

IV. The unions under the Wilhelminian Empire: the breakthrough of mass organization 1890–1914

From Bismarck's point of view, the Socialist Law turned out to be a dismal failure. Its repressive provisions had put a brake on the development of the SPD and the unions but failed to halt it. Despite – or because of – the government's emergency legislation the Social Democratic labour movement was stronger and above all more radical than before. As the pace of industrialization quickened in the 1880s and 1890s – and it never stood still even in times of recession – the nation's social and political problems worsened. At the same time, the working class grew in size and importance, bringing the trade unions their breakthrough as a mass movement.

1. *The organization of industrial capitalism: the economic and social development of the Wilhelminian Empire*

The economic depression that started in 1873 continued into the mid-1890s, interrupted only by feeble upturns; it was not until 1895 that the economy revived. Apart from temporary crises in 1901–2 and 1907–8, the revival lasted until 1912–13. Heavy industry had been heavily favoured by Bismarck's protective tariffs and its importance was soon reinforced by the arms race, particularly by the naval shipbuilding programme under Alfred von Tirpitz from 1898 on. In 1890 England's output of iron, at 8 m tonnes, was almost double Germany's (4.1 m tonnes); by 1910 the German output of 14 m tonnes far exceeded England's (just over 10 m). Even more dramatic was Germany's steel output, which grew from 2.1 m tonnes in 1890 to 13.1 m twenty years later, whereas English steel production rose from 3.6 m tonnes to only 6.4 m over the same period. While these statistics chart Germany's development into an industrial nation, industry underwent significant changes in the 1890s. As a result of new inventions and the development of pioneering technical processes, the German electrical engineering and chemical industries achieved world rank alongside mechanical engineering.

The picture of Germany as a highly industrialized society emerged during this period. The process of concentration continued steadily: in industry, the number of firms employing less than six people accounted

for 59.8 per cent of the working population in 1882; by 1907 this had fallen to 31.3 per cent. Over the same period the number of companies with a workforce of more than a thousand rose from 1.9 to 4.9 per cent of the total. Cartels increased in number and importance. While a large proportion of the cartels of the depression were short-lived (as was evident in the 1880s), the age of cartels had now arrived. In 1893 the Rhenish-Westphalian coal syndicate was formed; by 1910 it embraced almost every pit in the Ruhr district. In 1897 the iron ore mines combined to form the Rhenish-Westphalian Pig Iron Syndicate. Electrical engineering was dominated by the giants AEG and Siemens, and the chemical industry by four or five large concerns. Five major banks – including the Deutsche Bank and the Dresdner Bank – held almost half of all bank deposits. The banks exerted considerable influence on economic development, not merely as lenders but also as shareholders. Industrial and banking capital began to merge, one of the typical signs of the “organization” of the capitalist economy.

In addition a network of economic syndicates emerged. The Central Federation of German Industrialists, founded in 1875, was joined in 1895 by the League of Industrialists (Bund der Industriellen), which laid more stress on the needs of the processing industry. The employers were chiefly concerned with asserting their interests in the face of the rising trade unions, as evidenced by the Crimmitschau textile strike in 1903–4. Witnessing the solidarity displayed by the workers of different regions, the employers set up the Central Organization of German Employers' Associations (Hauptstelle Deutscher Arbeitgeberverbände), which was dominated by heavy industry, and the Union of German Employers' Associations (Verein Deutscher Arbeitgeberverbände), in which the processing industry was heavily represented. In 1913 the two organizations merged to form the Federation of German Employers' Associations (Vereinigung der Deutschen Arbeitgeberverbände). This emphasized the trend on both sides of the industrial divide to organize in ways that cut across trades and regions. This was reflected in the development of the trade unions, which in turn was a consequence of the changes in the labour market.

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As industrialization proceeded, the proportion of the working population engaged in agriculture fell from 43.5 to 35.2 per cent between 1882 and 1907, while the proportion of workers employed in industry rose from 37.7 to 40.1 per cent (Table 6a). Over the same period the number of industrial workers grew from about 3 m to 5.8 m. Urbanization continued

apace: in 1871, 65 per cent of the population lived in villages and small towns, by 1910 only 40 per cent, while the number of city-dwellers rose from 4.8 per cent to more than 20 per cent over the same period. Furthermore, the population continued to grow rapidly, soaring by 60 per cent between 1871 and 1914 to 68 million.

Urbanization brought a number of social problems in its train. It was a symptom and a consequence of migration away from the countryside, particularly from the poor areas on the fringes of Germany, such as the rural districts of East Prussia or the Eifel. Many of the people torn from their traditional ties found it hard to adjust to life in the cities of the industrial conurbations; others, especially Catholics, found that, when everything around them had changed, all they had to fall back on was their religious faith. Besides differences in occupation and income, it was regional or ethnic origin and religion that hampered – without preventing – the emergence of a unified class consciousness, in the sense of a united political will. In particular, the influx of workers from the east and from Poland, caused or exacerbated breaches within the working class, not only in the form of ethnic and religious differences but also social ones. For as long as there was a readily available “reserve” of unskilled and undemanding work-people, the greater the chances of promotion for the better trained German workers, and the greater the opportunity to develop an awareness of their status. It is hardly surprising that these social and cultural differences among the working class should have had an impact on their political and trade union organizations. The high degree of mobility, the migration from place to place, also meant that the trade unions found recruiting and particularly keeping members extremely difficult.

The growing numbers of unskilled workers and women posed particular problems for the unions when it came to propaganda and recruitment, as did the increase in white-collar workers. Having such firm roots among skilled male workers who were proud of their professional skills, it was difficult for the unions to penetrate the ranks of unskilled and female workers, while the latter often took the view that they were not adequately represented by the unions. Of course, women’s union activities were limited by other factors apart from the legal restrictions placed on associations, namely traditional gender roles and the double burden of paid employment and work in the family. As for the white-collar workers, they comprised a stratum of wage-earners that was developing an awareness of self and class all of its own, prompting it to set up its own organization with strong nationalist and bourgeois leanings.

Regardless of these splits, life was hard for all workers. The housing situation in the towns was abysmal: overcrowding, rack renting and sub



Workers at the lathes in the Siemens factory circa 1900



Making aprons – home working circa 1910

letting to one or more persons were commonplace. The high cost of food and less chance of making the family at least self-sufficient in some things by growing their own produce in their spare time forced workers' living standards down, particularly in the towns and cities. Even making allowances for differences due to industry, occupation, qualifications, area and sex, wages were often terrible; in sickness and old age, destitution was inevitable. It was often necessary for wife and children to go out to work, too, if the family was to have enough to live on. Despite the drawbacks, home working was considered a way of combining paid employment with work in the family.

But in the 1890s there were also signs that things were getting better. Between 1890 and 1913 the average annual wage of workers in industry, commerce and transport went up from 650 to 1,083 Marks. Taking into account the rise in living costs over the same period, average wages rose in real terms (in 1895 prices) from 636 to 834 Marks (Table 3a). These figures, however, conceal differing trends: for instance, while incomes in the printing industry went up substantially, conditions in the textile industry continued to be appalling.

In the same period, working hours in industry went on getting shorter. In 1890, 11 hours per day and 66 hours per week were the norm; in the years up to 1913 the workers won a cut to 10 hours per day and – as they started getting Saturday afternoons off – 54–60 hours per week (Table 4a). Individual firms such as the Carl Zeiss works in Jena and the Freese Venetian blind factory introduced the eight-hour day of their own accord as early as 1889 and 1892 respectively. This illustrates how the process of shortening the working day varied from one industry to another and from one firm to another. As with wages, this development would certainly not have taken place had it not been for the generally favourable economic situation, improvements in productivity and the struggles of the trade unions. But it should not be forgotten that these achievements were accompanied by the progressive intensification of work: technically manufacturing became increasingly complex while the work process itself was rationalized. With the division of labour and the introduction of fixed times – that is, detailed stipulations governing the production process as a whole – the trend towards rationalization became a central element in employers' efforts to improve productivity and thus increase production

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At this point, mention should be made of industrial safety legislation. In the February decrees, Kaiser Wilhelm II announced the setting up of work

ers' committees and the introduction of industrial safety laws. And in fact the following years saw a succession of laws affecting worker welfare come into force. On 1 June 1891 an amendment to the trade regulations (*Lex Berlepsch*) provided for the creation of worker committees, made Sunday a day of rest, limited maximum working hours for women and young people to 10–11 hours per day and banned night work, prohibited child labour by minors younger than thirteen and improved protection for women following childbirth. The same year, a law on industrial tribunals (*Gewerbegerichte*) set up “special courts” with lay magistrates and worker representatives to deal with cases of industrial strife; these were the forerunners of the labour tribunals (*Arbeitsgerichte*) created in 1926. In 1900 the industrial safety provisions of the trade regulations were revised and the rules protecting women and children improved. The same year also saw new regulations governing the closing times of shops and rest periods for employees, and an amendment to the Bavarian Mining Law laid down that pits employing more than twenty men had to set up worker committees, a rule that was also adopted by Prussia in 1905 – after a major industrial dispute – for pits with more than a hundred employees. After the reform of the Law on Associations in 1908, young people under 18 years of age continued to be barred from political meetings and associations but the rules were relaxed for women. The road to “social interventionism”, linked with the names of the Prussian Trade Minister, Hans Hermann Baron von Berlepsch, and the Secretary of State of the Interior Ministry, Arthur Duke von Posadowsky-Wehner, demonstrated a willingness to carry out a measure of cautious social reform, though the general aim remained the same: to curb the growth of social democracy. The main impression was, nevertheless, still of a working class exploited and marginalized.

Government policy in the Wilhelminian Age continued to display the twin faces of social reform and political repression. Wilhelm II repeatedly spoke out, for example in a speech in Königsberg in 1894, against the “parties of subversion”, to which he opposed religion, morals and order, which he wished to see upheld and strengthened. The assassination of the President of France by an Italian anarchist provided the pretext for political intervention: it prompted the submission of a Bill in 1894, the “Subversion Bill”, laying down harsher penalties for subversion, which was defined in terms of opinions as well as actions. The Bill did not receive the required majority in Parliament. The same fate was shared by the “Prison Bill” announced by Wilhelm II in 1898 in Bad Oeynhausen, whereby anyone attempting to prevent strike breakers from working during a strike would be sentenced to imprisonment. The Bill was laid before the Reichs-

tag in June 1899, caused a storm of protest and was defeated in November 1899.

Despite the failure of these attempts to force through sanctions against the Social Democratic Party and the trade unions, the Kaiser's speeches and the Bills mentioned above created a climate of uncertainty and menace that was often felt to be a political buttress for the economic exploitation and the social marginalization of the workers. In addition, there were the measures for suppressing union activity devised by the employers, especially in the heavy industry sector: from blacklists and lockouts to the setting up of works associations (*Werkvereine*) devoted to maintaining industrial peace. They refused even to listen to trade unionists, let alone negotiate with them. In accordance with their authoritarian, paternalistic outlook, most employers continued well past the turn of the century to see trade union demands for a say in matters as unwarranted interference by outsiders in their private affairs or as trouble-making, upsetting the "harmonious" relationship between the employer and the individual employee. Apart from government policy and the employers' hostility to the Social Democratic labour movement, the parts played by the bureaucracy, police and judiciary, as well as the use of troops in industrial disputes, could all in all scarcely be interpreted as anything but proof of the reality of the class state and its role as the protector of the propertied classes.

Finally, due consideration should be given to the overall social climate, in which the idea of international solidarity was seen as a betrayal of Germany's Great Power aspirations. It was not only the Social Democratic labour movement that managed to become a mass movement; other organizations were equally successful in attracting support. In April 1891 the General German League (*Allgemeiner Deutscher Verband*) was founded. renamed the Pan-German League (*Alldeutscher Verband*) in 1894. The aims of this association were to cultivate patriotic awareness, conduct anti-semitic agitation and lend support to nationalist domestic and foreign policies, above all on behalf of Germans abroad and the German colonies. In its imperialist propaganda it was supported, from April 1898. by the German Naval Association (*Deutscher Flottenverein*), which by 1913 could boast 1.1 million members.

Moreover, since the 1890s efforts had been made to rally all bourgeois conservative forces around an anti-Social Democratic "coalition policy", whose most conspicuous manifestations were the Imperial Association against Social Democracy (*Reichsverband gegen die Sozialdemokratie*) founded in 1904, and the Cartel of the Productive Classes (*Kartell der schaffenden Stände*), formed after the Social Democrats' election suc

cesses of 1912. It was certainly no coincidence that from 1904–5 onwards there was a lull in social welfare policy. Those rules which discriminated most harshly against the working class – the restrictions on the right of association, the Prussian three-class electoral system and the entrepreneur's absolute power as the “lord and master” of the company – remained in force right up to the end of the Empire. The beginnings of a social welfare policy were overlaid by the picture of a class society that sought to realize the dream of worldwide German influence by means of protective tariffs at the expense of the consumer, colonialist policies and the scramble to rearm, national hubris and an aggressive ideological stance. Both these factors – the beginnings of social reform and repressive measures designed to secure domestic backing for imperialist aims abroad – left their stamp on the programmes, self-image and policies of social democracy, of which the great mass of the union movement considered itself a part. Both factors, but probably more than anything the experience of being excluded from bourgeois society, contributed to the development of a ghetto mentality among large sections of the working class – a sense of rejection and solidarity – that caused them to view social democracy as a “home”, giving the ghetto stance an ideology of its own and thus reinforcing it. This feeling of exclusion and isolation characterized not only the Social Democratic sections of the working class but also the Catholic ones, in which the two largest trade union federations were rooted.

2. Organizational problems on the road to the mass union

The Free trade unions

Although the trade union movement had survived the repressive measures of the Socialist Law, it did not mean that henceforth – after 1890 – it was able to develop unhindered. The feeling of being under constant threat from the Law on Associations and a stream of proposed new laws, from the police and judiciary and the action taken by the employers to defend their position was enough in itself to make trade union policy uncertain and prompt cautious manoeuvring. More than anything else it was due to the defeats suffered since 1894 on account of the troubled state of the economy that trade unionists were far from looking to the future with confidence. Innumerable lost battles were a painful reminder to trade unionists of how limited their influence was. The strike and lockout of 3,000 Hamburg tobacco workers in 1890, the strike by 20,000 Ruhr miners in 1891, the strike in the Saar region in 1891–92 and the printers’

strike of 1891–92 – defeats such as these constantly raised doubts about the prospects of success of trade union work. Furthermore, strikes that ended in defeat often led directly to the weakening of the organizations, as many workers left their unions when they had been financially bled to death. The number of trade union members declined from over 290,000 in 1890 to 215,000 in 1892.

But the strike movements of 1889–90 also prompted the merger of the Social Democratic unions, thus laying the foundation of the modern trade union movement. Major and protracted industrial disputes in which the employers, as in Hamburg in 1890, resorted to a punitive lockout over the May Day celebrations, made the workers aware that they needed nationwide, cross-occupational solidarity to defend them. This repeated experience lay behind the formation of a trade union umbrella organization. On 16–17 November 1890 the Conference of Trade Union Executives in Berlin decided to set up the General Commission of German Trade Unions (Generalkommission der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands), under the leadership of Carl Legien, who remained in place until his death in 1920.

Born in Marienburg in 1861, Carl Legien had a rapid rise in the union movement behind him. The story of his life was typical of the trade union leaders of his generation. After the death of his parents he was raised in an orphanage, apprenticed as a turner at the age of fourteen and then set out on his travels as a journeyman until doing his military service from 1881 to 1883. After travelling around for a few more years he settled in Hamburg in 1886. The same year, with the Socialist Law still in force, he joined the Turners' Union and a year later attended the Turners' Congress in Naumburg as a delegate, where he was elected chairman of the newly founded German Association of Turners. At the Berlin meeting of union representatives in mid-November 1890 he was elected chairman of the General Commission, on the policies of which he had a major influence as editor of the journal "Correspondenzblatt" – more on account of his personal acumen than any formal rights laid down in the rules and regulations.

How did the General Commission see its duties?¹ Its first aim, for obvious reasons, was to defend the right of association. The Commission also had to carry on propaganda work in areas where there were no unions, it had to fund defensive strikes; it had to prepare and convene the congresses of the trade union umbrella organization; and finally it had been

¹ See Paul Umbreit, 25 Jahre Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbewegung 1890–1915. Erinnerungsschrift zum fünfundzwanzigjährigen Jubiläum der Begründung der Generalkommission der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands (Berlin, 1915), pp. 155–62

instructed to draft an organizational plan for the trade unions. The very nature of these duties showed that the General Commission was not really an instrument for leading the Free Unions; it was handed the jobs that the individual occupational associations were unable or unwilling to take on – and there was plenty of room for argument on that point.

So much was evident at the first Congress of German Trade Unions, held in Halberstadt from 14 to 18 March 1892. The plan to set up a central fund to provide backing for defensive strikes was once again dropped because it would probably have entailed too great a concentration of power in the hands of the umbrella organization. A step of crucial importance for the future of the trade union movement was the decision, after a good deal of heated discussion, to encourage the formation of national unions (*Zentralverbände*). A majority of the delegates thus came out against the local form of organization and the “shop steward” system, which had both proved their worth under the Socialist Law and were in tune with the ideals of grassroots democracy. There were a number of things in favour of national unions: greater financial power, better coordination of administration, propaganda and press, a wider spread of the risk in industrial disputes and stronger benefit schemes. But those who supported the principles of local organization did not find these reasons convincing enough and left the congress in protest.

The decision to work for the formation of industrial unions for appropriate trades was a pioneering one²; the unions of allied trades were to move closer together by entering into “cartel agreements”. But there was no clear decision on the issue of industrial unions versus occupational unions. Basically, this was in keeping with the actual situation, with large and small companies coexisting side by side. While the occupational approach reflected the position in the skill-based small and medium-sized companies, the growth of the large corporation, in which members of quite different trades and workers with greatly varying qualifications worked together, tended to support the idea of industrial unions. But in the early 1890s, with the dominant position of the big companies only just becoming apparent, there was no definitive solution in sight. It was to be decades before the union movement as a whole followed the example of the engineering workers’ and woodworkers’ organizations, which both overcame the limitations of the occupational approach at an early stage – 1891 and 1893 respectively. It was largely this step that ensured that the

² Protokoll der Verhandlungen der Ersten Kongresses der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands, abgehalten zu Halberstadt vom 14. bis 18. März 1892 (Hamburg, 1892), pp. 68–70

unions in question grew more rapidly than the others in the years to come, especially as they were able to compensate for the decline and disappearance of individual trades by recruiting other workers, particularly unskilled ones.

In the eyes of the General Commission, trade union policy was principally organizational policy. Recruitment and the provision of services to members were among its most important tasks. On 1 January 1891 it started publication of its own newspaper, the "Correspondenzblatt der Generalkommission". By expanding the benefits system, the trade unions were responding not only to the current plight of the working class but they were also trying to reduce fluctuations in membership by relating benefits directly to length of membership and the amount paid in dues. Furthermore, the General Commission consistently advocated the standardization and the raising of dues to ensure the strength of the organization. If one considers that in 1895 the average dues of the Printers' Union were 57.75 Marks, while in the Raftsmen's Union they were only 1.44 Marks, it is hard to dismiss such efforts. Lastly, the General Commission developed into a sort of trade union statistical bureau: data on membership, funds, strike action, the economic situation, wages, working hours and prices were collated and published to provide a firm foundation for union work.

The 1890s saw a tremendous expansion in the trade unions' benefit schemes. Nearly all the unions set up strike funds, travel funds, sickness and death benefits, and compensation schemes for workers penalized by the employers. The establishment of a trade union unemployment benefit scheme, on the other hand, was considered too risky for trade unions organized on occupational lines and often concentrated in one region; some unions also feared that the movement would overstretch itself financially, leaving no money available for industrial disputes.

At the same time, the trade unions began amalgamating the payments offices of the individual unions into local groups in order to exert greater influence on the local labour market. In addition, from 1894 local labour secretariats were set up, offering advice to wage earners (not only members) and representing them free of charge in matters of insurance and industrial law. Following the formation of eleven district secretariats at the seats of the Higher Insurance Offices of the National Workers' Insurance scheme, a central labour secretariat was created in 1903 at the supreme tribunal in Berlin; by 1914 there were a total of 150 local labour secretariats.

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The possibility cannot be ruled out that this emphasis on the local level was intended to take the wind out of the sails of local activists. The supporters of local forms of organization, who had been in a minority in Halberstadt in 1892, were initially able to enjoy the indirect support of the Law on Associations, which prohibited “political associations” from establishing links that extended outside the locality – and every response to government action was seen as “political”, for instance the demand for laws laying down shorter working hours, improving industrial safety and so on. So the unions were confronted by a choice: should they address political issues or link up nationally? The fact that this internal dispute went on smouldering after the Law on Association was amended indicates that it really centred on differences of opinion about union organization and tactics.

The “localists” advocated a radical, revolutionary trade union policy; according to the journal “Der Bauhandwerker” in 1893, a success by the trade union movement would be regarded as proof that “on the foundation of the existing order the worker could get by to his satisfaction”, whereupon “the need for a social revolution would be shelved”. The trade union movement could only have a revolutionary effect “by arousing hopes which it cannot fulfil”³. This is why the localists opposed the established division of labour and duties between the party and the trade unions. They rejected the model of representative parliamentary democracy and proclaimed their belief – influenced by the French labour movement – in “direct action”, the syndicalist idea of the unity of economic and political struggle forged at local level.

The localists, who got together in 1897 under the name of the “Free Association of German Trade Unions” (Freie Vereinigung deutscher Gewerkschaften), were at their peak around 1900, with about 20,000 members. The centre of the movement was clearly in Berlin, particularly among the bricklayers, carpenters and engineering workers. As far as the building trade was concerned, this was mainly due to the favourable conditions for local strike movements in Berlin, especially as during the building boom in the capital the often irreplaceable craftsmen did not have a strong employers’ federation to contend with. After the turn of the century the localist movement rapidly lost ground, partly due to the deci-

³ “Der Bauhandwerker” No. 37 of 16.9.1893, quot. Dirk H. Müller, *Der Syndikalismus in der deutschen Gewerkschaftsbewegung vor 1914*, in Erich Matthias and Klaus Schönhoven (eds), *Solidarität und Menschenwürde. Etappen der deutschen Gewerkschaftsgeschichte von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Bonn, 1984), pp. 57–68; this quot. p. 61

sion by the SPD party congress in 1908 that membership of the SPD was incompatible with membership of the Free Association.

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The question of which organizational model the trade unions should choose was not resolved before 1914. Up to the beginning of the First World War the number of unions affiliated to the General Commission fell to 46, with traditional trade associations alongside new industrial unions. Craft-based organizations such as the bookbinders, printers, coopers, hatters and coppersmiths continued to maintain their position. But the strongest unions – as emerges from a glance at the membership figures for 1914 – were the cross-occupational organizations of the rising industries: the German Engineering Workers' Union with over 500,000 members, followed by the building workers', miners', woodworkers' and textile workers' unions. One of the fastest growing unions was the Factory Workers' Union, which organized semi-skilled and unskilled workers in almost a hundred trades. The building labourers', retail workers' and transport workers' unions also recruited members among the unskilled. In any case, there were tremendous differences of size even between the various craft-based unions: the union of the note engravers had less than a hundred members, that of the printers more than 50,000. But overall the importance of the true craftsmen's unions dwindled because of their limited catchment area, the increasing proportion of unskilled workers and the declining importance of many crafts, such as those of the kid glove makers, hatters and ships' carpenters. But if one considers the degree of unionization, the "old" occupational unions do not come out badly: while about 30 per cent of the printers, coppersmiths and glove makers – all highly skilled trades – were unionized, the corresponding figure for bricklayers, for example, was only about 7 per cent.

While skilled male workers were the backbone of the unions prior to the First World War, their importance declined with the development of large-scale industry and the devaluation of skilled labour in favour of unskilled. This was one of the main reasons why cross-occupational national unions, organizing skilled and unskilled workers, both male and female, proved to be the organizational form of the future.

Even before the First World War, we can see the emergence of the organizational principles and structures that were to survive right up to the present day: personal membership of a specific union, which in turn belonged to an umbrella organization; delegation from the local level by way of the regional level to the central level through democratic elections

the elected executive's accountability to congress at all levels; payment offices of the individual unions at the local level, merging to form local groups (later replaced by local committees of the umbrella organization); strike decisions taken at the centre; the construction of a central machinery of professional union officials, taking charge of administration, funding, propaganda work, public relations and so forth. Between 1900 and 1914 the number of central union employees increased tenfold, from 269 to 2,867. But, particularly in the light of the controversy over "localism", the drawbacks of this development should not be overlooked. The system of delegating decisions upwards through a number of tiers to the top meant that there was a large gap between the union leadership and the shopfloor. The bureaucratization of decision-making – for instance, on strike action – fostered apathy and passivity in members, or led to spontaneous strikes bypassing the unions altogether. All these problems were being discussed in the trade union press well before the turn of the century; but they did not – before 1914 – give rise to a serious crisis of confidence between membership and leadership.

The fact that large sections of the working class were content with the trade unions as they were is best illustrated by the rise in membership that reflected the sound economic trend after 1895 and the trade union victories that this made possible. From 215,000 in 1892, the membership of the Social Democratic Free Trade Unions rose to more than 1.1 million in 1904 and to 2.5 m the year before the First World War (Table 1a), leaving the Hirsch-Duncker associations and the Christian unions trailing in their wake.

The Hirsch-Duncker trade associations

Despite their privileged position under the Socialist Law, the liberal trade associations lost more and more ground. Like the Free Trade Unions, their success in attracting members was largely dependent on the economic situation and successful strike action: from over 65,000 in 1891, their membership fell to 45,000 a year later and then rose slowly and with fluctuations to 106,000 in 1913 (Table 1a). The Hirsch-Duncker associations thus only benefited to a very limited extent from the trend towards a mass movement.

This was partly due to internal tensions. The first issue was the representation of the individual associations within the umbrella organization. In view of the great variations in strength between the individual associations, which were not given adequate consideration by the Central Coun-

cil of the umbrella organization, the mechanical engineers and the factory workers were repeatedly outvoted by the smaller associations. After a long and heated controversy, proportional representation on the Central Council was introduced in 1889, giving the associations influence commensurate with their size. This reform assisted the smaller associations in their efforts to carry out cross-occupational mergers, thus gaining in strength and importance. But members had a good deal of respect for the occupational principle – in accordance with the ideas of the founder, Max Hirsch – and such efforts quickly came to naught; indeed, they may even have frightened away many members. The concept of trade thus continued to dominate, and this fact – together with the associations' political outlook – succeeded in deterring the fast-growing group of semi-skilled and unskilled workers from joining the Hirsch-Duncker Gewerkvereine.

The strike issue was also a controversial one – in fact, a central one for all unions. The H-D associations had not merely paid lip service to the strike as the ultimate means of defending their members' interests; time and again they were involved in industrial struggles, even though it entailed great sacrifices. But there was no question of pursuing a policy of offensive strikes. It was for this reason that as early as 1891 the porcelain workers' association, with its 4,000 members, switched its allegiance to the Free Trade Unions. Particularly in Düsseldorf there was resistance to this reluctance to strike, which Hirsch continued to defend until his death in 1905, still at the helm of the associations. His opponent on this fundamental issue was Anton Erkelenz, who later became one of the leaders of the Gewerkvereine. In contrast to Hirsch, he came from the skilled artisan class, which was typical of the H-D associations. He was born in 1878, the son of an independent master fitter. After learning his father's trade, he joined the engineering workers' association at the age of eighteen. By the time he was 24 he had been elected workers' secretary of the Hirsch-Duncker associations of the Rhineland and Westphalia. In this post he strengthened the "Düsseldorf tendency", adding a clear nationalist tinge to its social-liberal outlook.

Such internal disagreements about organizational structure and, more than anything, strike policy were certainly detrimental to the image of the H-D associations; but it was the vagueness of their political line that was probably crucial. In the document "Basic Principles" adopted in 1907⁴ the associations professed party political and religious neutrality, though they could not deny their close connections with leftwing liberalism. They

4 Reprinted in Anton Erkelenz, *Arbeiter-Katechismus. Eine Erklärung des Programms der freiheitlich-nationalen Arbeiterschaft* (Berlin-Schönberg, 1908), pp. 7–11

demanded a firm policy of social reform, which did nothing to distinguish them from the Free Trade Unions nor – in view of their allegiance to liberalism – to improve their credibility. The *Gewerkvereine* tried to cope with this curious intermediate position by stressing their distinct profile – in 1901 incompatibility with membership of the SPD was confirmed – and nationalist ideals. In 1907–8 they described themselves – in the words of Karl Goldschmidt, union chairman from 1907–16 – as “popular-libertarian”⁵ and from 1910 as “libertarian-national”, in a pithy phrase of Erkelenz’s⁶. The position became extremely difficult for the H-D associations when a third union movement appeared on the scene and soon laid claim to the label “national” in the phrase “Christian-national”. The *Gewerkvereine* thus became “piggy in the middle” within the trade union movement, with major chunks of their programme being put across more trenchantly and more credibly by their rivals.

The Christian trade unions

Encouraged by the upturn in the economy from the mid-1890s on, a third union movement quickly developed, soon overtaking the H-D associations to become the second largest branch of the union movement. The first Christian trade unions were set up in those parts of Germany that already had a well-developed network of Catholic workers’ associations, above all the Aachen area, the industrial district of the Lower Rhine (Mönchen-Gladbach, Krefeld), the Ruhr district and the areas around Munich and Stuttgart in southern Germany. Invitations to the inaugural meetings of Christian trade unions were often issued by clergymen; at any rate, they were the main speakers, particularly the members of the Popular Association for Catholic Germany. Also, the clergy were often initially involved, via the institution of the honorary council, as mediators or overseers of the union leadership, though – unlike the denominational workers’ associations and the occupational sections, which were intended to act as non-striking substitutes for proper trade unions – the unions themselves were not under Church leadership. The way had been cleared for the Catholic Church’s involvement by the papal encyclical “*Rerum novarum*”, in which Pope Leo XIII had come out firmly in favour of social

⁵ Karl Goldschmidt, *Das Programm des Verbandes der Deutschen Gewerkvereine und die Forderungen der einzelnen Gewerkvereine* (Berlin, 1910)

⁶ Anton Erkelenz, *Freiheitlich-nationale Arbeiterbewegung* (Munich, 1910)

reform born of Christian charity and the establishment of Christian workers' associations.

The model for most of the subsequent Christian unions was the Union of Christian Miners, formed in October 1894 at the instigation of the miner August Brust and initially covering the mining district of Dortmund. In particular, the objective set out in Article 2 of its rules⁷ served as a model for others: "The purpose of the trade union shall be to improve the miners' moral and social position on a Christian and lawful basis and to initiate and maintain a peaceful accord between employers and wage earners." In addition it was emphasized that "the Association shall be loyal to the Kaiser and Empire and shall not discuss denominational and political party matters". According to Article 8, joining the association amounted to a declaration that the new member was an "opponent of Social Democratic principles and aspirations".

In the years that followed a number of Christian unions were set up at local and regional level. They quickly moved towards a merger. At the first congress of the Christian unions, held in Mainz at Whitsun (21–22 May) 1899, the "Mainz principles" were adopted as a basic programme⁸. The unions' interdenominational character and party political neutrality were the key principles enshrined in it. For this reason, both denominations should be appropriately represented in the selection of delegates and officers. The comments on the Christian unions' attitude to strikes were also important: it should "not be forgotten that workers and employers have common interests" – as the producers of goods, *vis-à-vis* the consumers. For this reason "the entire activity of the unions should be pervaded and inspired by a conciliatory spirit. Demands must be moderate but put forward with firmness and determination. The strike must be used solely as a last resort and if likely to be successful".

Thus unlike the Free Trade Unions, the Christian unions very definitely had a programme setting out their basic principles. This, of course, was indispensable, as the Christian federation had been expressly founded in opposition to social democracy, whose "class struggle mentality", "materialism" and "godlessness" were rejected. In the programme of the Christian unions, the social question appeared to be mainly one of

⁷ Quot. Heinrich Imbusch, *Die Saarbergarbeiterbewegung 1912/13* (Cologne, 1913), p. 2 f.

⁸ Reprinted in *Geschichte und Entwicklung der Christlichen Gewerkschaften Deutschlands nebst Protokoll des III. Gewerkschaftskongresses zu Krefeld* (Mönchen Gladbach, 1901), p. 10 ff.

morality that could be solved with good will, particularly on the part of the employers.

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It is a remarkable fact that the Christian unions set out on the road to a national union even before they had built up a system of individual unions. The congresses in Mainz (1899) and Frankfurt (1900) were by no means full stops in the story of the birth of the Christian unions; instead, they triggered off the establishment of new local, regional, and ultimately national unions. The fact that the creation of the federation ran parallel with the formation of numerous national unions is best illustrated by the following data: 1899 saw the formation of the Christian-Social Union of Engineering Workers, the Central Union of Christian Woodworkers, the Union of Christian Tobacco and Cigar Workers and the Central Union of Christian Building Workers; on the other hand, the Union of Christian Shoe and Leather Workers of Germany, the Union of Christian Tailors and Allied Trades and the Christian-Social Union of Non-Industrial Workers and Sundry Trades of Germany were not set up until 1900 – the year after the Mainz congress. But the federation undoubtedly derived its main support in the pre-war period from the miners' and textile workers' unions, which together accounted for one half of all the federation's members in 1905; five years later they still made up 42 per cent of the membership. Of all female Christian trade unionists, in 1905 60 per cent belonged to the Textile Workers' Union; in 1910, 46 per cent.

So although the formation of central (national) unions was by no means completed, as early as 1899 a central committee of the entire Christian trade union movement was set up in Mainz, though it ran out of money and ceased to function. But a little later, the Krefeld congress of 1901 adopted the rules of the national federation; at the time of its foundation, it had 23 affiliated organizations with some 84,000 members. With the formation of the federation, the debate about the organizational principles of the Christian unions was, in theory, decided. It was built up as follows: the individual unions soon all had central general assemblies that elected the executive; the next tier down consisted of regional or area unions, and finally there were the local payment offices, which – especially in the cities – were merged to form area groups. These area groups saw themselves as the local representatives of the federation and ensured that the individual unions took concerted action in matters of propaganda and also in the elections to the management committees of health insurance funds and industrial tribunals.

The federation also managed to put out a number of periodical publications – just as quickly as most of the national unions. On 15 April 1901 it commenced publication of “Bulletins from the Federation of Christian Trade Unions of Germany”, which changed its name in 1905 to the “Central Journal of the Christian Trade Unions of Germany” (*Zentralblatt der Christlichen Gewerkschaften Deutschlands*). From 1 October 1901, the chairman of the Union of Christian Woodworkers – and later Secretary General of the Federation – Adam Stegerwald edited the “Christian Trade Union Journal” for individual unions that could not support a journal of their own.

Like Legien, Adam Stegerwald was a tough character, perhaps even more hardbitten than Legien. He was born on 14 December 1874 in Greussenheim near Würzburg. His family were poor smallholders; Stegerwald sought to escape by completing an apprenticeship as a cabinet-maker. During his travels he came into contact with the Catholic journeymen’s movement. In 1899 he was one of the founders of the Central Union of Christian Woodworkers. He was an energetic supporter of the merger of the Christian trade unions into a federation, becoming its secretary general on 12 January 1903.

This institution continued to grow rapidly, so that it is accurate to say that by 1906 the Christian trade unions had been consolidated locally, regionally and centrally. They had a rich and varied press, union officials and an extensive benefits system. Because of this, the dues had been raised sharply year after year. The steady increase in membership, despite some setbacks – due to internal disputes (1902) and trouble in the economy (1907–9 and 1913) – is a sure sign of a stabilization process that was undoubtedly helped along by the overall favourable trend in the economy since 1894. It should be emphasized that the Christian trade unions – contrary to their own trade-centred outlook – pushed hard for the formation of unions covering groups of trades or whole industries, though the occupational trade union remained the prevailing form of union organization of the pre-war period.

Structural obstacles to organization

Their breakthrough as a mass movement certainly did not mean that the trade unions had now achieved wall-to-wall coverage, as it were. Owing to the restrictions placed on agricultural workers, messengers, state railway employees and so on, these occupations were anyway untouched by

unionization. Home workers were also hard to organize since they often clung on to an illusory independence.

The size of the company also directly affected opportunities to organize. In small craft-based companies the masters' social control over the journeymen in his employ was frequently complete, while in large companies, effective action by the employers often made union membership difficult. Blacklists on the one hand, welfare measures such as company accommodation, company shops, health care and so forth on the other, together with the support given to works associations dedicated to preserving industrial peace, serving as blacklegs and thus reducing the union's ability to fight and win a dispute, long hampered union expansion in the big companies. In 1910 only 3,000 (4.3 per cent) out of 70,000 Krupp workers in Essen were unionized. At BASF in Ludwigshafen, three-quarters of the workforce belonged to a "sweetheart" union. In 1910 the "sweethearts" merged to form a federation, which in 1913 became the "Head Committee of National Labour and Trade Associations", with a total of 173,000 members. The crucial role played by the strength and policies of the employers in the spread of these organizations is shown by the heavy industrial regions such as the Rhine, Ruhr, Upper Silesia and the Saar. In collaboration with the regional administration and the Church, authoritarian, patriarchal employers could slow down the advance of the unions considerably. And this applied not only to the notoriously revolutionary Free Trade Unions, but also to the liberal unions and even to rival Christian organizations.

Another factor that should be borne in mind is the differing extent to which the various regions were industrialized. The trade unions were strongest in cities with rising industries, such as Augsburg, Berlin, Bremen, Hamburg, Hanover, Nuremberg and the central German towns; their position was conspicuously weak in predominantly agricultural regions like East and West Prussia, which is an indication not only of the restrictions on the right of association but also of the social control exercised by the large landowners, reminiscent of the patriarchal attitudes of the early industrial barons.

The increase in female labour was another obstacle to the steady expansion of the trade unions. The occupational survey of 1907 showed that as a proportion of the working population women now accounted for 35.8 per cent. But the unions had little success in attracting female members. At the first congress of the Free Trade Unions in Halberstadt in 1892, it was seen as an "act of self-preservation" to step up agitational work among women. No special women's organizations were to be set up; if necessary, the rules of the existing unions should be altered to enable

women to be admitted.⁹ This decision only bore fruit, however, in cases where men and women had roughly the same qualifications, for instance, in the bookbinders', printers' assistants', gold and silver workers' and tobacco workers' unions. Unions in trades or industries in which men were often better qualified than women, such as the textile and clothing industry, were less successful in recruiting female members.

Disregarding the restrictions set out in the Law on Associations, which ceased to apply in 1908, women's reservations about unionization were due to several factors. To many women paid employment was simply a temporary phase in their lives, whose main duty was considered to be raise a family. Working mothers struggled under the dual burden of jobs and housework, especially since the latter was often left to them alone, even by convinced Social Democrats, in line with the traditional gender roles. Moreover, the wages paid to female workers, who were often unskilled, were so low – though much needed, indeed relied upon, as extra income for the family – that it was impossible to pay the still quite high union dues out of them. Lastly, many women were more deeply attached than the men to their rural, and hence often religious backgrounds, and these ties prevented them from backing the “aggressive” policy of defending one's interests embodied by the male-dominated unions.

Thus women were rarely represented at the top of the union movement. The only woman to be elected on to the General Commission at the Halberstadt congress was Wilhelmine Kähler of the Female Factory and Manual Workers' Union; Emma Ihrer, who founded the Association for the Defence of the Interests of Women Workers in Berlin in 1885, was not elected. Kähler was re-elected once only, in 1896. From 1899 to 1905 there was not a single woman on the General Commission. Although the Fifth Trade Union Congress (1905) decided to step up the recruitment of women and build up a system of female union representatives to this end, even setting up a secretariat for female workers the same year, the impression remained of male dominance at union congresses and on executive committees. For all these reasons the proportion of female members of the Free Trade Unions rose exceedingly slowly – from 2 per cent in 1892, to 3.3 per cent in 1900 and 8.8 per cent in 1913.

In the Christian trade unions things were not much different. There, too, the number of women members was a long way behind the proportion of women in work. From 5.8 per cent in 1903 it rose slowly and unevenly to 8.1 per cent by 1913. Even this could be seen as surprising, since the

⁹ Protokoll der Verhandlungen des I. Kongresses der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands p. 73

Christian unions never missed an opportunity to refer to women's "true" role as mothers and to play on their reservations about employment outside the home, which were fuelled by Catholic ideas about the proper order of things. The fact that the proportion of women in the Free and Christian trade unions was about the same is even more remarkable if one takes into account the dominant position of the Miners' Union in the Christian trade union movement; otherwise, in view of the high proportion of women in the Textile Workers' Union, the average would have been even higher.

The trade unions found it hard to make headway among the white-collar workers, a group that was growing fast. Although they differed greatly in function and income, the white-collar workers developed an independent mentality that was chiefly characterized by the wish to be distinguished from manual workers. Whether office-workers or shop assistants, technicians or clerks – the most important thing for them was their status as "non-workers". The launching of a special insurance scheme for white-collar workers in 1911 heightened their awareness of their status, which obviously ruled out membership of a proletarian mass movement. Although the Free Unions set up a clerical assistants' union in 1907, it was not able to report a great measure of success. White-collar workers often preferred the nationalist associations, as they felt less of a need for organizations of their own, not considering themselves rejected by Wilhelminian society in the way the workers did. In any event, the "bourgeois" white-collar associations were more successful in recruiting members than unions belonging to the trade union movement proper.

That much is revealed by a look at the membership statistics. When the National Union of Salaried Staff (*Zentralverband der Angestellten*) was formed in 1897 with 522 members, the Clerical Assistants' Association of 1858 (headquarters: Hamburg) already had some 54,000, the Union of German Clerical Assistants in Leipzig 47,000, and the German Nationalist Union of Clerical Assistants (DHV) 7,700. By 1913 the situation had changed in favour of the DHV, which now had 148,000, while the 1858 association had 127,000, the Leipzig union 102,000 and the nationalist union only 24,800. These figures illustrate how the white-collar workers' strong status awareness affected their decision to join a professional organization or trade union. The leading position of the DHV, which recruited members with its nationalist and anti-semitic propaganda, showed where the political sympathies of many white-collar workers lay – a problem that was to become particularly acute under the Weimar Republic.

At this point another problem should be mentioned: the rise in membership figures would have been more impressive, if it were not for the

huge turnover in members. For example, between 1892 and 1913 2.1 million workers joined the German Engineering Workers' Union – but 1.6 m left it again. Even the job of simply managing the ever-growing membership records made it necessary to build up a superstructure of regularly paid officials. Membership fluctuations forced the unions constantly to consider how best to tackle the problem: benefits schemes and more frequent contact with members via regular collection of dues were considered the best means, but they did not really provide a successful solution.

The administrative needs of a mass movement, the growing numbers of trade union duties and the trend towards centralization of union powers – all combined to change the face of trade unionism, which came to be increasingly dominated by the “union machinery”, or the “union bureaucracy”. One trend that was bound to affect the relationship between the members and the paid union leadership was the emergence of professional union officials, who – naturally – developed “class interests” of their own. Through their various tasks – for instance, as representatives and lay assessors on arbitration and self-management bodies – union employees had become incorporated into the society of the Reich. In consequence anything that jeopardized the trade unions, which after all were their life's work and livelihood at the same time, was viewed with the utmost suspicion. True, this had not yet led to a profound credibility gap between the rank and file and the leadership; but there were the makings of a problem that was to flare up during the Great War and later, especially during the revolution of 1918–19.

Ideological and political divisions within the working class and the split in the trade union movement

The breakthrough of the unions as a mass movement does not present a coherent picture. There was a steep rise in the number of union members in the 25 years between the end of the Socialist Law and the outbreak of the First World War. The strength of the unions also increased as a result of the centralization of the individual unions and the formation of umbrella organizations. Yet there was an obvious risk of membership and leadership drifting apart. Furthermore, there were large areas that remained out of bounds to unions of all tendencies. The fragmentation of the union movement and the resultant rivalry also tied up a good deal of energy that could have been expended more usefully on other things. Of course, the formation of trade union federations on political lines was not entirely a bad thing. The different ideological and political ties of the

unions were precisely what won over to trade unionism many people from sections of the working class that emphatically rejected it in its Social Democratic guise.

We should remember, however, that the splits in the trade union movement were not artificial ones: they corresponded to divisions in the working class itself, though admittedly these were initially deepened and entrenched by the various different organizations. The rival unions were both an expression and a consolidation of the old division of the working class into different socio-cultural milieux that shaped the lives and attitudes of the workers who belonged to them at any given time. The Free Trade Unions were part of the "Social Democratic milieu" that was also held together by the SPD, the benefit schemes and co-operatives, press, libraries, cultural societies and joint festivals. The Christian trade unions derived their surest support from the Catholic working class, most of whom tended towards the Centre Party politically and were politically and ideologically "at home" with their "own" insurance, their "own" co-operatives, the Catholic press and the cultural activities offered by the workers' associations and the Church.

It was not only the rival organizations that were affected by the various working class milieux – they made their mark on everyday life. They determined how people voted – but also where people lived and shopped, what insurance they took out against the vicissitudes of life, what they read, how and what they celebrated, whether they attended the May Day parade or the Corpus Christi procession. These different milieux were a consequence of the marginalization of the working class under the Empire; but at the same time they were a voluntary means of demarcation, enabling people to dissociate themselves from outside influences and thus promoting unity within the milieu.

The ideological and political division of the working class, the mass base for the various trade unions movements, thus extended to other levels. This is true of the co-operation between the trade union and co-operative movements, for instance. Since the 1890s the trade unions had seen the co-operative movement, formed under the influence of Schulze-Delitzsch's ideas, as a possible partner in improving the lot of the working class. The trade union members of the General Co-operative Association (Allgemeiner Genossenschaftsverband) broke away in 1903 to set up the Central Union of German Consumer Associations (Zentralverband deutscher Konsumvereine). At the Cologne trade union congress in 1905, Adolf von Elm, who had founded the Bulk Buying Company of the German Consumer Associations in Hamburg in 1893, sought backing for co-operation between the two movements in his speech on "Trade Unions

and Co-operatives"; after all, the latter were a "weapon in labour's struggle against capital". Congress decided that trade unionists should join the co-operatives¹⁰.

Despite all the internal conflicts (between, for example, model but costly working conditions, on the one hand, and higher dividends on the other) the co-operatives thrived (partly owing to trade union support) and founded or took over a number of companies of their own, such as factories producing cleaning materials and food. In 1911 there were 1,142 local co-operatives with 1.3 m members and a turnover of 335 m Marks. On 1 July 1913, the consumer co-operatives and Free Trade Unions co-founded the People's Care (Volksfürsorge) insurance scheme, which was to have its heyday in the Weimar period. The Hirsch-Duncker and Christian unions collaborated with their own consumer co-operative movements, which also flourished. In 1913 the Christian trade unions established the German Popular Insurance Company (Deutsche Volksversicherung AG).

There was a schism in the trade union movement internationally, too. Since the 1890s, a network of contacts had been built up, initially by unions organizing the same trades. Delegates attended the congresses of sister organizations abroad, international trade or occupational conferences were arranged and, finally, the first international occupational associations were formed, the Social Democratic and Christian unions doing this separately. Since the turn of the century, preparations had been in train to establish international federations of the Socialist and the Christian umbrella organizations. In view of the German trade unions' strength, they were given a leading role in these international efforts to achieve unity. Their work was rewarded with executive posts: Carl Legien, former secretary of the International Bureau of Socialist Trade Unions (founded 1902), was appointed president of the International Trade Union Federation, set up in Zürich in 1913. Adam Stegerwald was made leader of the International Trade Union Commission, which evolved into the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions.

¹⁰ Protokoll der Verhandlungen des Fünften Kongresses der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands, abgehalten in Köln a. R. vom 22. bis 27. Mai (Berlin, 1905); A. von Elm, Gewerkschaften und Genossenschaften, pp. 158–70, this quot. p. 170: resolution p. 35 f.

3. *Conflicts over the independence of the trade unions*

The period between the lifting of the Socialist Law and the First World War not only witnessed the emergence of the basic structures of the modern trade union mass organizations; these were also years in which the nature of the trade unions was clarified and they asserted their independence from their ideological and political mentors. Though the unions had not actually been founded by the parties or by the Catholic Church, these institutions continually tried to control them or to use them for their own ends. But as the unions grew stronger and scored successes in the day-to-day struggle to better the lot of the working class, they developed their own self-awareness, which was scarcely compatible with their allies' claims to leadership. This is why the Free Trade Unions clashed dramatically with the SPD, and the Christian unions fell out with sections of the Catholic Church.

Free trade unions and the SPD: from subordination to equality

The unity between the Free Trade Unions and the Social Democratic Party that had developed under the pressure of the Socialist Law and was almost taken for granted lived on, but it was troubled if not effaced by a series of conflicts. The Social Democratic Party laid claim to unlimited powers of leadership, as set out in the 1891 Erfurt party programme¹¹, which stated that the struggle of the working class against capitalist exploitation is “necessarily a political struggle” and “to turn this working class struggle into a conscious and unified one and to guide it to its necessary conclusion is the task of the Social Democratic Party”. This programme shows the SPD, having just emerged strengthened from the period of the emergency laws, bursting with self-confidence. The theoretical section explains the need for a complete social revolution, based on the socialization of the means of production. The protracted economic recession seemed to confirm the expectation that capitalism would perish in a manner as swift as it was inevitable. In contrast, the practical, day-to-day demands put forward in the second part of the programme – from the introduction of universal, equal, direct and secret suffrage, the repeal of all laws limiting freedom of opinion, assembly and association and the equality of man and woman, to the declaration that “religion is a private

¹¹ Reprinted in Dowe and Klotzbach (eds). *Programmatische Dokumente*, p. 187 ff.; these quotations, pp. 189 and 191 f.

matter” and the call to “secularize school” – showed the SPD with its feet firmly on the ground of the status quo. This applied even more to the demands listed “for the protection of the working class”, which included the introduction of the eight-hour day, a ban on the employment of children under fourteen, a ban on the truck system, the reinforcement of the factory inspectorate, “granting agricultural workers and servants equality in law with industrial workers”, “securing the right of association” and “the take-over of all workers’ insurance schemes by the state with strong worker participation in their management”.

The trade unions were certainly able to subscribe to this list of demands. Given their critical position in the early 1890s, they probably saw little alternative to accepting their allotted role as a recruiting school for the political labour movement. They modestly stepped back, ceding centre-stage to the political party that “seeks a total reform of the present social system”, whereas the trade union movement, “because of the limits imposed on it by the law, stands on the ground of present-day bourgeois society in its efforts”¹². A little later Carl Legien admitted: “We know full well that a lasting improvement in the lot of the working class, the elimination of wage labour, the appropriation of the full profits of labour can only be achieved politically. On the other hand, however,” he said, in justification of trade union work, “the mass of workers must be won over to this idea, won over by the economic struggle in present-day bourgeois society.”¹³ Union work was thus “the means to an end”; it was to create the conditions enabling the “mass of workers to solve [. . .] the historical task that is the lot of the working class”¹⁴. According to Legien at the Cologne party congress of 1893, the unions were the “nursery of the political movement”, the “best educational institution for our comrades”¹⁵.

The unions, weakened by the industrial defeats and membership losses that occurred in the early 1890s, was confronted by a SPD leadership abrim with self-confidence and delighted with the electoral successes of 1890 and 1893. With the backing of 1.4 m voters, later increased to 1.7 m,

12 Carl Legien, An die Mitglieder der Gewerkschaften, in *Correspondenzblatt der Generalkommission der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands (= Correspondenzblatt)*, no. 3 of 7. 2. 1891, p. 9

13 Zur Organisationsfrage, in: *Correspondenzblatt* No. 13 of 23.5.1891, pp. 51–3; this quot. p. 52

14 Quot. Helga Grebing, *Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung. Ein Überblick* (Munich, 1970), p. 101

15 Carl Legien, *Die Gewerkschaftsbewegung und ihre Unterstützung durch die Parteigenossen*, in *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitag der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands, abgehalten zu Köln a. Rh. vom 22. bis 28. Oktober 1893* (Berlin, 1893), pp. 181–88; this quot. p. 183 f.

the SPD leaders obviously thought that they could face the problems of the unions with equanimity. At any rate, they failed to give the unions the help they so desperately needed in the circumstances. The different positions of the SPD and the unions were evident in a press feud of 1892–93 and, particularly, at the 1893 party congress in Cologne. August Bebel, the chairman of the SPD, repeatedly warned members not to overestimate the trade unions' chances of success; what is more, he also feared that they might have a harmful influence on the revolutionary nature of SPD policy. In view of the inevitable collapse of capitalism, the unions' modest demands for reform could not appear as anything but deluded daydreaming on their part. The trade union leaders, on the other hand, were quite prepared to concede their work's subordinate importance for the final liberation of the working class, but requested the party's support in the acute crisis in which the unions found themselves. When, in this situation, Legien sought to make SPD members join the unions by decision of congress, after a defeat in 1892 he was brushed off at the 1893 Cologne congress with a non-committal statement in which congress "expressed its sympathies for the trade union movement" and, for the rest, declared once again that it was "the duty of party comrades to work tirelessly for recognition of the importance of the trade union organizations and to do everything in their power to strengthen them"¹⁶.

When things improved for the trade unions and particularly when they succeeded in scoring a number of successes in the field of social welfare, the harmonious subordination of the trade unions to the party became more problematic. Trade unionists became more self-confident and started questioning the most important Social Democratic prediction, on which so much hinged – the inevitability of capitalism's collapse. "We, the organized workers, do not want the so-called crash to come, forcing us to create institutions on the ruins of society, regardless of whether they are better or worse than the present ones," said Legien at the 1889 trade union congress in Frankfurt, "We want peaceful development."¹⁷

The SPD leadership cautiously took these new attitudes into account; after all, they were ideas that were making headway within the party, too, leading to the revisionism debate. In a policy paper on "Trade Unionism and Political Parties" published in 1900, Bebel abandoned his earlier view that the unions were the "recruiting school" of the party¹⁸. The import-

¹⁶ *ibid.* p. 180 f.

¹⁷ Protokoll der Verhandlungen des 3. Kongresses der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands, abgehalten zu Frankfurt a.M.-Bockenheim vom 8. bis 13. Mai 1899 (Hamburg, 1899), p. 103

¹⁸ August Bebel, *Gewerkschaftsbewegung und politische Parteien* (Stuttgart, 1900)

ance of reformist work had to be scrutinized, if – or since – the “crash” of capitalism was taking such a long time. Furthermore, as the strength of the unions increased, so too did the SPD’s interest in securing the votes of the masses who made up this movement. And, by the same token, the unions needed the SPD to champion their social demands in parliament.

Soon after the turn of the century, the realization that the SPD and the unions needed each other caught on in the SPD, too. Karl Kautsky, the leading party theoretician prior to the First World War, wrote with regard to the success of the trade unions: “The political organizations of the proletariat will always only embrace a small elite; only the trade unions are capable of forming mass organizations. A Social Democratic party without the unions as its core is therefore built on sand.” The special role of the trade unions was also acknowledged: “The trade unions must stay outside the party; it is not merely the laws on association that demand it, but consideration for the special tasks of these organizations.” Kautsky may have been thinking not only of the economic struggle but also of the problems caused by competition from the Christian trade unions, which derived their *raison d’être* (indeed, perhaps even their necessity) precisely from the close links between the Free Trade Unions and the SPD. “But,” Kautsky continued, “social democracy must constantly seek to ensure that the members of the trade union organizations are filled with the socialist spirit. Socialist propaganda among the trade unions must go hand in hand with trade union propaganda in the party’s agitation work.”¹⁹ The fact that it was presented as the party’s duty to ensure the socialist orientation of the unions indicated, however, that it was still considered the spearhead of the labour movement – and that the party leadership was not entirely sure of this socialist orientation. No wonder, for in the arguments about social democracy’s conception of its role and objective, in the struggles between the reformists led by Georg von Vollmar and the revisionists loquaciously represented by Eduard Bernstein, between the party centre grouped around August Bebel and the Left, equipped with the theories of Rosa Luxemburg, the majority of trade unionists sympathized with the reform course advocated by a minority in the party.

The debate on the general strike led to a (temporary) resolution of the relationship between the SPD and the Free Trade Unions. The attainment of universal suffrage by means of the general strike in Belgium and Sweden lent plausibility to the idea of an active policy to force through socialist demands. But the trade unions, which, not without justification, consi-

¹⁹ Karl Kautsky, *Zum Parteitag*, in *Die Neue Zeit* 1902/3, vol. 2, pp. 729–39; this quot. p. 738

dered that a general strike would have to be organized by them, saw their position jeopardized thereby. "It cost us tremendous sacrifices," Theodor Bömelburg, the chairman of the Bricklayers' Union, reminded the assembled delegates at the Cologne trade union congress from 22 to 27 May 1905, "to reach the present stage of organization." He continued: "But in order to build up our organization, we in the labour movement need peace."²⁰ It was in keeping with this basic attitude that the Cologne congress – with only five "nays" – "deplored all attempts to establish a particular set of tactics by propagating the political general strike". Instead it recommended "organized labour to vigorously oppose such attempts" – and to see that the organization was strengthened.²¹

The differing opinions of the SPD and the unions on this point, which Theodor Bömelburg tried to gloss over at the Cologne congress with the phrase "Unions and Party are one"²², were fully apparent a few months later at the SPD party conference in Jena from 17 to 23 September 1905. By 287 votes to 14, it adopted a motion tabled by Bebel, acknowledging the political general strike not as an offensive weapon but as a defence against any attempts to tamper with the electoral law and the law on association.²³ The union leaders firmly rejected the wording of the Jena party conference decision, which could be seen as basically a compromise between supporters of an offensive use of the general strike and the opponents of any use of the general strike at all. It speaks volumes for the union leaders' recent gain in self-assurance that – according to Adolf von Elm at the conference of union executives in February 1906 – they believed they were safe in assuming that the supporters of a general strike could "be simply swept away at a single party conference" – "if only trade union members would concern themselves more with the party".²⁴

In February 1906 the trade union and party leaders entered into secret negotiations in order to settle the general strike issue. The outcome of

20 Theodor Bömelburg, *Die Stellung der Gewerkschaften zum Generalstreik*, in *Protokoll der Verhandlungen des Fünften Kongresses der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands*, abgehalten in Köln a. Rh. vom 22. bis 27. Mai 1905 (Berlin, 1905), pp. 215–22; this quot. p. 221

21 *Protokoll der Verhandlungen des 5. Kongresses*, p. 30

22 Bömelburg's closing words in *Protokoll der Verhandlungen des 4. Kongresses der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands*, abgehalten zu Stuttgart 1902 (Berlin, 1902), p. 274; see also *Protokoll der Verhandlungen des 5. Kongresses*, p. 266

23 *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands*, abgehalten zu Jena vom 17 bis 23 September 1905 (Berlin, 1905), p. 142 f.

24 Quot. Eduard David, *Die Bedeutung von Mannheim*, in *Sozialistische Monatshefte* 1906, vol. 2, pp. 907–14; this quot. p. 908 f.

these talks was the “Mannheim Agreement” adopted by the next party conference, which met in Mannheim on 23–29 September 1906. Now that Bebel had sounded the retreat, it was “unthinkable to carry out a general strike unless the overall mood among the broad masses is favourable”; and after Legien had declared it nonsensical to commit oneself to rejecting the general strike, it appeared – according to Legien – simply to be a matter of “documenting unity to the outside world”.²⁵ The agreement stipulated that the executives of the trade unions and the SPD were “to ensure that a uniform approach was adopted in matters equally affecting the interests of the trade unions and the party”.²⁶ This document, spelling out the equal status of the party and union leaderships within the Social Democratic labour movement, reflected the actual position – in reality, neither an offensive nor a defensive general strike could be fought without the trade unions. At the same time, it amounted to a recognition of the real power of the trade unions, which intended to exert political influence commensurate with their strength – in 1906 there were roughly 1.7 m trade unionists compared with 384,000 Social Democrats. While in the early 1890s the trade unions had been content to accept the role assigned to them by the party, the SPD now feared that the unions were after supremacy. It seemed to many Social Democrats that the trade union movement was unequivocal in “recognizing [. . .] the necessity of collaboration between the unions and social democracy. But there were also moods and impulses best described as trade union illusions that must be flatly rejected”.²⁷

In the years following the Mannheim Agreement, SPD theoreticians repeatedly attempted to decide the importance of trade union work – partly in order to resist the influence of the unions, which the growing number of trade union officials among the party conference delegates were in a position to exert. The fact that the proportion of trade union officials in the SPD parliamentary party rose from 11.6 per cent in 1893 to 32.7 per cent in 1912 says it all. The most scathing criticism came from Rosa Luxemburg. Having previously viewed trade union policy as an indispensable but Sisyphean task that was doomed to failure in the long run²⁸, she shrewdly put her finger on one of the basic problems of trade

25 Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitagcs der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands, abgehalten zu Mannheim vom 23. bis 29. September 1906 (Berlin, 1906), p. 231 ff. and 245 ff.

26 *ibid.* p. 305

27 Parvus, *Die Bedeutung der Gewerkschaften und der Hamburger Kongress*, in *Die Neue Zeit* 1907/8, vol. 2, pp. 509–14; this quot. p. 514

28 Rosa Luxemburg, *Sozialreform oder Revolution* (Leipzig, 1899), p. 36

union centralization, though in exclusively negative terms: by the “businesslike, bureaucratically regulated leadership of the trade union official” the working class was “degraded to an indiscriminating mass, for whom the virtue of ‘discipline’, that is passive obedience, is elevated to a duty”.²⁹ Karl Kautsky also considered it necessary to allude to the limitations of union policy; in 1909, in view of the fact that real wages had ceased to rise, he believed that the social advancement of the proletariat had to be considered at an end.³⁰ The unions interpreted this not simply as a critique of the development of capitalism but also as a reproach addressed to them. Significantly, the General Commission’s reply bore the title “Sisyphean task or positive successes? Contributions to an appraisal of the activity of the German trade unions”.³¹

When, as a result of Rosa Luxemburg’s demands, the SPD party conference debated the general strike issue once again in Jena in 1913, the battle-lines no longer ran between the trade unions and the SPD, but right through the middle of the SPD, between the party executive and the left wing. After Philip Scheidemann, for the party leadership, had repudiated the view that “you can prepare for a general strike by relaxing union discipline, by playing off the masses against their leaders, by glorifying the unorganized mass”, Gustav Bauer, vice-chairman of the General Commission was able to adopt the stance that the unions “saw no need to engage in this discussion”.³² No wonder, then, that Rosa Luxemburg’s resolution that a general strike could not “be artificially manufactured at the behest of party and trade unions bodies” but “could only spring from the aggravation of the economic and political situation, as the escalation of a mass action that is already in progress” was defeated by 333 votes to 142. Instead, conference adopted a resolution stating that the political general strike was dependent on the expansion of the movement’s political and trade union organizations. It would be hard to find a clearer expression of the changes in the relationship between the SPD and trade unions, and in the policies of the party itself.

29 Rosa Luxemburg, *Massenstreik. Partei und Gewerkschaft* (Hamburg, 1906)

30 Karl Kautsky, *Der Weg zur Macht. Politische Betrachtungen über das Hineinwachsen in der Revolution* (Berlin, 1909)

31 *Sisyphusarbeit oder positive Erfolge? Beiträge zur Wertschätzung der Tätigkeit der deutschen Gewerkschaften.* hrsg. von der Generalkommission der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands (Berlin, 1910)

32 *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands.* abgehalten in Jena vom 14. bis 20. September 1913 (Berlin, 1913), pp. 231 ff. and 294 ff; motions and resolutions, p. 192 ff.

The Christian unions, the Catholic Church and the Centre Party: interdenominationalism and party political neutrality put to the test

In the Christian trade unions, too, organizational consolidation and the resulting self-assurance among the union leaders grouped around Adam Stegerwald led to a far-reaching conflict with their allies in the Catholic Church and its political party, the Centre. The Christian unions had emerged strengthened from the dispute over “joint” trade unions (that is, the possibility of a future merger with “genuinely neutral” Free Trade Unions), just as it had from the tariff dispute, when it had been left to the individual unions to deal with the aspects of the tariff question that directly affected them “professionally”. But the “trade union dispute” (*Gewerkschaftsstreit*) represented a threat to their very existence. Admittedly, the tariff dispute of 1902 had led to the temporary expulsion of Franz Wieber and the Christian Social Engineering Workers’ Union and thus – until unification in 1903 – weakened the organization. But the clash over the question of interdenominationalism and the right of the Catholic clergy to have a say strengthened internal forces within the union movement that threatened to smash the whole organization.

The thing that triggered the dispute was the question of whether the Christian unions, because of their interdenominational character, would put their Catholic members’ faith at risk and lead them into “religious routine” or even push them into the arms of the Social Democrats. Catholics who adhered to “integralism”^{*} saw their fears confirmed by the unions’ refusal to submit to clerical leadership or participation, even admitting that for them “Christian” really only meant “non-Social Democratic”. Consequently, they did not make a “positive” stand for a specific denomination but merely promised that, unlike the Free Trade Unions, in defending the “purely economic” interests of the workers they would not take any steps that might offend the religious sensibilities of their Catholic or Protestant members. Religious and moral education were, they claimed, the responsibility of the denominational workers’ associations. It was more than anything the announcement that, if necessary, they intended to merge with the Free Trade Unions in the foreseeable future – if the latter adopted a neutral stance on party politics and ideology – that provoked the opposition of the Integralists. This opposition took hold in the Catholic workers’ associations (based in Berlin) with the publication

^{*} Translator’s note. “Integralism”: former totalitarian tendency in the Catholic Church that sought to impose the precepts of the Church on all areas of life.

of Franz von Savigny's pamphlet, "Workers' Associations and Trade Union Organizations in the Light of the Encyclical *Rerum novarum*"³³. These workers' associations, which with their clergy-led trade sections sought to offer a non-militant substitute for the unions, received the backing of Cardinal Georg Kopp, Prince-Bishop of Breslau, and Michael Felix Korum, Bishop of Trier. These two clerics insisted on the Church's right to lead the Catholic labour movement; in their opinion, there was no separating economic from religious questions. They did not, of course, take the same line with farmers' and manufacturers' organizations, with the paternalistic justification that the workers needed special schooling and assistance.

It was mainly Kopp's doing that the German episcopate threw away the first chance to halt the looming conflict in the Fulda Pastoral Letter, which, while praising the Catholic workers' associations, did not deign to mention the trade unions. This threw open all sorts of interpretations of the intentions of the bishops' conference. The subsequent statements by the German episcopate and by Pope Pius X, who soon became involved in the disagreement, were notable for their scarcely veiled efforts to avoid taking a clear position. This is all the more surprising in that the majority of the German episcopate were favourably disposed towards the Christian trade unions; but time after time, in the desire to maintain a united front, they allowed themselves to be pressured by Kopp and Korum. Even when the Pope at last officially intervened in the conflict in 1912, with the encyclical "*Singulari quadam*" – partly at the request of some Centre politicians and representatives of the Prussian Government – his remarks about "so-called Christian trade unions", which "could be tolerated", were thoroughly ambiguous.³⁴ The outspoken resolution of the extraordinary trade union congress of 1912³⁵ and Kopp's implacable opposition were also partly to blame for the fact that the dispute persisted after the publication of the encyclical. Not until Kopp's death on 4 March 1914 and the outbreak of the First World War did this issue cease to be so important. In 1919 a measure of agreement, albeit superficial, was reached; the Christian unions finally received official approval from Pope Pius XI with the encyclical "*Quadragesimo anno*" (1931).

33 Franz von Savigny, *Arbeitervereine und Gewerkschaftsorganisationen im Lichte der Enzyklika „Rerum novarum“* (Berlin, 1900)

34 Quot. Texte zur katholischen Soziallehre. Die sozialen Rundschreiben der Päpste und andere kirchliche Dokumente, ed. Bundesverband der Katholischen Arbeitnehmer-Bewegung (KAB) Deutschlands (1975), p. 84

35 Protokoll der Verhandlungen des ausserordentlichen Kongresses der christlichen Gewerkschaften Deutschlands, abgehalten am 26 November 1912 in Essen/Ruhr (Cologne, 1912), p. 63 f.

The success of the Christian trade unions in fending off the leadership claims of parts of the Catholic Church was significant from several points of view. Their interdenominational character, and the recognition of this by the Catholic Church, were necessary to repudiate the Social Democrats' charge that the Christian trade unions were "lackeys of the Church" and to prove that they were a genuine, independent trade union movement. The principles of interdenominationalism and party political neutrality were mutually dependent, even though they were not achieved on any significant scale in reality. Firstly, only 10–20 per cent of members were Protestants; secondly, the Centre Party was obviously the unions' principal party political associate.

While the Free Trade Unions were quite clearly affiliated to the SPD – and in the pre-war period this relationship was relatively free of problems – the position was far more complicated for the Christian unions and their members. There was general agreement in rejecting social democracy, so that for this reason alone their claim to "party political neutrality" was based on a narrowed-down field. The main focus of the Christian unionists' party political commitment was undoubtedly the Centre, the party to which Johannes Giesberts, who in 1905 became the first Christian trade unionist to enter parliament, belonged. In 1907 the number of Christian trade unionist deputies rose to six – five sitting with the Centre and one with the Economic Association. In 1912, five of the seven Christian trade unionists in the Reichstag belonged to the Centre, one to the Christian Social Party (which succeeded the Economic Association) and one to the National Liberal Party. The conflicts resulting from the differing party political allegiances of the leaders and the members of the Christian trade unions only became fully apparent during the Weimar period. But one problem was in evidence already: the Christian trade unions were constantly discovering that in the parties closest to it their members' interests ranked alongside, or lower than, those of other groups, such as industry and agriculture.

With their political ties with the bourgeois parties, the Christian trade unions became the core of a Christian-nationalist coalition movement, whose most conspicuous manifestation was the German workers' congresses. The unifying factor of these congresses, first held in 1903, was the deliberate anti-Social Democratic programme, the other side of which was an overt nationalism, which now became at least as prominent as the social and religious elements of the programme. The importance of this coalition of non-Social Democratic labour organizations is illustrated by the number of members represented by their delegates at these congresses: 620,000 in 1903, 1 million in 1907, 1.4 m in 1913 and 1.5 m in 1917 (their

own figures). The “German Workers’ Congresses” symbolized the party political receptiveness of the Christian unions to all non-Social Democratic parties at a broad trade union level and from this point of view can be seen as the forerunner of the German (Democratic) Trade Union Federation, founded in 1919.

4. *Industrial struggle, collective agreements and social reform: trade union work under the Empire*

Concentrating our attention exclusively on feuds at congress and in the press, on the umbrella organizations’ desire to assert themselves vis-à-vis political parties and the Catholic Church, paints a false picture. For this was by no means the unions’ main field of activity; in fact, they often regarded them as irksome distractions from their “real” duties. Trade union work under the Empire was the daily struggle against social and economic ills, discrimination against the working class and its organizations in law and its social marginalization.



Looking at the foundation phase of the trade unions, we saw the tremendous importance of industrial struggle as a driving force behind the organizations. This never fundamentally changed later on. There was often a dramatic increase in membership shortly before expected industrial action. And even though some of these new members would again turn their backs on the unions once the conflict was over, there was usually a lasting increase in membership as a result. It was clear to the unions that successful industrial action not only depended on the economic situation in the trade concerned; a crucial part was played by the strength of both sides, and hence the unions’ degree of organization and financial resources. This is clearly shown by the figures: in the years of economic crisis and poor trade union organization from 1890 to 1894, of 544 strikes only 32.9 per cent were successful, a trade union figure which may even be an exaggeration; in contrast, during a period of economic expansion and growing union strength from 1895 to 1899, 57.8 per cent of 3,226 strikes conducted turned out to be a success for the wage earners.³⁶ This is the

³⁶ See Die Streiks im Jahre 1894, in *Correspondenzblatt* No. 36 of 23. 9. 1895, pp. 161–64; Die Streiks im Jahre 1900, in *Correspondenzblatt* No. 29 of 22. 7. 1901, pp. 449–61

reason why calls were heard in the trade union press for the organization to be strengthened – and, further, for more common sense to be shown in “wage bargaining tactics”. After the *Sturm und Drang* period of spontaneous protest strikes the trade unions should now – in 1897 – “systematize their warfare”.³⁷ The strike regulations transferring the decision on industrial action to regional bodies accompanied and reinforced this trend, which on the one hand increased the clout of the organization through rational use of resources, but on the other frequently bolstered the impression of executive remoteness from the grassroots.

Without a doubt, there was a decline in the number and scale of local spontaneous strikes, though they persisted in breaking out: suffice it to mention the strike of 1896 that started in the Berlin garment industry, the strike of the Hamburg dockers in 1896–7 and the 1905 Ruhr miners’ strike. These strikes were started either against the wishes of the union or without union backing, though some of them were subsequently taken over by the unions. The trend, however, was clearly towards well-organized industrial action, pitting trade unions and employers’ federations against each other.

But strikes, especially if met by large-scale lockouts, were a double-edged weapon. Certainly, they helped enhance the workers’ class consciousness and solidarity; but they not infrequently jeopardized the very existence of the trade union organizations if they encountered stubborn resistance from the employers. Moreover, strikes prompted the employers to develop organized forms of joint defence in turn. A few examples of the dual role played by industrial action must suffice. The printers’ strike of October 1891 – January 1892 for the implementation of the nine-hour day mobilized 10,000 trade unionists and consumed the – by the standards of the day – enormous sum of 1,250,000 Marks. This financial drain was enough to cripple the printers’ trade union activities for years to come; defeat in the strike itself only made matters worse and aggravated the mood of crisis that gripped the trade unions in the early 1890s.

Furthermore, the wave of strikes in 1889–90 mentioned above and the industrial struggles of the turn of the century gave a boost to the employers’ efforts to organize. The (relatively) poor economic situation of 1901–3 led to greater intransigence on the part of the employers, which manifested itself in the month-long lockout of 6,000 Hamburg dockworkers and again in the industrial struggle of 1903 in the Crimmitschau textile industry. The strike at Crimmitschau – the first in which women

37 Zur Taktik bei Lohnbewegungen, in *Correspondenzblatt* No. 9 of 1.3.1897, pp. 45–47; this quot. p. 45



Women during the dispute in the textile industry at Crimmitschau, 1903-4



The army move in during the 1905 Ruhr miners' strike.

took a major part – was carefully prepared by the unions, but it occurred at an unfavourable point in the business cycle, that is, during a slump in the market. The main aim of the dispute was a reduction in working hours to ten hours a day. The workers received money from unions and wage earners all over Germany, but had no reply to the lockout imposed by the employers. Furthermore, the Saxony textile manufacturers were supported by the Central Federation of German Industrialists. The outcome was a crushing defeat for the strikers and those locked out. As we have seen, the Crimmitschau dispute also speeded up the process of organization amongst the employers. From now on, blacklists containing the names of “undesirable elements”, the setting up of “sweetheart” unions and the aggressive use of large-scale lockouts were among the weapons most frequently used by the employers to hamper and hamstring the unions, if not destroy them. The fact that all workers were locked out and not just trade unionists was probably intended to ensure that in future the company concerned stayed “non-unionized”.

The scope and magnitude of trade disputes increased in tandem with the degree of organization on both sides of industry. This was true of strikes such as the Ruhr miners’ strike of 1905, involving some 220,000 of the 280,000 miners, which ended in a partial victory with the creation of workers’ committees in the amendment to the Mining Law of 14 June 1905. But it also applied to lockouts: after the punitive lockouts for celebrating May Day in 1890 and 1891, and peaks in 1903 and 1905–6, they began affecting ever larger numbers of wage earners, as demonstrated by the lockout of 190,000 building workers in 1910.

But that was not the last major industrial dispute before the Great War. Let us recall the strike by some 190,000 Ruhr miners in 1912, which offered a textbook example of the collaboration between the authorities, the army, the judiciary and the employers. It also illustrates the effects of the split in the trade union movement: in 1912 the union of Christian miners, which had joined the strike of 1905, were not prepared to co-operate with the Free Trade Unions. This was probably due to fear of the threatening papal rejection of the Christian trade unions – obviously no-one wanted to provide an easy excuse for such a step. The schism within the movement indubitably undermined the position of the strikers, who suffered a heavy defeat.

If industrial struggle had a secure place in the “world view” of the Free Trade Unions, it was a bitter blow to the Christian unions that the employers refused to go along with their notions of an alliance of employers and workers. Petitions were ignored, negotiating offers rejected, and no distinction was made between the Christian trade union movement

and the others – on the contrary, it was seen as a particularly sophisticated variant of the labour movement, which would anyway lead the workers into the arms of the Social Democrats. So, even in the early years, the Christian unions were involved in numerous industrial disputes, the employers' intention being to bring the young organizations to their knees. The Christian unions often took part in strikes in order to give the lie to their reputation as non-militant “bosses' lackeys” or “Church lackeys”. In relation to the (low) level of benefits – dues were kept low to attract new members more easily – the proportion of money they spent on industrial disputes exceeded that of the Free Trade Unions. Only after 1905–6 – during the period of consolidation – did dues, benefits and expenditure on industrial disputes settle down at roughly the same level as the Free Trade Unions', although the proportion of Christian trade unionists taking part in industrial disputes remained a good bit behind the Free Trade Unions. In the period 1903–13, benefits to strikers and others involved in industrial disputes amounted to an average of 51.5 per cent of the Christian trade unions' total expenditure on benefits, exceeding the Free Trade Unions' 47.2 per cent; but the proportion of members taking part in industrial action averaged only 9.2 per cent, compared with 12.9 per cent in the Free Trade Unions.

Let us take a brief look at a form of industrial struggle that was rapidly becoming less important: the boycott. In the 1890s, above all, boycotts were often organized to support a strike by, say, bakers' or butchers' journeymen and to fight restrictions on the right of association in the breweries. Such action was, however, difficult to organize, since it required an enormous amount of publicity work; secondly, it could only be taken against the producers or purveyors of certain consumer goods – and the purchase of some items of food could not be postponed for very long. As in the case of strikes, the trade unions leaders pressed for national co-ordination of local boycotts. The Hamburg trade union congress took the decisive step in 1908, when it laid down that a boycott “could only be decided on at the request of the national leadership of the trade union engaged in the wage struggle, the area representatives of organized labour, the local union coalition (Kartell) and the local union associations’.³⁸ By now the heyday of the boycott was over. Collective bargaining, with or without an industrial dispute – more commonly the latter – was gaining ground.

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³⁸ Protokoll der Verhandlungen des sechsten Kongresses der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands, abgehalten zu Hamburg vom 22. bis 27. Juni 1908 (Berlin, 1908), p. 43 ff.

The growing scale of industrial disputes was both a symptom of and a spur to organization on both sides; this was particularly true of the institution of the collective agreement. The more peaceful collective bargaining became the norm, the more significance organizational power acquired as a means of applying pressure. But there was a long way to go yet. Not all unions saw the collective agreement as a sensible way of settling industrial relations since it impaired the workers' will to fight. In view of the high esteem in which strikes were held – “undoubtedly the most appropriate way” of “making the workers class conscious”³⁹ – it is scarcely surprising that the collective agreement was seen as “betrayal of the class struggle” and an expression of unforgivable collaborationist daydreaming. Not until 1899 did the Third Congress of the Free Trade Unions come out clearly in favour of the collective agreement “as evidence of the employers' recognition of the workers' equal right to determine working conditions”.⁴⁰

In the years that followed, the trade union leaders encouraged the conclusion of collective agreements, as they constituted “recognition of the workers' right to co-determination”⁴¹ and were thus not “alliances of friendship with the entrepreneurial class but merely ‘ceasefire treaties’”.⁴² These articles and speeches testify to lingering reservations about the collective agreement which obviously had to be dispelled. The fact that the Gutenberg League, the Hirsch-Duncker associations and the Christian unions all supported collective agreements in their day did not make matters any easier, especially as there were few prospective takers on the employers' side for a policy of peaceful negotiation. As late as 1905, the Central Federation of German Industrialists still considered collective agreements “thoroughly dangerous to German industry and its prosperous development”, as they not only deprived the employer of the “necessary freedom to decide on the use of his labour and to fix wages’ but also resulted in “the inevitable subjection of the workers to the organizations of labour”.⁴³ However, it may have been precisely the employers' resist-

39 Zur Lage, in *Correspondenzblatt* No. 11 of 29. 5. 1893, p. 41 f.; this quot. p. 41

40 Protokoll der Verhandlungen des dritten Kongresses der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands, abgehalten zu Frankfurt a.M.-Bockenheim vom 8. bis 13. Mai 1899 (Hamburg, 1899), p. 150

41 Carl Legien, *Tarifgemeinschaften und gemeinsame Verbände von Arbeitern und Unternehmern*, in *Sozialistische Monatshefte* 1902, vol. 1, pp. 27–35; this quot. p. 29

42 Theodor Leipart, *Die gewerkschaftliche Praxis und der Klassenkampfgedanke*, in *Sozialistische Monatshefte* 1906, vol. 2, pp. 642–48; this quot. p. 647

43 Quot. *Werktage werden besser. Der Kampf um den Lohnrahmentarifvertrag II in Nordwürttemberg/Nordbaden* (Köln and Frankfurt, 1977), p. 10

ance that won over many of those who regarded collective agreements as a betrayal of the class struggle; often it was necessary to take industrial action to secure acceptance of the concept of the collective agreement.

The building workers did not get a collective agreement until 1899; the engineering workers, not until 1906. From then on, however, the number of collective agreements rose sharply – from 3,000 in 1906 to about 13,500 in 1913, covering 218,000 firms employing some two million people. Consequently, by 1913, 16.5 per cent of all industrial workers and 36.4 per cent of the members of the Free Trade Unions had their conditions of work regulated by collective agreement; 79.5 per cent of these agreements had been reached without a strike.

They were a motley assortment: company agreements as well as national ones, some covering small trades, some covering huge numbers of unskilled workers. Generally speaking, the collective agreements covered one to three years, with one to three months' notice required; most agreements were limited to quite small groups of companies and employees; they were easiest to push through in industries or trades in which the employers were relatively weak and isolated and the workers well-organized. Where employers were strong and well-organized, for instance in heavy industry, the unions did not manage to gain a foothold in terms of organization and collective agreements before 1914, though it was precisely in such areas that lockouts to weaken the unions were the order of the day. All in all, collective agreements were instrumental in promoting and securing an improvement in working class conditions; at the same time, however, they reflected the dominance of skilled workers within the unions and helped consolidate it further.

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It was clear to unions of all tendencies that in the face of legal and political discrimination against the working class neither industrial militancy nor collective agreements could achieve any lasting improvement in the situation. Owing to the restrictions on the right of association, the inequities of the suffrage and the urgency of the social issues, the unions were virtually forced to deal with problems of policy. Matters were made easier for the General Commission by the abolition of the ban on links between political associations in 1899; the agenda of the Frankfurt trade union congress of that year was heavily weighted towards matters of social policy, the list of which lengthened in the following years. Prime concerns were the extension and protection of the right to carry out union work, that is, the guaranteeing and reform of the rights of association and assem-

bly. It was also the undisputed task of the unions to put forward proposals for improving industrial safety: accident protection, industrial disease, special measures to protect women, young people and home workers, a ban on child labour, the fixing of working hours, a ban on unnecessary night work and holiday working and the improvement of the factory inspectorate. Decisions were taken and bills proposed on all these issues. Another problem concerned improvements to the existing national insurance law and the transfer of unemployment insurance and labour exchanges to the state. Lastly, there were demands that employees or unions be given a greater say in their industries; the idea was to set up company workers' committees and to create trades' councils as a counterpart to the chambers of commerce and trade corporations. With increasing frequency the trade unions also made clear their views on tariff and fiscal policy. They either focused on the interests of a particular trade, when special taxes on certain products – such as cigars or brandy – threatened to lead to reduced sales and hence job losses; or they were concerned to prevent increases in duties or taxes that were bound to affect the workers as consumers. The aim of all these initiatives – planned and co-ordinated, from 1910 on, by the General Commission's Social Policy Department – was to ensure a decent life for the working class.

Though there was no overlooking the occasionally physical confrontations between the trade union federations, there were clear signs of a rapprochement on specific points, ideological and party political differences notwithstanding. All the unions concentrated on legal improvements, attainable in the existing circumstances. The co-determination arrangements sought by the wage-earner organizations, whether in the shape of the "pure" trades' councils demanded by the Free Trade Unions or bipartite trades councils consisting equally of employer and employee representatives on the lines envisaged by the Christian trade unions, revealed differences of degree, not of principle. It was of little importance for day-to-day union work whether policy prescribed the ten-hour or eight-hour day, so long as there was agreement on the need for a cut in working hours – and, anyway, up to 1914 the issue at the heart of the struggle was still the introduction of the ten-hour day. The list of areas in which the federations, separately, made similar demands extended from A to Z. Moreover, even before the World War I, there were the first signs of joint action and co-operation between the federations, for example over the German Home Workers' Day in January 1911.

5. *Trade union reform policy under the authoritarian state: a balance sheet*

Let us now sum up. The end of the Socialist Law ushered in a period of trade union consolidation within the economic and political status quo, which was widely accepted as a working basis. These years saw the emergence of the trade unions basically as we know them today, though the organizations which merged to set up the General Commission of the German Trade Unions were mainly trade associations, and it was their structure that continued to dominate well into the Weimar era, despite efforts to form industrial unions. Only towards the end of the nineteenth century was it possible to bring trade union organizational structures into line with the state of industrial and political development, with regard to the centralization of decision-making. Just as the local self help organizations of the skilled workers of a particular trade corresponded to the situation around the middle of the century – when demands for better working conditions were properly addressed to the company management – the unions' tendency to group skilled and unskilled together in national unions was in keeping with the growing concentration of the production process.

It actually proved easier to combine the individual unions into ideologically distinct umbrella organizations than it was to introduce the principle of the large industrial union. The first Christian unions appeared on the scene at a comparatively late stage, considering that by this time unions – Social Democratic and liberal – were already in existence catering for the major occupational groups. While the unions' organizational development ran largely parallel with the development of the economy during the nineteenth century – with the unions a few steps behind – the establishment of the Christian trade unions represents an exception to the general trend, though they were quick to catch up by forming an umbrella organization with unusual rapidity (1899–1903).

The establishment of umbrella organizations followed the emergence of centralized political decision-making structures. This, however, reinforced the growing gap between the union leaderships and the rank and file, which was to become a problem, particularly in times of crisis. The most conspicuous illustration of how much the unions were influenced by the centralism of the political system was perhaps provided by the relocation to Berlin of the General Commission and the Federation of Christian Trade Unions from Hamburg and Cologne respectively.

Even though the period 1890–1914 is a fairly short one in relation to union history as a whole, let us try to draw up a kind of “interim report” on

trade union policy. The most striking feature was the unions' success in their "original" sphere of activity: the industrial struggle and collective agreements regulating working hours and wage levels.

The increase in wages and the cut in working hours achieved since the 1890s would hardly have been possible without the unions. The fact that the economic trend was generally favourable from the mid-1890s to 1912 not only aided the unions' organizational efforts but also – particularly in the boom years of 1902–6 and 1910–12 – improved the chances of success in industrial disputes. The development of wages and working hours (Tables 3a and 4a) was thus part of a general trend towards the improvement of the lot of the working class, which in times of economic prosperity offered more scope for wage rises and more opportunities for industrial action.

While government policy did not directly affect wage levels, it refrained from intervening to any large extent in the question of working hours, despite constant appeals from the trade unions. The modest legal moves to protect children, young people and women in particular were a result of increasing pressure from the labour movement, which also had indirect consequences. Fears that the SPD and trade unions might continue to grow won supporters for the idea of social reform outside the ranks of the working class; they hoped that by proving the Empire's willingness and ability to implement reform it would be possible to stem the "red peril".

Modest though the unions' successes over the legal regulation of working hours were, their achievements in other key areas of social reform were even more meagre. They failed to get the right of association extended or the Prussian three-class voting system abolished; the introduction of parliamentary democracy was as far away as ever; even the problems of public unemployment insurance and employment exchange remained unsolved. The trade unions never exerted any influence on economic, financial or trade policy. Nor was there any prospect of political reforms designed to democratize the Empire.

Nevertheless, mass membership and real successes in the industrial struggle and in tariff policy helped trade unions of all tendencies develop a sense of their own power and independence, enhancing their importance in their various political camps, as the general strike debate and union dispute demonstrated. Even before the First World War it was clear that the trade unions had become an important factor of economic, social and domestic politics which it would be difficult to resist politically. In view of this fact, the state and the employers would soon have no choice but to strengthen trade union pragmatism by making concessions and giving

them a place in society. And this is exactly what happened: the Empire's willingness to carry out reforms, though limited to the social sphere, seemed to confirm the correctness of the policy, shared by trade unions of all persuasions, of gradual social reform on the basis of the status quo, thus increasingly depriving radical tendencies of support. The First World War was to provide the acid test of this policy.