CHAPTER 8

THE SERVICE TRADE UNIONS

In the year 1890 the clerks employed on a temporary footing in a certain government department considered that the conditions of their service justified a collective approach to their departmental chief. Accordingly, they forwarded a petition in which they "humbly prayed" that he would see fit to grant some improvement in their rates of pay, which at that time rose from 5s. per week to a dizzy maximum of £2. The official reply to this piece of daring expressed surprise that such a petition should have been addressed to the department by persons who were "not even civil servants" and went on to suggest that the request for an increase in pay was as improper as the tone of the petition in which it was preferred. It concluded by suggesting that if they were dissatisfied with the wages paid to them it was open to them to seek employment elsewhere—and that was that.

Since that time the employees of the state have made considerable strides in collective action and the general attitude which they adopt today in their negotiations with the official side on pay and conditions could be regarded as neither prayerful nor humble. In other words, they have built up a trade union movement which, in spite of certain defects with which we shall deal later, will bear comparison with industrial unionism in most essentials. Today there are approximately 200 separate unions catering for different sections of the Service. That is, on occasion, as much a cause for despair as for self-congratulation, and attempts are already being made to reduce the number drastically—but it does serve to reveal the completeness with which civil servants have accepted the principle of collective action. The cap-in-hand mentality is in fact as dead as the graft and corruption which equally disfigured the Service during the early phases of its evolution. Considerations of space preclude any detailed enumeration of

these unions, many of which represent only a bare handful of members, and we shall confine ourselves to the larger and more important of them. The postal group is obviously in the forefront with a record of trade unionism which links them with the early pioneer struggles of the industrial unions. The Union of Postal Workers with a 1940 membership of well over 130,000 is the largest unit in that group. It caters for the manipulative grades in the Post Office, many of whom have a direct affinity with analogous classes of workers outside the Service. Then there are the Post Office Engineering Union with something like 40,000, the Post Office Controlling Officers' Association covering the indoor supervisory grades, and five other associations catering for similar grades linked with it in a Federation of Post Office Supervising Officers. All the other manipulative grades outside the Post Office field are organized in the Government Minor and Manipulative Grades' Association. It has a miscellaneous membership ranging from messengers, cleaners and park-keepers to members of the coastguard service, preventive men employed in the Customs and Excise Department, instructors in Ministry of Labour Training Centres, and custodians of ancient monuments.

Before we come to the clerical organizations, a word of explanation is necessary. We have already seen that the general structure of the Service provides for a number of common classes in a graded hierarchy with common salary scales and conditions. These are described as Treasury classes, because the scales and conditions are not determined by reference to the department in which the individual civil servant happens to be employed. There are exceptions, however, to this general rule. In certain departments the work has been regarded as unsuitable for performance by officers drawn from the Treasury classes, and in these cases special departmental classes have been created. It will be readily appreciated that the existence of these separate classes has introduced an additional complication into the already difficult task of organizing the clerical workers of the Service within appropriate unions. Here is the method whereby the difficulty has been partially overcome. The Civil Service Clerical Association

caters for the whole of the Treasury clerical classes. Its membership—over 80,000 in 1940—has almost doubled during the war, owing to the creation of new departments, the expansion of existing departments and the consequent influx of "temporaries". In addition to the Treasury classes it also includes in its membership the departmental classes employed in the War Office, Admiralty, Air Ministry, Assistance Board and a few other departments.

It is by far the largest of the clerical unions.

The clerical workers in the Inland Revenue are in a departmental class and over 27,000 are organized in the Inland Revenue Staff Federation.

Though a Federation in name, this organization is centrally controlled and speaks for the whole of the clerical personnel employed in the offices of Inspectors and Collectors of Taxes and in the Valuation Branch. (The technical officers in the Income Tax service are separately organized.) The staffs of the Employment Exchanges, also a departmental class, are organized in the Ministry of Labour Staff Association, the membership of which has increased since 1940 from 11,000 to 17,000. The managerial and other higher-grade staff are members of the Association of Officers of the Ministry of Labour. There has been some overlapping between the two organizations and a loose form of federation is in process of negotiation.[1]

The County Court Officers' Association, which is self-descriptive, has a membership of 1,500.

The C.S.C.A., I.R.S.F., M.L.S.A. and C.C.O.A. are grouped together in the Civil Service Alliance, a federal body with no authority to determine the policy of its constituents but acting as a clearing-house for matters of common interest to all four. An amalgamation of these four bodies into one organization comprising the whole of the clerical workers in the Service has been energetically advocated from time to time. The war, however, bringing with it an all-round increase of membership, the maintenance of which must depend on all sorts of incalculable factors, has made it difficult at the moment to

[1] This federation is now in being.

continue that campaign. Circumstances will probably bring this objective appreciably nearer and meanwhile the Alliance is regarded as the next best thing.

Within the field of indirect taxation the officers of Customs and Excise have their own organization, the C. & E. Federation with upwards of 5,000 members. Then we come to the executive class, occupying, as we have seen, a buffer-state position between clerical and administrative. Their numbers too have doubled since 1940, and the membership of the Society of Civil Servants which caters for them is now in the neighbourhood of 18,000.

Finally, we have the Institution of Professional Civil Servants. The position of the professional and scientific and technical classes in the Service has already been reviewed at some length and the problem of representing their interests with any sort of adequacy will have been appreciated.

The Institution is a loosely knit body and its constituents, of which there are at the moment well over 100, have considerable autonomy within their own field. Some of them have an almost microscopic membership. The total membership covered by the Institution reaches a figure of over 23,000. In bringing them together within an organization which enables them to give collective expression to the professional and scientific point of view the I.P.C.S. has had a hard struggle, and problems of co-ordination and grouping are still a major preoccupation.

In this enumeration we have covered the larger part of the area of state employment. We ought now to see whether the form of trade union organization is, by reference to the nature of that employment, the best suited for its purpose. What is that purpose? The following, taken from the printed constitution of one of the aforementioned organizations, is fairly typical of the rest: "To protect and promote the interests of its members, to regulate the conditions of their employment and the relations between them and their employers and to provide and maintain such services as may be approved from time to time." There are variations on this theme, of course. The Society of Civil Servants, for instance, adds the further

object of "protecting the professional status of the Civil Service". But broadly speaking, it can be said that these objects are common to most of the Service unions.

The Union of Post Office Workers is a notable exception. This organization puts in the forefront of its objects "the organization of Post Office Workers into a comprehensive industrial union, with a view to the Service being ultimately conducted and managed as a National Guild".

Apart from this the U.P.W. subscribes to the same objects which govern most of the other Service unions.

It will be of some interest to see how these objects compare with those laid down for some of the industrial unions. The narrow definition was formulated by Sydney and Beatrice Webb, in the *History of Trade Unionism.*

In their view a trade union was "a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining and improving the conditions of their working lives", a formula to which the objects of the Service unions can truly be said to conform. But individual industrial unions have added to this generally accepted formula other objects which very considerably transcend the scope of that definition. The A.E.U., for instance, prefaces a long list of objects with "the control of industry in the interests of the community".

The Transport and General Workers' Union starts off with "the regulation of the relations between workmen and employers and between workmen and workmen", but includes as one of the further objects of the union, "the extension of co-operative production and distribution".

The Durham Miners' Association rounds off its list with "the abolition of capitalism and the substitution of the common ownership and control of the means of livelihood".

Finally, in a report of a trade union committee, set up in 1921, and subsequently endorsed by the T.U.C., the aims and objects of trade unions are summarized under two headings, as

1. Securing for wage earners the best possible conditions under the existing system;

and

2. Entirely changing the industrial system by establishing in industry and society such democratic conditions and relations as will satisfy the legitimate aspirations of the working class.

Here, under the second of these two headings, you have an objective only possible of attainment by political action of some kind or another. Its inclusion in the declared aims and objects of industrial trade unionism is a tacit admission, therefore, that "the protection and promotion of the interests of the industrial worker" cannot in the final analysis be secured by methods of collective negotiation within the existing system.

This admission is not even implied in the constitutions of most of the Civil Service unions, and it will be useful to remember that when we come later to look at the position of the state employee in relation to civil liberty. Many attempts have been made to get the objects of specific unions re-defined to allow things to be done which on a narrow interpretation seemed to be ruled out. During the Spanish Civil War, for instance, certain members of more than one organization argued that the use of general funds for the purpose of making contributions towards the relief of distress caused by fascist aggression came clearly within the four walls of the constitution. How, it was said, could you expect to protect the interests of your members if you failed to support in some tangible way every movement and organization which was actively engaged in the struggle to maintain democratic institutions? Attention was drawn to the position of the French Civil Service, many of whose leaders had played a prominent part in the *Front Populaire* and the fate which had overtaken the unions of the public employees when the Blum government was destroyed. The feeling engendered by these attempts to broaden the constitution became so intense that in the case of one union an injunction to restrain it from taking the action suggested was sought, and as a result the subscription of funds to aid the Spanish people was put by this and some

other Service unions on a purely voluntary basis. As some indication, however, of the extent to which the Service unions are coming to a realization that the days of their isolation from the body politic are numbered, we may cite only two instances. In May, 1939, the Annual Conference of the Inland Revenue Staff Federation endorsed with enthusiasm and without a single dissentient a resolution which "affirmed its belief in democracy as the only basis of society upon which social and economic progress could be made". It declared its intention "to defend that principle, particularly within its own sphere of organization and to fight for the preservation of the freedom of association which in its view was the sole guarantee of the preservation and improvement of wage standards and conditions of service". The Civil Service Clerical Association went a lot further than this when, in 1941, it endorsed a nine-point manifesto, which included a welcome for the Anglo-Soviet Treaty, a reconstitution of the Government regardless of party considerations, the removal of the ban (which then existed) on the *Daily Worker*, the establishment of Joint Production Committees, and an early declaration of British war aims.

The recent action of the U.P.W. in connection with the Trades Disputes Act will be discussed later. What we now seek to show is that even Civil Service unions with a long tradition of respectability and 'constitutionalism' are being forced, by the impact of world events, to reinterpret their aims and objects and to see them in the context of larger and more directly political issues.

There is more reality in this attitude than in one which suggests that "the staff associations should confine themselves as far as possible to matters of purely professional concern and that they should approximate more to the outside professional society than to the industrial trade union". The same writer wrote also that "the aim should be to leave to the individual civil servant the performance of his own political duties as a citizen and for the association to participate in political activity as little as possible".[1] We shall not be surprised after

[1] E. M. Gladden, *Civil Service Staff Relationships.*

that to find that he agrees with the present limitations placed upon the political rights of civil servants. Fortunately, there is little danger that the Service unions will accept this view of their status and function. It is one which, if adopted, would bring them dangerously near to the position of the company or house unions which have already endangered true trade unionism in other fields.

In the picture of trade union organization within the Service it will be difficult for the reader to trace any consistent pattern. It would be convenient, no doubt, if one could regard the Civil Service as a more or less self-contained industry and on this basis to attempt to organize its members within one big union. That, however, is not in present circumstances as easy as it may sound. Outside the Service, industrial unionism has been an ideal never capable of absolute realization. The annual report of the T.U.C. in 1924 described the three types of organization existing within the trade union movement, as:

1. Craft unionism, in which, irrespective of industry, the workers are grouped according to their craft identity.
2. Industrial unionism where the whole of the workers skilled or unskilled and irrespective of the craft followed, are grouped in accordance with the industry in which for the time being they may happen to be enployed, and
3. General unionism, which brings a miscellany of workers together irrespective of craft, industry or occupation.

The Webbs, whose knowledge of the trade union movement was, as we know, profound, saw the solution in terms of *ad hoc* arrangements combining features of all three forms of organization.

G. D. H. Cole, on the other hand, came down very heavily on the side of the industrial union. He advanced two main reasons. The first was, that against any mass formation of capitalism it was necessary to oppose an equally strong formation of labour. He conceded that this argument was only valid on the assumption that trade unionism was to be

regarded as a class movement based on the class struggle. His second argument was that if the union had as its aim something more than the protection of its members within the existing system—if, in fact, it aimed at self-government in industry, then it must obviously be industrial in structure.

All these conflicting views were discussed by the 1927 Congress of the T.U.C. on a resolution which advocated a reduction of the number of unions to the absolute minimum and the organization of all workers on an industrial basis.

The discussion turned on the divergence of view expressed by different unions as to the line of demarcation of a particular industry. The principal determining factors advanced were:

1. The commodity produced *or the service rendered* [my italics].
2. The tool operated.
3. The employer or group of employers.

The Congress finally decided that, in view of the impossibility of defining the boundaries of industry, it would be impracticable to formulate a scheme of industrial organization which could be made to apply to all industries.

This may seem something of a digression but it has some importance when we come to consider the general principles (if we can discover any) which underlie Civil Service trade union organization. It is clear that there can be no very close analogy between the Service and the general body of industry. The State, on its non-industrial side, is not directly concerned with production. Its employees do not therefore, in any strict sense, operate a tool, and having regard to an enormously wide variation of function it would be difficult to argue that they followed any clearly recognized craft. It is true that they have one employer, the state itself, and one big union covering the whole Service field would appear therefore to have some logical justification. The delegation of authority by the Treasury to individual departments, however, and the lack of any real interchangeability of staff between them has, as we have seen in the cases of such organizations as the Postal Unions, the Inland Revenue Staff Federation, the Customs and

Excise Federation and the Ministry of Labour Staff Association, had the effect of interrupting that tendency. It could, of course, be argued that although the Civil Service is not a commodity-producing entity it does most certainly "render a service" and that this factor, common to every state employee, points again in the obvious direction of 'industrial' organization. But as we have seen, trade union organization is as little able to proceed by pure logic as any other organic institution, and, while working towards a form which in the meaning of G. D. H. Cole's words will enable a mass formation of workers to confront a mass formation of employers (in this case the government departments), it will be necessary for some time to come to adapt existing forms to constantly changing needs. At present the structure of Service unionism is broadly horizontal in character, the strips corresponding to the main classes to be found within the Service hierarchy, e.g. the minor and manipulative, clerical, executive and professional and technical, with exceptions in the case of the separately organized departmental classes previously referred to. It is clear, of course, that if the post-war reconstruction of the Civil Service brings with it a reduction or merging of classes, the horizontal strips will need to be widened. The abolition of departmentalism would have the same effect, and we should be brought appreciably nearer to the creation of larger units of trade union organization. One final factor which would hasten that objective is the greater unity of interests which a change of the social and economic environment would inevitably produce within the area of state employment. The present concern with status arises, as we have seen, from a certain sense of frustration. That, surely, will tend to diminish when the Civil Service is linked with what we at present call the outside world in a common effort for the achievement of common aims.

Meanwhile, Service trade unionism can already show some remarkable achievements within the narrower sphere of purely economic improvement.

It is not possible within the scope of this book to give the history of those achievements. They have brought with them

a progressive improvement in the standards of remuneration of every grade and class and conferred upon the unions a prestige and a status which neither the Treasury nor heads of departments can afford to ignore. A technique of negotiation has been perfected which permits the discussion of wage claims and conditions at every level and with minimum delay. Within these spheres and the limits imposed by the multi-tiered structure of the Service itself, the Civil Service trade union movement has fully justified itself. The fight for recognition has been won and in this the Service unions have long since blazed a trail which other black-coat organizations, such as the Guild of Insurance Officials and the Bank Officers' Guild, have far more recently begun to follow. Their big test is still, however, to come. It lies in the extent to which they can influence the further development of the Civil Service as an instrument of social change, and in the process eliminate sectionalism and vested interest from their own ranks. Moreover, just as the industrial unions are being forced, by the stark facts of a war for the survival of the democratic idea, to take on new responsibilities in order to stimulate production for its successful prosecution, so in a similar way the Service unions are being obliged to enlarge the scope of their normal functions and to claim a greater share of responsibility for the day-to-day work of the departments. In the next chapter we shall see how these new tasks are being accomplished.