

## PART 2

THE WAR OF 1914-18 —  
AND THE ROAD THAT  
LED TO NUDAW

## 7 AUCE IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR—1

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### *Break with the TUC: A National Policy: Open membership*

WE now move into an ominous year — 1914. The world was delusively peaceful, or, at least, with no more cause for concern than the habitual bickering among nations. Many people believed that it was no longer possible for the great powers to wage war on each other. Had not Sir Norman Angell demonstrated in *The Great Illusion* (published in 1910 and translated into twenty-five languages) that the consequences for victors and vanquished alike would be so terrible that no nation could contemplate them? His was the illusion. On 1 August, 1914, Germany declared war on Russia. On 4 August Britain declared war on Germany; France, Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Serbia all joined in. The streets of Berlin, Paris, London, Moscow, Vienna, Budapest were filled by crowds cheering the outbreak of war.

Those who cheered no doubt saw it as the great adventure, a new excitement in dull lives, with one's own side to be welcomed home as victors after a few weeks or months of glory. Few realised how long such evenly matched powers could batter each other or on the toll that must be paid in lives before one side was forced to admit defeat. And none of those who cheered in the streets of the great capitals on those sunny August days of 1914 could even dimly have imagined that twenty-five years and one month later their sons and grandsons would be facing a second and even more destructive war. This time, without cheers.

But that is for future chapters. Here, we are concerned with the experience of AUCE between 1914 and the immediate post-war years. For the Union, it was a period of sorrow and of crisis in its own affairs. Sorrow at the loss of hundreds of young members who died in the endless and usually futile offensives

on the Western front, on the seas and in other theatres of war. Crisis because AUCE's very right to exist was challenged by other Unions. Yet, paradoxically, but for this challenge AUCE might have remained a comparatively small organisation specialising in distributive employees of the Co-operative Movement. The influential and widespread USDAW of today was, in fact, conceived and born in conflicts of Trades Union policy fought out more than *sixty years ago*. This turning point in the Union's story is the main subject of the present chapter.

The issue arose largely through the structure of the Trades Union Movement and the trading success of Co-operative Societies. There was no standard basis of organisation for Trades Unions at the turn of the century (nor is there today, for that matter). Craft and skilled Unions operating, or professing to operate, nationally had great influence in the TUC, but the New Unionism had brought in an influx of general Unions with loosely defined (sometimes undefined) fields of recruitment. Long established single-industry Unions such as the Miners' and the Railwaymen, had broadened their base to become industrial Unions, taking in anyone, regardless of craft, who worked in or around the mines or railways. Occupational Unions in the public service had similar all-in objectives.

AUCE was entirely based on the Co-operative Movement and at this stage in its history had no desire to go outside. But the very success of the Movement raised recruitment problems for the Union. Societies, according to enterprise and size, spread out into most of the main consumer trades, including productive operations in bakeries, tailoring, clog making and boot and shoe repairing, and services such as clerical, transport, maintenance. The CWS and the Scottish CWS were even more diversified in their range of employment. Many retail societies were small and might employ only a couple of bakers, a tailor, a clogmaker, a boot repairer, one or two carters, and so on. There were craft and general Unions that claimed to cater for these and other productive or service trades carried on in the Movement. But because of the small numbers involved and the distance from any branch of an appropriate Union, more often than not these other Unions did nothing to organise Co-operative workers except, in some cases, in the large city societies.

There was only one Union on the spot — AUCE. It had 667

branches (many covering more than one society) when this issue first came before the TUC in 1911. It was understandable that many productive workers would seek to join their distributive colleagues in the only local Union available to them, one, moreover, which provided good benefit scales and had proved its ability to look after its members. There is evidence in speeches and writings of the period that some leaders of AUCE, particularly J. Hallsworth, were advocates of industrial Unionism. But the Union did not seek actively to recruit all the workers, productive and distributive, in Co-operative service. There is no evidence that justifies the accusation, later to be made, that AUCE sought deliberately to poach from craft Unions. As we saw in the last chapter, in 1903 the Executive had instructed branches "that piece workers and others engaged in trades which have effective and available Unions of their own, must not be accepted as members unless they are at the same time members of the Unions connected with their respective trades, and willing to continue such membership".

Some of the craft Unions, however, began to cast a jealous eye not only on recruitment of new productive workers but on the membership of those who had been in AUCE for many years. The Shop Assistants' Union, too, was sharpening its axe for open war with AUCE. To some degree, AUCE was to become the scapegoat for wider conflicts over Trades Union organisation. The first clash came at the Newcastle TUC of 1911. AUCE had submitted a resolution calling on Co-operative Societies to be willing to receive deputations of employees on questions affecting employment, and to allow them to be accompanied by their Union representatives. The Amalgamated Society of Tailors proposed as an amendment to add words instructing the Parliamentary Committee "...to enquire into the bona-fides of the Co-operative Employees' Union from a Trade Union standpoint". This was, effectively, a separate resolution, but rather than have two debates the AUCE representatives somewhat rashly agreed to it being added to their own resolution, and it was carried.

In due course the enquiry took place, a number of craft and general Unions, together with AUCE, giving evidence to a sub-committee set up by the Parliamentary Committee. The recommendations of the sub-committee were presented to the New-

port Congress of 1912. They were: "1. That the Co-operative Employees' Union should refrain from accepting as members workers in skilled trades, for whom separate and well recognised Unions had been established. 2. That where such workers have been admitted to membership the Co-operative Employees' Union should insist that they retain membership of their own craft Union, and see the craft Union card at least once per quarter in accordance with their own rules". J. Halls-worth, for AUCE, accepted this as "satisfactory to our organisation".

This view was endorsed by a special meeting of AUCE on Easter Monday, 1913, which reaffirmed the Executive decision of 1903 by embodying in the Rules a provision that "Applications for membership shall not be entertained from persons employed in productive departments or workshops" where there were "effective Unions of their own". It was, however, a reluctant decision. W. Orchard, member of the Executive Council for the Southern District, probably spoke for the instinctive feelings of many members when he contended that every class of worker employed in the Co-operative Movement should logically be with AUCE. If, he said, the TUC was against the Union on that point, then it would be for the AUCE to go its own way. Nevertheless, the Union had accepted the right of the TUC to carry out the enquiry, its case had been heard, it had accepted the decision announced at Congress and it would have been democratically indefensible to reject the recommendations at so late a stage. The exclusion rule was adopted by 312 votes to 35. More than 600 applications for membership from productive workers which had been held up during the enquiry were returned with the entrance fee and a letter to each applicant suggesting that he should join his craft Union. AUCE had accepted an adverse verdict in the interests of Trades Union unity, and expected that to end the matter. Unfortunately, it did not. But before we reach the next, and critical, stage, a digression is necessary.

The special delegate meeting of 1913 had another purpose, more directly related to the needs of the Union's members. In the Executive Council and many branches there was a feeling that the Union was losing impetus in the drive to improve wages and conditions. A stronger sense of urgency was required

and the objectives should be defined more clearly, both in total and in detail. This issue was brought before the special meeting in proposals for action on a broad front, with a national policy that would bring together in one programme demands that had previously been fought for piecemeal.

The programme was to increase pressure for the minimum wage scales of the District Councils not simply through the Districts or individual branches but in a national demand to all the societies in which AUCE had members; to seek a maximum working week of, first, 53 hours, with a phased reduction to 48 and the abolition of excessive overtime; eliminate overwork caused by inadequate staffing, regulate the proportion of junior to adult workers; and for none but Trades Union labour to be employed.

There was to be a timetable which envisaged that the policy should be carried out by 30th September, 1913. It was to be communicated to all societies in which the Union had members with a request that it should be introduced, in its entirety where necessary, or in part where some of the provisions were already observed. In cases where it met with a hostile reception, those branches that were sufficiently organised were, first, to try pressure on the recalcitrant committee through members' meetings and public opinion, and if this failed, to strike.

When strike action was necessary, the General President, T. Howe, emphasised that the Union would not accept the adjudication of the Joint Committee of Trade Unionists and Co-operators, on the grounds that "... the right to strike claimed so vigorously by the Trade Union Congress and at Labour Party Conferences should not be denied to Co-operative employees". Moreover, said the President, the Joint Committee was based on the principle of compulsory arbitration "... to which, in common with the great majority of Trades Unionists generally, we are opposed".

Finally, this new forward policy was to be financially underwritten by a "war chest" of £10,000 to be raised through levies. Following a long discussion *The Co-operative Employee* reports that "Amidst a scene of great enthusiasm the resolution adopting the policy of the Executive Council, and giving them the mandate and power to carry it out, was unanimously adopted".

It was certainly a bold programme. Some might have said

it was a rash one, for it was inconceivable that it could be realised throughout the Co-operative Movement in the 188 days between Easter Monday (25th March) and 30th September. But the Executive probably had psychological as well as practical targets in its sights. Increasing membership had induced a degree of apathy and some *sectionalism in the attitude of Districts* towards the national purpose of the Union. A national policy attacking grievances that were common to employees everywhere was a healthy antidote to sectionalism and a stimulant to the apathetic.

The policy would also be intended to shake the nerves of those societies that refused to give wages and conditions consistent with Co-operative principles, a subject on which *The Co-operative News* leader of 29th March, 1913, commented "... it is not pleasant to have to repeat that had it not been for Co-operative employees being represented ... by a Union many of them would not have been in as good a position as they are to-day with regard to wages ... AUCE must have found out long ago that where Trade Unionists have become Co-operative 'masters', they have in too many cases not been always too ready to grant conditions to employees that they are always seeking for themselves".

We shall "report progress" with the national policy later. Now, we must return to the main issue of this chapter — the Union's relations with the TUC. All seemed well after the agreement to refrain from recruiting productive workers. Unfortunately, some of the craft Unions could not leave well alone. They returned to the attack in 1913 with an appeal to the Parliamentary Committee to rule that its adjudication was intended to be retrospective. *There were more hearings*, more arguments, and eventually the Parliamentary Committee stated its intention to report to the 1914 TUC that it considered the findings of eighteen months earlier *were* intended to be retrospective. Not only was AUCE to be limited mainly to Co-operative shop workers; every baker, tailor, clog maker, boot repairer already in the Union, some with many years of membership, was to be thrown out. And to rub salt in the wound, this was to be done *at a time when many of the would-be members rejected under the 1912 findings were still outside any Union*; the Executive report for 1913 stating "... little or no effort

having been made by the respective Unions concerned to enrol them”.

It was an intolerable decision, reflecting more the Parliamentary Committee's reluctance to stand up to craft Unions than any respect for equity, or even for commonsense. A Union deputation met the Committee on 14th May, 1914, in an unsuccessful attempt to persuade it to withdraw the retrospective finding. All they gained was a decision to refer the whole issue to the Trade Union Congress due to be held in Portsmouth in September (the Congress was cancelled because of the outbreak of war). Neither the Executive Council nor the membership of AUCE were prepared to remain in limbo between May and September. A special delegate meeting was called for 26th July, 1914, and made two major decisions. One was that “under no circumstances” would AUCE accept the retrospective interpretation of the award of 1912. The other was that if they lost the day at Portsmouth there should be immediate “secession of our Union from the TUC”.

We have now reached the end of a long and frustrating trail, marked by the jealousy of some Unions at the growth of AUCE, the timidity of the Parliamentary Committee as it was then constituted and, indeed, by the reluctance of AUCE itself to break with the historic industrial organisation of the Labour Movement. The turning point came at the Leicester ADM held over Easter Sunday and Monday, 1915 (4th/5th April). One decision reaffirmed the resolution of the previous year's special meeting by empowering the Executive Council “. . . to withdraw from the Trade Union Congress immediately they feel our status as a Trade Union will be jeopardised by remaining affiliated”. More significant was a resolution from the Manchester Central branch “That all persons engaged in Co-operative employment be eligible to apply for, and, subject to the confirmation of the Executive Council, be admitted to membership of the Union . . .”.

J. Hallsworth, in moving, said they already had in membership bakers, painters, flour millers, laundry workers, soap workers, lard and butter makers, fellmongers, shoe makers and repairers, chemists, jewellers, bacon curers, jam workers, tea packers, tailors, carters, vanmen, motormen, printers, shop assistants and all kinds of warehousemen, clerks and



general labourers and even *poets*. (The poets must remain a fascinating mystery; but how delightful if one could have traced a group of rhymsters, historically the lowest paid of all, who had banded together under the banner of AUCE!) He cited the CWS and some of the larger retail societies as bodies under single control but with employees either unorganised or divided over many Unions, some of them "craft Unions with their miserable little groups peddling away for their own edification and satisfaction". Their quarrel with the TUC was not on principle "but rather on the form of organisation" and if they had to "slip away in grief, they would come back again". The resolution was carried by an "overwhelming majority".

It is virtually certain that Hallsworth himself, and many of those who supported him, were well aware of the wider implications of this historic decision. It would not be by chance that he catalogued the great variety of trades represented in Co-operative service. For the logical next question was: Why stop at the Co-ops? The "open door", as the new policy was described was still only ajar. Why not open it fully, to organise and seek to lead in the vast army of private trade distributive, service, and some productive workers still outside any Union? That was soon to become the policy of AUCE and we can properly date the beginning of the present USDAW from the 1915 debate in the Secular Hall, Leicester.

Three months after the ADM the Executive Council exercised the power given to it and notified the TUC of its withdrawal, citing first the Union's refusal to accept the retrospective application of the 1912 findings, and secondly, the Leicester decision to open the ranks to all Co-operative employees "... which makes the aforesaid findings nugatory". A similar notice of withdrawal was sent to the Scottish TUC.

It was to be only a temporary break. AUCE was too much part of the mainstream of the British Labour Movement to remain permanently in the shallows. But the immediate effect was a challenge to the Union's right to exist, organised and led by a Federation of Trades Unions, self-styled as "representing Co-operative employees". The Federation, or at any rate, some of its members, was almost vulture-like in the avidity with which it sought to destroy and devour AUCE. It was contended that AUCE "was not a Trade Union" because it was no longer

in the TUC; an argument which, apart from its basic falsity, ignored the fact that other powerful Unions had at times been outside the Congress over issues of policy. The Miners' and Railwaymen's Unions were already organising all workers, regardless of craft, who were employed in their industries. But they did not suffer the national obloquy that was levelled at the Co-operative Employees' Union. Attempts were made to have the Union expelled from Trades Councils. During the war years there were major strikes within the Co-operative Movement, mainly over war bonuses and wage increases, and some of the Federation Unions were prepared to blackleg the AUCE. The management committees of some societies also sought to influence their employees to leave AUCE for the Shop Assistants or craft Unions.

There is no point, however, in reciting details of these battles long ago, fought against the awesome background of what up to then was the most devastating war in history. AUCE suffered some sore wounds, but its members showed by their loyalty (and the increase in their number) that it truly reflected their interests. In the words of the classical zoological phrase, AUCE proved that "this animal is dangerous, if attacked it defends itself". By the early years of peace the heat was cooling. If it was not loved by its former opponents in the Trades Union Movement, AUCE was accepted, and had to be dealt with sensibly on common issues of Trades Union action and organisation.

More important for the future than this fratricidal conflict was a decision of a special delegate meeting in Leeds on 7th January, 1917. Executive Council and members had recognised that once the door to membership had been opened by the decision of 1915, it could not remain half open and half shut. At Leeds the Executive declared that it should be opened wide and free. The meeting had before it a resolution proposing to amend the constitution by "... the opening of a separate section for membership of and to which such persons engaged in commercial employment and as allied workers shall be eligible to apply and be admitted as the Executive Council may determine". Or, to disentangle the verbiage, to accept members from the whole field of distribution and commerce, private as well as Co-operative. A second resolution altered the title of

the Union to "Amalgamated Union of Co-operative and Commercial Employees and Allied Workers". But the Executive knew that while the new title might be descriptive, a mouthful like AUCCEAW was not likely to pass into common usage. So it was provided that "the short title shall continue to be 'the AUCE'."

The principal speaker for this revolutionary change in the Union was the General Secretary, J. Hallsworth. He spoke at length of the changes that were likely to follow the end of the war. Many of the thousands of Union members in the Forces would not return to Co-operative service. Were they to be allowed to drift away from the Union? Many of the women who had replaced men and were also in the Union would not "go back to mending socks" but would continue in industry. Were they, too, to be lost? There were an estimated one-and-a-half million shop assistants, clerks, commercial travellers and warehousemen in the distributive trades and only a small proportion had been organised. AUCE should play its part in bringing them under a Trade Union banner.

He visualised that the Union's new role could be the beginning of federal arrangements with other Unions that had employees in Co-operative service, with transfer arrangements so that no distributive or commercial worker who changed his job need be outside the scope of an appropriate Union. His speech, inadequately summarised here, fills six-and-a-half pages of *The Co-operative Employee*. An exhaustive discussion fills another five-and-a-half pages and at the end of the day the first of the two resolutions mentioned earlier was carried on a card vote by 22,929 votes to 4,022, more than the two-thirds majority required for an alteration of rules. The change of name was adopted by a similar majority. The new General Section was formed immediately after the special meeting at Leeds and by the end of 1917 had 1,686 members.

The ordinary meeting at Easter, 1918, carried matters a stage further. It adopted a resolution authorising the Executive to negotiate with other Unions in the Co-operative and private fields to join in drafting a scheme for amalgamation into one industrial Union, alternatively to form a federation for trade and political purposes.

The prime mover in this profound change in Union direction

and policy was undoubtedly J. Hallsworth. Many members believed instinctively that the Union should take in all who worked in Co-operative service. Hallsworth articulated this feeling, expressed it in terms of logical development, extended it to include the amorphous mass of distributive and general workers who were only fractionally involved in Trades Unionism. He looked to horizons which for long it was beyond the Union's resources to reach. But more than sixty years ago he foresaw the widely diversified Union of today, and in all the hardships and anxieties of a bitter war the delegates at Leeds had the courage to join him in his vision.

So after 26 years the AUCE was out in the big wide world. In 1891 it was a small benefit and mutual improvement association. In 1894 it became a Trade Union with moral force as its only sanction. In 1897 it took the first step towards full Trade Union action by adopting a wages policy. In 1911 it became a fighting Union backed by a strike fund. In 1915 it became an occupational Union by opening the door to anyone employed in the Co-operative Movement. In 1917 it now became a general Union, still predominantly based in the Co-operative Movement but with the world of distributive and commercial industry and service as its oyster. In the remainder of this book we shall follow the Union through many crises and triumphs in this wider world.

## 8 AUCE IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR—2

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*The lost generation: "Substituted females":  
Conciliation: yes, no, maybe in politics*

**D**URING the second World War the censorship of the Press and other media was qualified through confidential briefings of newspaper editors and specialist correspondents given by Ministers and senior officers of the Forces. The writer recalls a meeting of this sort addressed by Ernest Bevin, then Minister of Labour and National Service, on Government plans for increased mobilisation and direction of workers to serve in war industry. The details I have forgotten, but one remark by the Minister remained in my memory.

Describing the problems involved in organising the entire adult population for war purposes, Bevin said that they constantly came up against what had come to be called the "lost generation". The craftsmen, technicians, planners, organisers and managers whose experience and skill should have been at the service of the nation between 1939 and 1945, but who lay buried in tens of thousands of graves in France and Flanders, killed in the first World War, lost to life and the community before they had fully begun to live. Reading the issues of *The Co-operative Employee* (which became *The AUCE Journal* in 1917) from 1914 to the immediate post-war years brought Bevin's "lost generation" poignantly back to memory. In most months a Roll of Honour was published, giving names, age, unit, rank and peacetime Co-operative employment of Union members who had been killed or died of wounds on land or sea, and for whom funeral benefit was paid to relatives. The total was 2,103. And by far the greater number were young men in their middle twenties. Many were aged 18 or 19. Truly a lost generation, not only in Britain, for in every other belligerent country it was the young who died.

In both world wars the distributive and commercial trades

were called upon for a great contribution in manpower. As early as the summer of 1915 a conference of employers and employed in the trades was told by the then Prime Minister, H. H. Asquith, that up to the middle of April 260,000 shop assistants had voluntarily joined the Forces. If clerks, commercial travellers and miscellaneous jobs connected with shops were added, the volunteers numbered 430,000 and there were 360,000 of military age still in civil employment.

AUCE's record of recruitment to the services can have had few equals in other occupational groups. Shop work, particularly in grocery, which was the basic Co-operative trade, was still predominantly a male occupation and when the war began 80 per cent of the male members of the Union were of military age. Of these, and others who reached recruitment age during the war, 60 per cent — 25,297 — joined the Forces. Their sacrifice in lives was given earlier, to which could be added the great but unknown number who suffered wounds which in many cases weakened or shortened their days.

Throughout that war, distribution was repeatedly combed for manpower; for the Army as the generals demanded more men to replace the casualties of each successive and usually unsuccessful "big push", for industry as older shop workers were drafted into war work to release younger men for the Services. When conscription was introduced in 1916 (it was not abolished until 1920) many of the tribunals, set up to adjudicate on pleas by employers for the exemption of key workers, were loth to regard shop work as essential. Moreover, there were cases where tribunals blatantly discriminated against Co-operative societies (this was one of the factors which led the Co-operative Movement to end three quarters of a century of political neutrality, and establish its own political Party in 1917). AUCE joined in Co-operative protests that women could not entirely replace men and in warning that the vital business of civilian food supply would break down if it was denuded of experienced workers. These protests led to an instruction by the Director-General of Recruiting at the Ministry of National Service in the Spring of 1918 that it was "essential that the staffs employed in food distribution should not be so depleted as to cause serious inefficiency" and temporary exemption had to be given "... to any man who may reasonably be considered ...

essential to such business". But by then the war was nearing its end, and the damage had been done.

Many of the Union's staff volunteered or were called up. Active branch secretaries and District Council members disappeared into uniform. So heavy was the loss that for a time elections to fill Council vacancies could not be held. It was decided that Council members who joined up should be allowed to complete their term on return to Co-operative service and temporary measures only taken to fill the vacancies. Elections were resumed in 1918. As we saw in the last chapter the Union's wartime difficulties were compounded by the controversy with the TUC and the Federation of craft and other Unions claiming to be the true representatives of Co-operative employees. In spite of these problems AUCE was remarkably successful in retaining gains already made for its members and solving the special problems created by the war.

Once the myth popular in 1914 that "The war will be over by Christmas" had died out and it became obvious that great numbers of women would be replacing men in the shops, the Union went all out to organise these potential recruits. It was Union policy that "substituted females" (as they were called) should be paid the same rate, and enjoy the same conditions, as the men they replaced. There could be one month's probationary payment of AUCE female scales for women without experience, but if a woman employee was kept on after this trial, she should receive the male rate. To look after the interests of women members, and particularly to encourage them to play an active part in the work of their branches, Miss Ellen C. Wilkinson was appointed in July, 1915, as the first woman *organiser*. She was later to become one of the best known of the MPs who have served the Labour Party and the Union in Parliament.

By 1916 it was reported that 70 societies (some very large) were on equal pay. But the Union did not succeed in establishing equal rates generally throughout the Co-operative Movement. The annual report for 1918 stated that while most societies were willing to accept equality of pay for women employees up to the age of 17, they would not carry the principle through to the higher ages.

By the end of the war in 1918 there were 36,422 women

members in a total membership of 87,134. The new recruits soon disproved fears that through lack of will or interest they might weaken the Union's ability to hold onto conditions won in earlier years and at the same time keep pace with a rising cost of living. There were some hard-fought strikes against Co-operative employers during the war years, and the 1916 annual report had this to say of the part played by women members: "To those who say women workers cannot be organised and have not the will to fight, we would point out the magnificent struggles waged by our newly recruited body of women members whose Trade Union spirit reminds us so forcibly of our better-seasoned male members in the struggles of pre-war days".

Another issue of the war years was the national policy adopted in 1913, and so far as wages were concerned this soon merged into campaigns to keep pace with the cost of living. During 1913 and the early part of 1914 the new policy had been backed-up by successful strikes in England and Scotland, in retail societies and in CWS flour mills. When war broke out there was a pause. As the annual report for 1914 put it "A truce was called...[and] on the whole it has been honoured, advantages already gained maintained intact, and the peace, thus kept". A table in the report showed that by December, 1914, 274 societies had accepted the national policy on wages, 295 on hours (53 or less per week) and 92 on the employment of Union labour only. Similar tables were published in 1915, 1916 and 1917 and by the latter year 449 societies were "into line" on wages, 458 on hours, and 151 on Union labour only. In 1918 the report stated the tables had been dropped since nearly all advances in wages by then had been "war wage advances bringing the actual remuneration far above the minimum laid down in our national policy".

Most of the wartime scale increases or war bonuses were negotiated peacefully. But there were many cases where increases were settled by a test of strength. For instance, the August, 1917, meeting of the Executive Council noted satisfactory settlements of four disputes, one of an agreed reference to arbitration, and in six cases authorised strike action if necessary. One particularly bitter dispute with the powerful Plymouth Society lasted for eleven weeks in 1916, and the best



that could be claimed was that it ended in a draw, which left AUCE in a weakened position in the Society. In this dispute the Union was allied with the Transport Workers' Union and there are references in reports and minutes to "E. Bevan", later more correctly identified as E. Bevin, soon to become nationally known as the architect of the present Transport and General Workers' Union.

We saw in previous chapters that AUCE moved only slowly and reluctantly towards a militant policy. It had certainly proved itself a "bonny fighter" when it felt it must fight or surrender cherished objectives. But the Union did not glory in industrial battle. It was pacific in principle, and basically, the same could be said of the Co-operative Movement. Both stemmed from common working class roots and ideals and from 1914 onwards they began to search for means which would reduce if they could not totally eliminate the risks of conflict between them.

Hours and Wages Boards were being established by retail societies under the auspices of the Co-operative Union. Initially, AUCE was opposed to them on the grounds that they could only be effective if they were jointly representative of employers and employees (this was actually the case in the Northern District). But by the latter years of the war the Union was beginning to accept them as an established part of the Co-operative scene, and, in any case, their purpose was negotiation rather than conciliation. But even for that purpose many societies refused to join the Wages Board machinery, and for them individual negotiations were necessary.

The Union still refused to recognise the authority of the Joint Committee of Trade Unionists and Co-operators. In AUCE's view the Committee's procedures prohibited, or severely restricted the right of Co-operative Workers to strike, and also prescribed compulsory arbitration, both of them provisions which were rejected by *Trades Unionists generally*. These objections were frequently expressed in resolutions, speeches and print, although, as we shall see later, the Union was to use the Committee's services in the settlement of some post-war disputes.

Immediately, however, we are concerned with moves to replace the Committee with a more satisfactory form of

conciliation. Discussions with the Co-operative Union led in 1915 to the adoption by the Co-operative Congress and the Union's ADM of a National Conciliation Board of five AUCE representatives and five from the Co-operative Union, plus eight District Boards of four from each side. The National Board had an independent chairman who could arbitrate if both sides agreed. Any dispute which could not be settled by a District Board had to go to the National body. It was optional upon either party to use the machinery or not. The Boards had some success in the latter years of the war, but by the early twenties they had ceased to be used.

In a previous chapter we noted that there was one period in which AUCE was in the Labour Party, another when it was out and a third when it was neither in nor out. The first stage was up to early 1914, by which date the Union had been affiliated to the Party for eight years. A new Trade Union Act in 1913 had imposed complicated conditions for the registration of rules permitting a Union to spend money for political purposes. To safeguard the legal position, a ballot in support of or against political action as an object of the Union, was taken in March, 1914. The result was: 11,130 members for, 11,967 against. The Union was out of politics by a majority of 837, and, to quote *The Co-operative Employee* in commenting on the result "... AUCE thereby earns the questionable distinction of being the first among the big Trade Unions to shut itself out from the right to take part in any sort of political action whatever...". The result was a shock to the Executive Council and to the majority of the activists in the branches, who, probably, were partly to blame, for there is little evidence that they had done much to explain the case for independent Labour politics to their less active colleagues.

The lesson was taken to heart. At the annual meeting of 1915, R. J. Davies (then manager of the National Insurance Department, later to be the first AUCE MP) moved that there should be another ballot on Labour Party affiliation but this time "... before the ballot is taken a campaign shall be carried on among the members explaining to them the provisions of the Act, the financial obligations... and their right to claim exemption. Officials, organisers and District Councils to educate members in the principles of Labour representation".

The resolution was carried by a large majority. Following an intensive campaign of discussion throughout the Union, the ballot took place in March, 1916, and the 1914 decision was reversed, voting being: For political action, 13,754, Against, 5,854.

But this time the Labour Party was coy! The Union was still outside the TUC. There was still hostility, and sometimes open conflict, with the anti-AUCE Federation and the Unions in that body were influential in the Labour Party and the TUC. AUCE was told that its status had been referred to the Joint Board of the Labour Party and the TUC. The Board was itself enmeshed in a spider's web of argument over industrial unionism and craft unionism and could reach no decision. AUC couldn't get in, and it wasn't quite out. The situation became farcical at the General Election of December, 1918. In addition to the existing potential candidate, R. J. Wilson, both J. Hallsworth and R. J. Davies had been elected to the Union's Parliamentary Panel. All three fought the Election on the nomination of the local Labour Parties in Stretford, West Salford and Newcastle North, respectively, and with the endorsement of a Labour Party that hesitated to recognise their political existence! None was successful, but at least AUCE had demonstrated its fidelity to the cause of independent working class politics.

This situation continued until the post-war years when, as we shall see, the heat and fury of inter-Union hostility died down, and AUCE returned to both the TUC and the Labour Party.

By 1918 there had been a number of changes in the leadership of the Union. The General President, R. B. Howe, died suddenly in February, 1915, and in the subsequent election he was succeeded by R. B. Padley. A. Hewitt, who perhaps more than any man could be called the father of the Union, retired from the General Secretaryship in 1916, although the Executive Council retained his services in two important capacities. He remained on the committee of the Approved Society and as editor of *The Co-operative Employee*; continuing with both activities until 1920. He was succeeded by J. Hallsworth, who was elected unopposed as General Secretary on the nomination of 164 branches. In 1915 staff was replanned on the basis of

National Organisers operating from Central Office, and Organising Secretaries for the Districts. A future General President, J. Jagger, was appointed to the Secretaryship of the Yorkshire District.

It was to be a new world after 1918. Old empires gone, new nations born, old values shattered or challenged, a second Industrial Revolution on the way. AUCE was still a young Union, but shrewd leaders and loyal members had already overcome difficulties that could have wrecked a weaker organisation. They were well equipped for the harsh tests that were to come in the twenties and thirties.

## 9

THE ROAD THAT LED TO NUDAW

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THE first World War was to have been the war to end war. The League of Nations was to be the forum in which differences would be settled without nations wrecking their economies and decimating their peoples. Here at home, Britain, in Lloyd George's words, was to become "a fit country for heroes to live in". It was a time of noble aspirations, rich in hope after the Armistice of November 11th, 1918, but soon to be proved a false dawn in the grey years of the twenties and thirties.

There was a brief euphoria in 1919 and 1920 when to Trades Unions and other working class organisations it seemed that they could indeed look forward to building the promised land. The collapse came in 1921 and 1922, and for every year thereafter to 1939 Western capitalism was economically stagnant and millions of ordinary people were tormented by unemployment; the evils that led to Fascism and the second World War.

Neither AUCE nor any other Union had foreseen the crash and crisis of 1920/21. Governments in the victorious powers were equally unprepared, and had contributed to the crisis by the rapid dismantling of controls in the rush to return to "normal business". For AUCE the two years were the most dangerous in its history. Disaster was only averted by the loyalty of the membership and the cautious policy of past years in building up strong financial reserves. We shall return to these hectic years in the next chapter.

First, however, it is necessary to consider a development in the immediate post-war period which greatly enlarged the Union's field of operations — the first major amalgamation. AUCE had begun with an amalgamation and in 1905 there had been one other merger when the Union took over the small National Millers' Union, whose members had mainly been employed by Co-operative mills in Yorkshire. It became the nucleus of AUCE's Millers' Branch. The real expansion through

amalgamation, however, began after the war.

The special meeting of 7th January, 1917, and the ordinary meeting of the same year, had opened the door to recruitment of distributive and commercial employees in private trade, and had visualised either amalgamation or a federation of Unions catering for these workers. There were early discussions with the National Warehouse and General Workers' Union, based in Liverpool, and these led in June, 1918, to an "alliance" between the two Unions as a preliminary to possible amalgamation. In August eleven other Unions were invited to a conference to discuss amalgamation or federation — the Clerks', Bakers', Tailors', Journeymen Cloggers', Butchers', Shop Assistants', Co-operative Officials', Grocers' Assistants, Boot and Shoe Operatives', Boot and Shoe Makers' and the Millers'. The first three said they would be represented by the anti-AUCE Federation, but that, most definitely, was not acceptable to AUCE. The Shop Assistants' would only discuss amalgamation of distributive workers, but not of Unions based on or including productive workers. The Cloggers', Co-operative Officials', Grocers' Assistants and Butchers' were willing to talk, but nothing came of it. The Millers' and Boot and Shoe Operatives' said No, and the Boot and Shoe Makers' did not reply. Not a very promising start.

Nothing daunted, however, AUCE turned to other Unions and continued to strengthen links with the WarehouseWorkers'. As J. Hallsworth told a special delegate meeting in October, 1918, the time for amalgamation with this Union might not immediately be ripe but "... it would probably be of great advantage on both sides to get to know more of one another's difficulties before the psychological moment arrived when amalgamation would become possible".

The Warehousemen's Union had been founded in 1911 and was a particularly suitable partner for AUCE under the new "open door" policy. It had members in many trades where AUCE was either beginning to organise or already had a strong position. While a working arrangement would have avoided competition between them, outright amalgamation and concentration of resources would be even more effective in strengthening both Unions.

For some time discussions with the Warehousemen's Union

continued in parallel with attempts to bring about a wider amalgamation. The Shop Assistants' waived their objections to talks and in July, 1919, they took part in a joint meeting with AUCE and the Warehousemen — three representatives from each side — which declared in favour of a merger and appointed the three General Secretaries to "prepare draft proposals for giving concrete expression to this declaration". Distributive workers were to be the basis of the new Union, but productive and allied workers in trades linked to distribution "would find a place" (to quote Hallsworth), and this seemed to satisfy the Shop Assistants' insistence on the priority of distribution. A detailed scheme was duly prepared, including a provision that the new organisation should be called the "National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers" and after a lengthy debate was adopted by AUCE at a special delegate meeting in October, 1919.

So far, so good. But historical evidence demonstrates that it is easier to establish a Trade Union or a Co-operative Society than to amalgamate them once they are in existence. In the case of the Warehousemen, "Barkis was willing". The Shop Assistants' were not convinced. So the other two Unions went ahead. In the summer of 1920 each held the necessary ballot on amalgamation, and the results were conclusive. In AUCE the vote was: For 51,562, Against 3,076, with spoilt and blank papers (627), a total vote of 55,265 out of a certified membership of 88,777. The Warehouse Union vote was: For 49,745, Against 1,395 (290 spoilt papers), a vote of 51,430 out of a total membership of 96,289. Financially, AUCE was the stronger, with balance sheet assets in 1920 of £110,245 compared with £32,702 for the Warehousemen's Union.

The objects of the new Union, apart from the obvious purpose of improving wages and conditions, included "To work consistently towards securing the control of the industries in which its members are employed". The recruitment provision was widely drawn to include "all workers eligible for its membership". Those eligible were defined as "... any person of either sex employed wholly or mainly in any commercial occupation in connection with the retail or wholesale trades", plus such other allied workers as the annual conference might decide. Subject to the annual delegate meeting, government

was to be by Executive Council, two General Secretaries and twenty members elected from the Divisions, broadly in proportion to membership. Until the ADM of 1922 the Executive Council was to consist of the aggregate of members serving on the Executives of the two Unions at the time of the merger, who would be eligible for re-election.

While the Presidency was eventually to be an elective office, the rules provided that the first holder of the office should be J. Jagger,\* subject to the same re-election conditions as those applying to Executive Council members. The two General Secretaries were to be J. Hallsworth and W. A. Robinson (who held that position in the Warehousemen's Union). They were to hold office "during the will and pleasure of the members". These, and other new rules, were adopted by a joint delegate conference on 14th/15th November, 1920, to become operative from 1st January, 1921.

One immediate advantage of the amalgamation was to widen the field in which AUCE's General Section was already seeking to recruit. Another advantage was that the Warehouse workers were already in the TUC and the Labour Party, and affiliation continued with the new Union, thus bringing the AUCE element back into the fold. The disadvantage was timing. The duties of permanent officials of the two Unions had to be co-ordinated and in some cases reorganised. Administrative systems had to be standardised. Normally these adjustments could have been made at leisure. But scarcely a month was to be spared for the two formerly separate Unions to coalesce before the economic blizzard hit the country and faced the British working class with the greatest challenge since the Hungry Forties.

The formation of NUDAW was a long step along the amalgamation road. But the new Union did not regard it as a reason to pause and rest awhile. Efforts to merge with the Operative Tobacconists' Society, the Journeymen Butchers' Federation, the National Drug and Chemical Union and the Life Assurance Workers' during the period up to 1926 (when this chapter ends) were unsuccessful. But in 1920 a new source of membership was developed among Co-operative Insurance

\* J. Jagger replaced W. B. Padley as President of AUCE in 1919; the latter having held the office since 1915.



Society agents and other staff, the Scottish Slaughtermens' and Allied Workers Union "joined up" in 1923, as did the Amalgamated Union of Fur Workers. In 1925 the Barbers' and Hairdressers' Assistants' Union joined NUDAW and the Belfast Linen Lappers' and Warehouse Workers' Union was another recruit a year later.

In one form or another, discussions with the Shop Assistants' Union over amalgamation were continued, sometimes direct between the two Unions, sometimes under the auspices of the TUC. While discussions were taking place there was a suggestion from the provisional representatives of the new Transport & General Workers' Union that NUDAW should become a member of that body, but nothing came of the idea. Of one attempt at amalgamation, chaired by C. W. Bowerman (General Secretary of the TUC) in 1921, J. Hallsworth told NUDAW's annual meeting of that year "... we really believed we had got to the end of what some people have described as that feud — long drawn out — between our organisation and that of the Shop Assistants". *But it was not to be.* Negotiations broke down over the inclusion of productive workers in an amalgamated Union. Twenty-five more years had to pass before the two Unions finally came together.

In Chapter 3 we said goodbye to the Manchester District Co-operative Employees' Association and welcomed AUCE. We now say goodbye to AUCE. It had made a name for itself in both the Trades Union and Co-operative Movements and had earned the respect which accrues to those who hold strong principles and stand by them. In subsequent chapters we shall see how, first, NUDAW, and later USDAW, have carried those principles into the remainder of the twentieth century.