

On trade unions in UK

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I am going to speak of Trade Unions in Britain. But I am not going to speak of trade Unions in general. I 'll assume that everyone of you knows what trade unions are, what is their role in economic and social life, what stupendous results they have brought about, in the raising of the human and economic standards of the working class; and I 'll also assume that you, by and large, know how they work, how they help the ^{laboring} ~~working~~ class not only in dealing with management for wages and working conditions, but also how they try to take care of all sorts of economic and social interests: social security, medical care, training of young workers, setting professional standards, solving all sorts of problems. ~~that would~~ I won't even go in the interesting matter of trade unions relationship with the formal organization of the State: how they are represented in several administrative bodies, in many consultive boards dealing with economic planning, ^{etc.} and so on and so forth. All these things are pretty similar not only in Great Britain and Italy, but ^{these aspects of the British tradition} in almost all modern countries. So I am not going to speak of ~~that would~~ look familiar to an Italian in England, but of what would puzzle him. I am going to speak of the differences between British Trade Unions and Italian "Syndicates".

The most obvious differential feature is that Trade Unions are an original, native product of ^{the} British spirit, that is of British history, social conditions and way of life. This means that they have not been born out of some big idea, but are the product of sound experience, of accepted behavior and conventions which only gradually became rules and laws. The history of trade unions goes back, without any real interruption, to the medieval guild. In fact, it can be said that trade unions are but the result of the adaptation of the guild to the ~~new~~ new environment created by the industrial revolution, which in England occurred in the second half of the XVIII century. [The mass-production methods destroyed the workshop on which the guild was based, and, amassing great numbers of workers in

factories, made them aware of the contrast between the interests of the employer and those of the employees. The tradition of self-government suggested the first unions of workers.] These unions were strictly trade unions, that is, they defended only the professional interests of the members; there was absolutely no idea of class solidarity in those times; and actually, a long time had to pass before semi-skilled and unskilled workers - those who did not really have a trade - could be accepted in trade unions. [Being an outgrow of an ancient and respected social formation such as the guilds, the trade unions could peacefully develop ^{during} (in) all the XVIII century. But soon the ideas of economic liberalism, with its fierce hostility towards any kind of ~~an~~ organisation that could be liable to hinder the expansion of free enterprise; the ideas of ^{imported} French revolution; the necessities of the Napoleonic wars; and most of all, the worries and fears of the employers, brought about a strong reaction. A serie of laws were passed which ~~prohibited~~ outlawed trade-unionism. But unions were already too deeply rooted in English tradition, and they also were a historical necessity: they could not disappear altogether. They survived the storm; little by little they gained ^{de facto} new recognition. By the middle of the century they were again a considerable power: by 1870 they were already unconquerable: the government began to surrender: little by little it granted the unions all the freedoms they needed, and the conditions of the working class began ~~to rise~~ its steady rise.

This sketch of the historical development of British trade unions makes one thing clear: they were more than a century old, when Karl Marx began to theorize about social classes. This in turn means that they have always been professional, ~~not~~ that is, economic organisations, not political ones. ~~It~~ Political ideologies about the structure of society, the form of government, never were ² trade-unions' business. This, I think, is the basic difference between ~~British~~ British trade unions and the Italian Syndicates, which came into being only after ~~Marxist~~ Marxist theories had already spread all over Europe, had been accepted by ~~wide~~ large strata of the working class: so the syndicate was, right from the beginning, a tool of class war more than a professional union. By the way, this also accounts

accounts for my reluctance to call "trade union" the Italian syndicates.

Of course, I am speaking very broadly: I can't go into the details of the relationship and mutual influence between British trade unions and Marx' ~~the~~ gospel. But I do hold that the basic difference between trade-unions and syndicates is that the former are independent from Marxist theories, whereas the latter are deeply imbued with them; the former are professional bodies, the latter are mainly political; the former are a way to gain worthier places within a society, the latter are a weapon aimed at the subversion of society.

Two main objections could be made to this statement of principles: one is, that not all Italian syndicates are Marxist. ~~in fact~~ Besides the red one, there is a pink (UIL) a white (CISL) and a black (CISNAL) syndicate. To this it can be replied that all of them are patterned after the fashion of the rigidly Marxist CGIL; all of them have absorbed from the environment the classist conception of society; all of them, being but competitors of the original Marxist syndicates, were forced to accept much of its methods and ideology. So I think it can be repeated that all Italian syndicates resent ^{are influenced} ~~of~~ the Marxist outlook.

The second objection maintains that also British trade unions ~~are~~ have learned a lot from Marx, and the Labour party itself is officially Marxist. This is undoubtedly true, but one thing is to be influenced by an idea, and another to be born out of an idea. To British trade unions, ^{Marx' theories} were but a rationalization, a super-structure; they never became so important, nor so deeply rooted; they are but an addition that scarcely affects the underlying structure.

I hope I have made my point clear: the basic difference between British trade unions and Italian syndicates is to be seen in that, that the former are primarily professional and economic organizations, while the latter are deeply engaged in politics. This interpretation sets a pattern, in which all the differential ~~structural~~ features of the two types of workers' organizations can fit and be easily explained.

For instance, the most macroscopic difference between the two is that

in England, all trade unions are closely linked together: they form a huge, unitary organization, binding together 10 million workers who find their collective representation in the Trade Union Congress, which can truly be regarded as the ^{the} Parliament of English ~~workers~~ working class; ~~the Parliament is endowed with legislative power over all the~~

this is only possible, because British trade unions deal exclusively with professional, economic and social problems; they expressly ban discussions on political principles, from their proceedings! In Italy, ~~on the~~ ? contrary, there is no single labour organization, because each syndicate is more concerned with its own political principles than ~~it is~~ interested in the benefits of unitary representation ⁱⁿ of the workers' interests.

A second important feature of British trade unionism, is that it is deeply imbued with the principles and practice of democracy. In every union, the power comes from the basis, from the members; it's they who truly elect their officials, from the shop steward up ~~to~~ to the national chairman. The single unions then elect their representatives in the Trade Union Congress. The organizational chart of this body ~~is~~ displays an effective flow of power from the ~~base~~ basis to the top of the huge pyramid. In Italian syndicates, the power usually flows down, from the central, national organs down to the local ones: because the money, the leadership, the organizational know-how, and, most of all, the creative ~~spirit~~ political spirit come down from the central committees. In short, Italian syndicates are practically hierarchical, bureaucratic institutions, in which the basis - the individual workers have probably less authority than they should, ~~than~~ than they are formally entitled to.

A third obvious difference between Trade Unions and Syndicates, is the strong political coloration of the latter. In Italy, each Syndicate clearly backs, or is backed by, a political party. In Great Britain, the political engagement of the unions is quite a peculiar one: as a whole, they support the Labour party. But the historical development of this relationship shows a marked difference with the Italian situation:

the Labour Party is but the direct political emanation of the Trade Unions, who go as far as to sponsor ~~and~~ their own MP's. But in England there is a clear awareness of the distinction between the party and the trade union, between politics and economics : any mingling of the two ~~is avoided~~ ^{is} looked upon with suspect and distaste. An elaborate set of rules has been made up, in order to avoid it. For instance, whether a particular Union should support the Labor Party or not, is decided by the majority of the members; in any case, each member has the right not to contribute ~~to~~ to the political fund; this fund, which is used to finance the party, must be kept separate, and separately administered. All this, is, of course, very remarkable; but even more remarkable is perhaps the main consequence^h of this sharp distinction between party and union, politics and economics: I mean, the lack of political strikes. Political strikes are not known in Great Britain - with the result that, since the war, the average loss of working days has been of 2 millions per year, ~~xxxcomparedwiththe~~ more or less seven times ^{less} fewer than in Italy.

To sum up, it is not easy to evaluate the two systems. From an abstract point of view, it ~~is not difficult to say~~ ^{can be said} that the British trade unions are ~~more apt~~ ^{better suited} to favor a peaceful ~~and orderly~~ co-existence of social groups, an orderly arrangement between opposite economic interests, within the framework of a stable society. The Italian system is the expression of a society ~~strongly engaged~~ ~~with~~ ~~political principles~~ deeply divided by political passion; a society where principles count more than facts, ~~xxxsocietywithextremelystrong~~ ~~internal tensions, which are bringing about xxxswift and xxxrest;~~ but it is impossible to say whether one system is better than the other, just because they are the products of two utterly different kind of societies.