

PART 3

A TIME OF DANGER AND A TIME OF GROWTH

10 THE LEVY THAT SAVED THE UNION

THIS chapter is a story of crisis and conflict. Crisis for the nation in an industrial depression which in duration and intensity transcended anything that had been known before. Crisis particularly for working people. They bore the burden in unemployment and a savage reduction in their standard of living. Crisis for NUDAW and other Trades Unions. They experienced loss of membership and crippling erosion of their funds. Conflict for those Unions, of which NUDAW was one of the foremost, which fought to defend their members' standards with the weapon of last recourse — the strike.

For the Union, the story of conflict began before the amalgamation of 1921. In the last months of the war AUCE became involved in the most widespread dispute since its formation, the antagonist being the mighty CWS. In August, 1918, there was a strike in support of a wage claim at the Longsight, Manchester, Printing Works (the CWS then printed at six centres). What began as a more or less local dispute escalated into a battle over the Union's right to represent its members. The Manchester and District Printing and Kindred Trades Federation, comprising eleven Unions, claimed that it could provide for all employees in the works (although over a long period the print Unions showed no interest in the 300 or so workers, mainly women and warehousemen, who had joined AUCE). Against this background the CWS Board refused to negotiate on the pay claim, on the argument that it could only deal with all the Unions concerned.

The CWS itself was under pressure from some of its shareholders to make Trades Union membership a condition of employment. Perhaps with this in mind, and with or without its collective eyes open to the probable consequences, the Board decided to back the P&KTF by notifying the print workers on strike that they would only be reinstated if they joined "... the Trade Union applicable to their respective

craft". This set the fire among the heather with a vengeance. It was a basic principle for AUCE that Co-operative employees had the right to join the Trade Union of their choice, and it was determined to resist any attempt by employers to restrict freedom of choice.

The immediate challenge was over the Longsight workers' strike (although there were also disputes in one or two other CWS undertakings), and in view of the Board's decision the Executive Council called for sympathetic action by CWS branches. Members came out at food, soap, clothing and other factories. By September, 1918, 7,000 were on strike, according to one report, 10,000 according to another. There was danger of the conflict spreading to retail societies through shop workers refusing to handle goods coming from the CWS. The issue came before the Trade Union Congress, where the printing Unions had the support of Unions in the anti-AUCE Federation, and the Congress called on the strikers to "become members of their respective trade [craft] Unions".

It was perhaps fortunate for future labour relations in the Co-operative Movement that wartime legislation governing industrial disputes was still in force. Under the Munitions Acts, if there appeared to be no prospect of a strike being settled in any industry which affected the war effort — as food supply from Co-operative factories certainly did — it could be ended by Royal Proclamation. This power was invoked, and the Executive Council immediately instructed members to report for work.

Three arbitrators were appointed to determine whether the CWS had the right to prescribe the Union employees should join. They found for the CWS, their ruling being that the Board had the power to prescribe that employment should "... only be given to members of the particular Trade Union applicable to their respective crafts". AUCE was also censured for withdrawing labour from essential trades during a time of war.

It was a technical defeat for the Union and there was some feeling at the next ADM that the dispute had been allowed to escalate too far, too fast. But the ultimate victory was for commonsense, for the CWS did not again try (apart from one or two local incidents, probably due more to management than

to Board policy) to interfere in its employees' choice of a Trade Union, and the Longsight workers were allowed to continue their membership of AUCE. Some, however, did not get their jobs back.

Compulsory Union membership became a condition of employment in the Society in 1919. It was based on a shareholders' resolution declaring that there should be membership of a Union "... recognised for affiliation to the Trade Union Congress". There could have been another flash-point here, for it was not until AUCE was merged in NUDAW in 1921 that the Union was back in the TUC. Wisely, however, in the intervening years the CWS did not try to interpret this provision or the arbitrators' award in a manner which would have provoked further conflict.

We come now to the post-war years. They were to be the period in which the "fit country for heroes to live in" became the subject of the bitter jibe that for a great many people it was a land in which you had to be a hero to be fit to live at all. There were to be almost two decades of high unemployment. The monthly average of registered unemployed in Great Britain was 1,543,000 in 1922 and 1,514,000 in 1939. In the intervening years the figure never fell below a million. Between 1931 and 1933 one fifth of the national work force (excluding agricultural workers and those under 16) was unemployed. It was a time of retreat, or at the best, long periods of standstill, on wages and conditions, years in which the "dole" and the Means Test became part of the folk-lore of working people. For the fully employed worker, after 1927 real wages in terms of what his earnings would buy began to improve against a falling cost of living. But the unemployed, subject to a Poor Law concept of "dole" scales and to the Means Test, derived little benefit from that source.

The experience of AUCE, and, from 1921, of NUDAW, in the immediate post-war years, can be divided into three phases, extending up to 1925. While it is an arbitrary division, it covers the two years in which it was possible to improve wages and conditions, the shock and almost the paralysis of many Unions when the economy collapsed in 1921 and — for NUDAW — the cautious moves towards improvement in standards which began around 1923.

The whole period can be epitomised in the percentages of the

Union's benefit provision represented by unemployment or dispute and victimisation costs during each year. They were:

		Benefit expenditure as percentage of the total on —	
		<i>Unemploy- ment</i>	<i>Dispute/ Victimisa- tion</i>
		percent	percent
1918	.....	1.4	30
1919	.....	15	23
1920	.....	12	32
1921	.....	62	16
1922	.....	39	27
1923	.....	18	48
1924	.....	16	26
1925	.....	16	28

These figures must be seen against the fact that in 1922 benefits were reduced to meet a heavy deficiency on revenue, and were not restored until July of 1924. The high dispute/victimisation percentage for the otherwise "prosperous" year of 1918 would reflect the cost of the CWS strike. Nineteen-twenty three saw another long struggle with the CWS, which is reflected in the high percentage for that year.

To return to the earlier years. In 1919 an attempt by the Executive to revitalise the national wages policy of 1913 was unacceptable to the Divisions, which were then deputed to prepare their own scales. In due course these were presented to all Hours and Wages Boards or individual societies outside the Wages Boards' machinery. In most Divisions reasonably satisfactory settlements were secured, or were being negotiated at the end of the year. But in the North-Western Section of the Co-operative Union a selective call-out by NUDAW in one district led to a lock-out throughout the Section. Similar selective action in Yorkshire, however, led to a settlement without spreading the dispute. In these two Divisions the disputes were settled on terms "which substantially benefited practically the whole of our members concerned." The annual report estimated that in these and the Divisions where there had been a settlement the new agreements represented an annual

gain of £1¼ million in wages. In all cases war bonuses had been incorporated into wages.

In 1920 there were no major national disputes but much negotiating and some conflict at Divisional or individual society level. As an illustration, the 17th October meeting of the Executive Council had before it 27 cases of disputes or possible disputes in retail societies, seven in the CWS and one in the Co-operative Insurance Society. The 48-hour working week, it was reported at the end of the year, had been established in retail societies generally, with 44 hours in the Northern Societies and many productive works.

On the whole, the future seemed bright. Then . . . the economy collapsed. The wartime impetus to full employment of workers and machines had carried forward into the short-lived peacetime boom. It began to weaken in 1920 and ran out of steam in 1921. Unemployment soared to the figures given earlier. Wages and conditions were among the first victims of the blizzard. NUDAW had been born on 1st January and by 31st December the first annual report had to say: "The year 1921 will long be memorable in Trade Union history as the year of wages reductions. The slump in trade which ensued on the artificial after-war boom was followed immediately by a concerted attack on wages and other conditions, from which our private trade members suffered at once, and of which the Co-operative Movement was not slow to take advantage".

In almost every Division of the Union there were reductions in Co-operative wage rates, in some cases twice in the year. In the general section there had been reductions in the warehouse, flour milling, sugar refining, sugar based (jam, confectionery), drug and fine chemical, soap, feed and compound trades. In several of these trades there had been two reductions in the year. The Union was represented on 29 Trade Boards and eleven Joint Industrial Councils or other Joint Trade Committees. In some cases, it was reported, Trades Boards had proved a slight check on the amount of wage cuts demanded by employers, particularly in the case of women workers. But, generally, it was retreat all along the line.

For NUDAW, however, it was a fighting retreat. The Executive's policy, endorsed by the 1921 ADM, was that "Where our own members have been and are prepared to make a stand

against reductions, they have had and will find every ounce of the Union's strength behind them". During the year there were strikes at sixteen retail societies, usually over attempts to enforce wage cuts without the agreement of the Union; three against private employers; one each against the CWS and the CIS. Unemployment benefit in 1921 amounted to £122,331, almost six times the total amount paid since it began in 1896. Dispute and victimisation benefit was £31,568, approximately half as much again as the total since this benefit was introduced in 1912/13 (although of course, the 1921 figures related to the much larger membership of the amalgamated Union).

Unemployment ravaged the Union's membership. We saw as percentages earlier in this chapter the toll it levied on benefits payments. In human terms, the average weekly number of unemployment claims throughout 1921 was 3,200, and in the worst weeks, 6,738. The effect on finances was crippling. With only eight weeks experience of the new year, the annual meeting of 1921 had been warned of the deteriorating financial position and had agreed that there should be an appeal for extra voluntary contributions. But that sort of appeal is rarely successful. The best response to an emergency comes when people can feel they are all in it together, contributing equally to find a solution.

The voluntary appeal failed. The position continued to deteriorate. The Executive was concerned above all that financial considerations should not cripple the Union's ability to resist, through organisation, agitation and strike where necessary, the attack on wages and conditions. In June, 1921, it was decided by the Executive that there should be a "capital levy" of £1 per member and 10/- for associates (by then, this category included only members under 16 years of age. In their case the levy was later reduced to 5/-). Payment was to be either as a single sum or in weekly instalments.

Almost every member of the Union had experienced cuts in wages. Many were on short-time. Yet the response was magnificent. More than £57,056 was paid in levy or donations during the remainder of the year. J. Hallsworth was to declare at the annual meeting of the following year that "The amount raised by the levy in 1921 saved this organisation". Nine years later, when the Union completed its first decade, the annual report for 1930 stated that in that earlier year of crisis "... its destiny

then was in the balance very much more than was realised". The present day USDAW owes much to those members of long ago.

Finance was not the only cause for anxiety. There was also a heavy loss of membership. At the time of the amalgamation in 1920 the total was 185,066. By the end of 1921 this was down to 104,746. The slide continued to a low point of 81,297 in 1923. Thereafter, the climb back began, and by the end of this chapter in 1925 the figure was 93,468 (65,873 men, 27,595 women).

The decline in the early twenties would be due to several causes. NUDAW began with 72,267 women members. A year later the number was down to 36,902. Many women were, almost literally, driven out of industry during the depression. To "clean up the books" after the amalgamation and in subsequent years several thousand members heavily in arrears were written off the lists. These factors would account for a considerable part of the lost membership.

In addition, the enlargement of the Union had made it vulnerable in times of depression. Co-operative employment was relatively stable. By the 1920s few Co-operators, whatever their quarrel with NUDAW, denied that their employees should be in a Union. NUDAW, however, was now operating in many trades where employment was much more volatile and all or some employers would gladly have seen Trades Unionism destroyed. Many members probably left the Union to save their jobs, or, if unemployed, to improve their chance of getting another job. It was not until 1928 that the membership figure again turned the hundred thousand, at 104,129.

To return to the early twenties. The levy alone did not lift the financial burden. Welcome as it was, it had still left a deficiency of £41,948 for 1921. In the following year unemployment and dispute/victimisation benefit continued at a crippling level and the attack on wages called for all the strength the Union could mobilise in resistance. Reluctantly, the Executive had to ask the ADM of 1922 to accept a reduction in provident benefits.

The proposal was a reduction of 50 per cent, except in the case of strike pay, where the reduction was less. The rules were to be altered accordingly. It was a tense and unhappy meeting, facing a situation which was new to a Union that so long had

gone from strength to strength. After a lengthy debate the proposal was rejected by 30,485 votes to 23,719.

But a negative vote could not make the crisis go away. There were "off-stage" discussions and the Standing Orders Committee accepted an emergency resolution. This reinstated the proposal with the exception that, if carried, the cuts would be regarded as temporary, to operate for twelve months, and sick benefits would be reduced by 25 per cent, not 50. With these amendments the proposal was adopted by what the official report described as "an overwhelming majority".

J. Hallsworth, who was the principal speaker, probably carried the day on two main arguments. One was that to attempt by economies alone to meet deficiencies of the prevailing size would reduce the Union to a nullity, incapable of rendering adequate Trade Union services (although a rigorous programme of economies *was* being carried out). The other, and related, argument was that provident benefits only affected members, and then a minority of them, on occasion, but the task and cost of fighting to maintain wages and conditions was vital to all members "day after day".

The annual meeting of 1923 agreed to continue the reduced scales, with the proviso that the Executive could make any earlier revision, wholly or in part, towards the old scales if it considered it would be justified by the financial situation. The benefits, with some amendments to the former scales, were restored in 1924 in a new schedule submitted by the Executive and adopted by the ADM of that year, to operate from 1st July. To add to the problems of this period a break away Union was formed at Barnsley; the cause apparently being discontent over some of the post-amalgamation arrangements. Within a few years, however, it returned to the NUDAW fold.

The defensive battle over wages continued. Towards the end of 1922 and in the early part of 1923 there was a long-drawn-out strike, more or less national in scale, against what the Union contended were wage cuts imposed by the CWS in some factories without negotiation and, equally important, a claim by that Society to a free hand in operating Trade Board, JIC or "accepted" Trade Union variations in wages and conditions. The strike extended into a refusal to handle goods from the CWS in many retail societies. When the dispute was eventually

submitted to the Joint Committee of Trade Unionists and Co-operators, the award more or less endorsed the wage cuts. But the Society's claim to a free hand in selecting the rates it would apply in future was rejected, largely on the grounds that it would give the right to pick and choose among a wide range of rates, and enforce its choice without negotiation with the Unions concerned.

Many workers' productive co-operatives have been formed as the result of a strike. NUDAW is probably the only Union to have gone into retailing in an extension of strike action. At Bishop Auckland in 1921, and Wallsend-on-Tyne about a year later, there were prolonged strikes against the local retail societies. With Union support, competitive societies were formed, and employed a considerable number of the strikers, the remainder continuing on benefit. They were initially successful, but eventually closed down. While they thus failed commercially their very existence probably deterred some other management committees from driving the Union to a total confrontation. (Hallsworth described the cost of supporting these societies as "an insurance premium.")

Not all the disputes of these hectic years were in the Co-operative Movement. Some notable battles were fought against private employers. In 1921 a group of firms in the Liverpool rope trade sought to impose Trade Board rates, which meant a substantial reduction in earnings. The dispute lasted from May, 1921, to February, 1922, and ended in victory. In 1922 there were successful actions against wage reductions by a Leicester firm of drug and fine chemical manufacturers and similarly against a distillery firm. In 1924 Liverpool sack and bag makers, mainly women, came out against Trade Board rates that were lower than those in any other industry covered by Trade Board machinery. It was a rough struggle, with police action against pickets, but it ended in a wage increase.

The tide began to turn in 1923/24. While there was still massive unemployment, the first shock-wave of the depression had worked itself out. Co-operative trade, which had slumped drastically between 1920 and 1921 (partly through a fall in prices), began to recover. The General President, J. Jagger, was able to claim at the ADM of 1924 that in the preceding year . . . "the retreat had almost stopped", with very few reductions in

wages during the year. Nineteen-twenty-four saw slight advances in wages for a considerable number of members and an increase in membership of 8,047. By 1925 the annual report claimed "distinct success" in maintaining wages and conditions, plus a further increase of 4,124 in membership.

Nineteen-twenty-five also saw another attempt to establish improved national scales for all grades of workers in the Union. They were drawn up by the Trade Conferences and Trade Advisory Groups which for a time were part of the Union's machinery. NUDAW's experience had been, particularly in the Co-operative Movement, that wage reductions in one Section or District were invariably followed by similar applications throughout the country. Hopefully, national scales would lead to national negotiations and agreements, but whether negotiations were national, regional or local, J. Jagger told a conference at Leicester "... we will all for the first time be negotiating upon the same scale." The Co-operative Union, although it was believed to be in favour of national negotiations, soon had to make it clear that they were not on. Its constituents insisted that applications must go through the Sectional or District Hours and Wages Boards.

By the end of the year they had been submitted and were being actively pursued in Co-operative and some private trades. In the North-Western Section of the Co-operative Union there was another lockout, which was embittered by the attempt of some societies to induce employees to give up their membership of NUDAW. The lockout ended in an agreement to resume negotiations and if the differences were not settled to refer the issue to "... any new machinery that may have been set up between the Co-operative and Trade Union Movements". If no such machinery had been created within a specified period a Court of Arbitration was to be set up, comprising NUDAW, Sectional Hours and Wages Board, TUC and independent members, with a mutually agreed chairman. A somewhat similar agreement was made in the North-Eastern Section. Eventually, without arbitration, it was agreed to stabilise rates until April, 1926, but with an immediate improvement in holiday entitlement. While on the whole the North Western agreement was honourably observed, a few societies refused to reinstate Union members.

One break with the Union's past must be recorded. A Hewitt

died on 26 March, 1925. Of no man would it be said that he was the creator of USDAW but among the band of pioneers and builders who were the architects of the Union his memory holds a high and honourable place.

We have now reached the end of the most dangerous five years in the Union's history. The future would not be lacking in problems and crises but never again would they be so acute that they could threaten the Union's existence. There are not many members still around from these tense and challenging years. If they think of them at all, they must recall many occasions when it seemed that NUDAW would be swamped by the deluge sweeping through the national economy, and recall also how they and their colleagues gritted their teeth and determined that somehow the Union would survive. That it did so is a tribute to its national leadership and to the memory of now forgotten stalwarts in the branches and districts.

11 PROGRESS IN DEFIANCE OF ADVERSITY

WE have made our way through five years in which an embattled NUDAW had to be constantly on the alert to defend wages and conditions and, gradually, to improve them. That is a *primary* purpose of any Trade Union. But strife is not the every-day activity of a Union, even in the worst years. We must now return to many other developments through which NUDAW sought to serve its members between 1918 and 1925; years in which there was growth as well as adversity.

POLITICS

There were four General Elections between 1922 and 1924 and by the latter year the Union had four representatives on the Labour benches. But its first-ever Parliamentary seat was won at a by-election in 1921, when R. J. Davies, secretary of the Approved Society, won the largely mining constituency of Westhoughton (Davies himself was a former miner).

A year later he held the seat in the *General Election of 1922*, and R. J. Wilson joined him as Labour MP for Jarrow-on-Tyne. Both were re-elected in 1923, with the addition of W. Mackinder, who won the Shipley constituency. NUDAW also had official candidates in Spen Valley, Stafford and Ashton-under-Lyne, all of whom were defeated. The three sitting Members were returned in Labour's victory election at the end of 1923. Union candidates at Stafford, Spen Valley and Ashton-under-Lyne were rejected. R. J. Davies became Under Secretary of State for Home Affairs in Ramsay Macdonald's first Government.

In the notorious Red Letter election of October, 1924, Labour lost 39 seats, but the NUDAW three held their own and Ellen Wilkinson won Middlesbrough East, to bring their number up to four. She was the only successful woman Labour candidate. Altogether, it was a good achievement for a Union which, for the reasons given earlier, had been a late starter in Labour Politics.

Apart from increasing the number on the Parliamentary

Panel there were two other changes in the Union's political arrangements during the twenties. While both General Secretaries were eligible to seek election as an MP, the Executive considered that it would be inadvisable for both to be in Parliament, which could have happened with the rising tide of Labour support. Therefore, the ADM of 1924 was informed that a mutual arrangement had been made with them that J. Hallsworth should devote himself entirely to the control of industrial, organisation and administration activities and be known as Industrial General Secretary and W. A. Robinson should operate as Political General Secretary, with specific authority to seek a seat in Parliament. The second alteration, authorised by the 1926 annual meeting, increased the allocation from the General Funds for political purposes by 6d per member to 1/6d; the increase being made to provide for the servicing of four MPs and three other prospective candidates.

EDUCATION: *THE NEW DAWN*

These two must be considered together as complementary parts of the same purpose. At the time of the amalgamation it was decided to continue the journal, and the first intention was to re-christen it as "*The Distributive and Allied Worker*". But some genius on the Executive asked what was wrong with "*New Dawn*", a title symbolic of NUDAW's aspirations and virtually identical with its name? His suggestion was adopted. It was also decided that publication should be fortnightly, beginning with the first Saturday in March, 1921. L. Lumley, AUCE's first full-time organiser, was appointed as editor and publicity manager.

It was hoped to reach a circulation of 50,000. But if there is one thing British workers will not do, it is read their own publications. They will join a Trade Union, they will strike, they will stand by their Union in bad times, they will vote Labour — but the greater number of them will not read publications that belong to them.

The *New Dawn* was one of the brightest Trade Union publications of its day. It gave extensive news of the Union, including some brilliantly written reportage on the great strike battles of the twenties. A. W. Petch, Financial Secretary and Office Manager, wrote regular articles on Union finance and administration which, apart from their national interest, were virtually

a serial textbook on branch administration. There was a strong literary content, frequently including poetry and fiction. There were many cartoons including contributions from Vic Feather, a one-time Co-op. employee who later became General Secretary of the TUC, Women's Pages, fortnightly sketches of local Union personalities, contributions from the principal national leaders of the Labour and Trades Union Movements (and from the Union's own leaders), articles on health, holidays, Parliamentary reports, a special section on Scottish affairs: all these were included. But for long the circulation remained obstinately well under 20,000. Nevertheless, *New Dawn* was probably the most potent single factor in teaching members the Union's conception of Trade Union organisation and introducing them to Socialist philosophy and the humanities.

AUCE had long discussed the establishment of more formal education, but had deferred action because of disagreements in the Labour Movement over the political and philosophical base from which education should be provided. There had been links with the Workers' Educational Association, but these ended in 1921. There was also an internal scheme of summer school scholarships for members taking Co-operative Union examinations. Some members, however, wanted a more clearly defined Socialist approach to educational work, and the 1922 ADM adopted a demand for action based on "... the independent working-class policy of the Labour College Movement."

The National Council of Labour Colleges, which was the body meant by the resolution, was a grouping of the London Labour College (owned by the NUR and the South Wales Miners' Federation), the Scottish Labour College, 51 local non-residential Colleges, the Plebs League and some Trades Unions. NUDAW joined, and was represented on the national and district committees of the NCLC.

During the first World War the Union also began an association with the Fabian Society, the Labour Research Department and the National Council for Civil Liberties.

JOINT COMMITTEE OF TRADE UNIONISTS AND CO-OPERATORS: CONCILIATION

We saw in the previous chapter that the Union swallowed its objections to the Joint Committee when there was no better arbitration and conciliation machinery available. But in the

ranks of NUDAW, as of AUCE, the Committee was suspect and the search continued for a more satisfactory method of conciliation. On the initiative of NUDAW, the TUC had set up a committee representing Unions with members in Co-operative employment and since the early twenties it had been discussing with the Co-operative Union the possibility of a substitute for the Joint Committee. These talks ended in deadlock. The General Council then appointed its own investigation committee to seek a way out of the deadlock. It prepared proposals which, again, were rejected by the Unions concerned. The principal objection, so far as one can see, was that the proposals over-emphasised the validity of Trade Board and similar rates, which NUDAW and some other Unions regarded as a bare minimum, while many employers sought to establish them as a maximum. It was back to square one.

By now the General Council had run out of patience. It said, more or less, "A plague o' both your houses" to Co-operators and the Trades Unionists alike, gave notice that it was withdrawing from the Joint Committee by Whitsuntide of 1925, and in effect left the two sides to sort out the problem between themselves. Surprisingly, in one sense — considering the background of protracted disagreement — they did so. Not surprisingly in another sense, for both parties genuinely desired means of conciliation and arbitration that would be more flexible and more representative of the Unions concerned in a dispute than the old Joint Committee.

The new machinery, set up in 1926, provided for a National Conciliation Board, equally representative of signatory Unions and the Co-operative Union. Each Union and each Section of the Co-operative Union nominated panels from which they could draw six members to constitute any meeting of the Board. Four could be members of the Union or Section concerned in a dispute. The chairman for each meeting was drawn in rotation from a panel of independent persons. Decisions could be by unanimous agreement, by majority agreement if that was acceptable to both parties, or by agreement to accept a chairman's arbitration. Decisions by any of these methods were to be binding. Within seven days of direct negotiations breaking down the case must be referred to the Board, which must meet within fourteen days from the date of the reference.

Seventeen Unions were parties to the scheme, which covered all retail Co-operative societies and the Co-operative Production Federation (organisation of the worker productive/co-partnership societies). The CWS was not included but later was to make separate conciliation arrangements. The new machinery was fully operative by 1927, and in that year NUDAW was involved in thirteen cases. Five resulted in the Union's favour, in four there was no decision, three were referred back to the parties for settlement and one was withdrawn by mutual agreement.

NUDAW GETS A HOME OF ITS OWN

A notable move — in both senses of the word — came in 1920. After nineteen years as a tenant of the Co-operative Newspaper Society with increasing over-crowding as staff and activities expanded, the Union purchased and moved into its own premises. The building was a large mansion with extensive grounds, known as "Oakley", in Wilmslow Road, Fallowfield, Manchester. It had been built in the 1870s and enlarged in the intervening years.

Appropriately, "Oakley" is situated in a district with a long progressive tradition. Platt Fields, which are immediately adjacent to the building, were part of the estate of the Worsley family, who were active leaders of the Commonwealth cause in the Civil War against Charles II. In more recent times many leaders of the Labour Party have spoken there at open-air meetings. Richard Cobden, the great radical leader of the early part of the nineteenth century, lived nearby, as did Mrs. Gaskell, whose novels did much to educate Victorian society in the hardships of the cotton trade.

It was not, however, the first attempt by the Union to secure a home of its own. In 1914 a site had been purchased in Denmark Road, Manchester. Building plans were prepared but the war put a stop to development, and eventually the site was sold.

TWO "BREAKAWAY UNIONS"

Two attempts were made in the 1920s to hive-off from NUDAW breakaway Unions of Co-operative employees.

One was in the Co-operative Insurance Society, then just beginning the programme of expansion which by today has made it one of the largest insurance organisations in the United Kingdom, with a premium income in 1978 of £238,500,000 and 6,000 agents. The Society was founded in 1867 by a number of

retail Co-operatives, individual members and the CWS. In 1913 it was absorbed by the CWS and the then Scottish CWS (now itself merged with the CWS). It made little headway, however, until after the first World War.

Insurance workers were first mentioned in the AUCE Executive Council minutes of January 13th, 1918, which authorised efforts to enrol them in the Union. A Co-operative Agents' Union already existed; in 1920 it merged with AUCE, and was established as a national branch. By 1923 the branch could report to its conference that there were 1,500 members — an increase of 1,200 since the previous conference. But all was not plain sailing. Among district managers there was a move to form a separate Union, which agents were invited to join, and some did so, particularly new men who were influenced by their managers. The TUC rejected an application for membership by the breakaway which then sought a kind of half-and-half link by joining the National Federation of Insurance Workers, which was affiliated to the TUC.

There was not, however, any real stamina in this "Union". It had neither the resources, the experience nor the general back-up which NUDAW could provide. In 1927 most of its approximately 2,000 members merged with NUDAW, a small number (mainly officials and office staff) transferring to another Union as a separate section. Effectively, however, NUDAW had (and USDAW has) one hundred per cent membership of the agency staff. Fuller details of the special structure through which agents are organised are given in Chapter 33.

The other attempted breakaway was at the Newcastle Branch of the CWS, in the aftermath of the General Strike of 1926. Membership of a Union eligible for affiliation to the TUC was by then firmly established in the Wholesale Society and the breakaway attempted to obtain recognition. It was rejected by the General Council as ineligible and the CWS Board notified its members that they could not continue in the Society's employment unless they were in an affiliated Union. Exit the Co-operative Employees' Union (as it had been called).

There was also an attempt by some retail societies to weaken the compulsory Trades Union membership clause in the CWS, a backward move which was overwhelmingly rejected by the shareholders' meetings.

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

There can only be a brief mention of other developments of the period.

From 1918 onwards the Union renewed the campaign for compulsory Trades Union membership in retail societies. In 1921 this was the rule in 123 societies. By 1925 the number was 192. In some societies, however, it did not require compulsion to secure full Trades Union membership. Rodney Hanes, who was later to become President of USDAW, recalls that when he worked in the Eccles Society, it was their proud claim that they were one hundred per cent through voluntary recruitment.

In 1920 the right of employee members to seek election to committees of their societies was in the rules of 29 societies (in 19 of which employees had been elected). By 1925 the number was 65, with employees on committees in 48 cases.

In 1917 central funds became responsible for maintaining full-time secretaries in very large branches, the first four being Bolton, Irlam CWS, Liverpool and Woolwich. The latter branch had maintained a full-timer, G. Settatee, at its own expense since 1915. Formed in 1908 with 7 members (now just under 5,000), the first secretary of the Woolwich Branch, E. J. Bull, was one of the two new full time officials who were added to the Union's first organiser, G. Lumley, in 1908.

The Union continued to strengthen its international links, and by 1925 was affiliated to the International Transport Workers' Federation, the International Federation of Commercial, Clerical and Technical Employees, the International Federation of Trades Unions (through the British TUC) and on behalf of its members in the fur trade, the International Clothing Federation.

12 NUDAW IN THE GENERAL STRIKE — AND THE “ALMOST GENERAL STRIKE THAT WASN’T”

THE General Strike of 1926 is considered by many to have been an isolated event, almost a freakish distortion, in the history of British Trades Unionism. It should more properly be seen as part of an historical process, an almost inevitable attempt to apply in practice ideas that had influenced working class thinkers since the days of Robert Owen and his Grand National Consolidated Trades Union of 1833. Or of William Benbow, who a year earlier proposed a “sacred month” in which, by refusing to work, the common people would compel reforms in the State which would establish social and economic equality.

In his book *Robert Owen*, G. D. H. Cole describes the objects of the Consolidated Union as being “. . . to include all producers within its scope and by the threat of a general strike to enforce, first, a universal eight hours day, and soon a complete transformation of the industrial system”. Thus, there were two objectives. One was to lead mankind into the Golden Age by the mass exercise of working class power. But the immediate practical objective was to be the use of the strike weapon to advance or defend working conditions and wages. By far the greater part of the Union’s rules (given as an appendix in Cole’s book) was devoted to methods of organisation and action to carry out this second purpose.

The Grand National had a brief and turbulent existence (the Tolpuddle Martyrs were one of its “lodges”). It was destroyed by its own organisational inefficiency and the hostility of Government. But the idea of a gigantic strike of all or most workers either for social/political or for industrial purposes lingered on — some would say, haunted — the Trades Union Movement long after the days of Owen and Benbow. It had many advocates in the decade following the first World War. Syndicalists, Guild Socialists, Communists of the period agreed on very little but all saw in the power of Trades Unionism a

force for social change as well as for the defence of wages and conditions. The majority of Trades Unionists who belonged to none of these factions recognised that post-war capitalism was consolidating and rationalising into bigger national units (the great multi-national corporations, while they existed, were then fewer in number than they are today). The growing power of employers was contrasted with the fragmentation of Trades Unions. Mass action, it was argued, was the only countervailing power the workers could mobilise.

There was not, however, any organised move towards a single all-in national union such as Owen's Grand National, and there was only a minority interest in the use of Trades Union power for revolutionary purposes. Amalgamation was favoured, as the means by which Unions could best defend wages and conditions against the consolidated power of employers. Some of the biggest Unions of today date from those years. The Transport and General Workers' Union and NUDAW were formed through amalgamation in 1921, the National Union of General and Municipal Workers in 1924. Amalgamation led to increased interest in federation through formal agreements for defence or *advance* between Unions with a broadly similar industrial or occupational base. The possibility of united action on a wider front than that of a single Union was also reflected in the decision of the 1924 Trade Union Congress to give the General Council considerable power of co-ordination in disputes likely to involve large numbers of workers in more than one industry.

In one case amalgamation and federation went a stage further by, so to speak, adding quality to quantity. A Triple Alliance of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain, the National Transport Workers' Federation (of which NUDAW was an active member) and the National Union of Railwaymen had been *formed* in 1911 but did not emerge dramatically on to the national scene until 1921. In theory it had the power to paralyse the nation by closing down transport, use of the ports and the supply of fuel for power, heat and light. (King Coal, no matter how decrepit he had become, had not then been seriously challenged by oil. As late as 1938 the United Kingdom's consumption of petroleum was only a fraction of what it is today). A strike by the Triple Alliance could thus have produced much the same impact as a General Strike.

The test came in April, 1921 — and the result was a fiasco. As we have seen, 1921 was also the first year of the great attack on wages and conditions, and by no employers was it pressed home more savagely than by the mine owners. Notices of wage reductions and a general worsening of conditions were posted at the pit heads. The miners refused to accept them, and were locked out. They had already invoked the support of the Alliance, and had every reason to believe that rail and other transport workers would come out in a sympathetic strike. A resolution of full support had been carried at a special conference of the Unions in the Alliance, moved by H. Gosling, President of the Transport Workers' Federation, and seconded by J. Hallsworth, Joint General Secretary of NUDAW. All seemed ready for the closest approach to a General Strike that Britain had yet seen. The strike was set to begin on the night of Friday, April 15th.

It was, however, to be the "almost General Strike that wasn't"! The mood of the special conference was not truly reflected in the Executive Council of the Alliance. The Council's nerve soon began to weaken. It did not have plenary powers. The last word still lay with the Executives of the affiliated Unions. Possibly, some of them feared that their members would not obey a strike call on an issue which did not immediately and obviously concern their own wages and conditions. They may have flinched from an open confrontation with the Government, which was only too obviously backing the mineowners and had strengthened its hand with an Emergency Powers Act in 1920. Whatever the reason, the strike was a non-starter. The Executive of the Alliance decided that some unofficial discussions that had taken place between miners and mineowners' representatives and MPs (which were repudiated by the miners' Union) justified them in calling off the strike at the last hour of 15th April, a date which was to become known as "Black Friday". P. Kean, NUDAW's representative on the Executive of the Transport Workers' Federation, was one of those who voted against the cancellation, and his action was approved by the Union's Executive Council.

NUDAW's membership among transport workers was small compared to that of some other Union's in the Federation. But the Union was among the most active supporters of every move

to stand by the miners, and the Executive protested at the cancellation of the strike. Their plans to meet the mineowners' challenge had been thorough and realistic. NUDAW's leaders realised that to strike and hope for the best was not enough. There must be a policy to provision the strikers and sustain their morale. *A plan for that purpose was drawn up by the Joint General Secretaries, J. Hallsworth and W. A. Robinson, approved by the Executive Council, sent to the Executive of the Triple Alliance and circulated to Union branches on 9th April, 1921.*

It was based on the establishment of "... joint machinery of the Triple Alliance and the Co-operative Movement." A National Strike Food Committee was proposed, with local committees. *They were to be manned, nationally and locally, by representatives of the Unions in the Alliance, the Co-operative Movement, Co-operative employees. Strikers were to be supplied with food to the value of their strike pay. Where a food was scarce, Co-operative Managers were to draw on their wartime experience to introduce rationing schemes. Co-operative Societies were to be urged immediately to move all stocks of food, fuel, petrol, forage etc., which might be "lying in railway stations, warehouses", before the strike began "so that the stores can be in our hands before the Government commandeers the larger accumulation of supplies". Whether the plan was ever considered by the Executive of the Triple Alliance is doubtful. By the time it reached them they were more concerned to avoid a strike than to find means of conducting one.*

After Black Friday the miners struggled on until July, when they had to capitulate to the old strike-breaker; hunger. During the months they were out NUDAW, *itself financially harrassed* by the impact of the slump on cash and membership, contributed generously to relief funds.

There were many lessons to be learned from the collapse of the Triple Alliance, including particularly the need for advance planning on the lines which NUDAW had proposed. They were not taken to heart by the Trades Union Movement which, in 1926, drifted into a full-scale General Strike with little more contingency *planning than in the fiasco of 1921. The lesson that preparation is half the battle in industrial disputes as in war was, however, mastered by the Conservative Party, which was in*

Government in both years. It was ill prepared for a confrontation in 1921. By 1926 an armoury of legal, administrative, military and strike breaking resources was ready for action.

The "real" General Strike of 1926 also began over an attack on the miners. It had, however, been simmering since early in the previous year. The sacrifices imposed in 1921 failed to revitalise an inefficient and, in many areas, decaying coal industry. Germany, Poland and other countries were chasing British coal out of long established markets. A plan to nationalise the industry, modernise it, and among other proposals, link it to the development of electrical power (in which Britain was acknowledged to be then falling behind other industrial nations) and develop pretreatment of coal to utilise the profitable by-products and eliminate the smoke evil, was jointly prepared by the Miners' Federation, TUC and the Labour Party. It was submitted to, and rejected by, the Royal Commission on the Coal Industry which, as we shall see, was set up shortly before the General Strike. In any case, it never stood a chance with a Conservative Government in power. The forces opposed to the miners had their own Triple Alliance in the coalowners, the Royalty owners who sucked about £6 million a year out of the industry, and the Government, and for them there was only one cure for the sickness of King Coal — another twist to the screw that already squeezed the miners' standard of living.

The coalowners' intentions had been clear well before they were formally published. The April, 1926, annual conference of NUDAW anticipated the coming storm in a resolution which assured the Union's "... comrades in the mining industry that it stands solidly with them . . . and declares its determination to support them to the utmost of its power and regardless of the cost".

The storm broke on 30th June, 1925. Notices went up at the pit heads ending the national agreement which still existed with the Miners Federation of Great Britain, substituting district agreements, imposing heavy wage cuts and increased hours. The Miners' Federation sought the support of the TUC General Council at a joint meeting on July 10th. The support was promised, a special committee was set up to carry it out, and the railway and transport Unions agreed to embargo the movement of coal from midnight on Friday, July 31st. Neither exports

nor imports were to be handled, and all deliveries of coal to commercial and industrial concerns were to cease. The Unions that had flinched from action on Black Friday, 1921, made good their failure on Red Friday, 1926.

The immediate result was a retreat by the Government, then headed by Stanley Baldwin. It was not yet ready for a show-down. Only hours before the embargo was to begin it was announced that there would be a subsidy of £25 million to the coal industry. It was to last for nine months, and the owners' demands would be postponed until April, 1926.

So far so good. The threat to use mass power had worked. But it had not yet been tested in action, and an ominous deadline lay nine months ahead. The TUC's special committee was kept in being and announced its intention to "... apply itself to ways and means of consolidating the resistance of the Trade Union Movement should the attack be renewed." But it was the Government that did the consolidating. An Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS) was set up. The country was divided into ten regions, each under a Civil Commissioner. Arrangements were made for the enrolment of special constables and strike breakers. Preliminary plans were made for the deployment of Army and Naval forces.

A Royal Commission on the industry had been appointed in September, 1925, under Sir Herbert Samuel, and it reported in the following March. It made some useful recommendations, but it also accepted the owners' case for economies at the expense of wages and hours. The Spring of 1926 was the critical season. In April the notices of cuts in wages and debasement of conditions again went up at the pits. A lock-out from 1st May was the sanction if they were not accepted. *This time there was no postponement.* Government and coalowners were ready for battle, and there is considerable reason to believe that many of them welcomed an opportunity to cut the Unions down to size.

On 20th April the Government proclaimed a state of emergency. On 29th April Executives of most Unions in the TUC began to assemble for a special conference on the crisis in the Memorial Hall, Farringdon Street, London, where the Labour Party had been born twenty-six years earlier, under its original name of the Labour Representation Committee. For most of

three anxious days they waited in the hope of a peaceful and humane settlement of the mining dispute. But Government and coalowners were adamant that miners' wages and conditions must be worsened. The owners would not withdraw the lock-out.

On 1st May the conference decided by almost unanimous vote that as from 3rd May other Unions would strike in support of the miners, under the direction of the TUC. On 30th April the TUC had already circulated the "first line" list of Unions to be called out "... as and when required by the General Council." Other Unions were to be brought out as needed at a later stage, but the strike was over before that stage was reached. The first list comprised all transport, from docks and harbours to road and rail to the then infant Civil Aviation industry; printing, including the Press; iron and steel; metal and heavy chemicals; building. With electricity and gas, Unions were recommended to co-operate with the object of cutting out power supply to industry. Unions were to "do everything in their power to organise the distribution of milk and food" and to maintain medical and other supplies to hospitals. All Unions were warned to be aware that "... the opponents will in all probability employ persons to act as spies and others to use violent language in order to incite the workers to disorder".

NUDAW immediately responded to the call. On 3rd May wires went to every branch directing that all members engaged in transport of every description "must cease work tonight". Branch meetings were to be called to make arrangements and Central Office was to be informed by wire of the numbers affected. In a follow-up letter signed by J. Hallsworth as Industrial General Secretary the TUC warning on incitement was repeated.

The General Strike was on, and it lasted for nine days. This is not the place to follow the story through all the discussions between the TUC and the Government, and between the TUC and the Miners' Federation, which led to the General Council's decision to call off the strike on 12th May. The strike had not collapsed through lack of support. The miners, of course, were already out. There was a full response from the "front line" Unions that were called out in support. In some cases members of Unions not immediately involved came out of their own

accord. In parts of the country Strike Committees were effectively in control of vital services. There was no evidence that the majority of those already out were weakening, or that the "second line" would not respond to the call.

On the other hand, the more successful the strike became, the more was it likely that the Government would seek to break it by police and military action against pickets and by encouraging strike-breakers. Hundreds of strikers were arrested and imprisoned under the Emergency Powers Act. The provocative promise of full official support of any act committed in repressing the strike was virtually an incitement to violence. There were also plans to rush coercive legislation through a Tory-controlled Parliament. The bogey was raised that the strike was an attack on the constitution, a charge that was vociferously voiced by Tories who only a few years earlier had been preparing for armed rebellion in Ulster to prevent the passage of legislation for Irish Home Rule. Although the charge against the Unions was untrue in fact and doubtful in law it undoubtedly scared some members of the General Council.

Sir Herbert Samuel had drafted unofficial proposals for settlement of the coal dispute which the Council apparently assumed to have the support of the Government, although they were rejected by the miners on the grounds that they meant a reduction in wages and worsening of conditions. Nevertheless, the General Council convinced itself that they were the best that could be won, notified the Miners' Federation accordingly, and ordered a return to work. So ended Britain's first and only General Strike.

Before coming to the sequel one document which survives in the archives of NUDAW must be mentioned. It is "An account of the Proceedings of the Northumberland and Durham General Council Joint Strike Committee", prepared in May, 1926. No author's name is given but it was probably by C. R. Flynn, the Union's Northern Divisional Officer, and Secretary of the Council.

It begins with an informal discussion on the evening of 3rd May by representatives of NUDAW, T&GWU, Northumberland Miners and Labour Research Department, held at the Union's Divisional Office, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. This led to a meeting the next afternoon of representatives of most Unions in

the area, which agreed to set up a local General Council and a Strike Committee of representatives from each Union or group of Unions on strike or locked out, to meet daily. Flynn was secretary of both. Thereafter comes a day by day (sometimes hour by hour) account of crises, solutions and the gradual build-up of an efficient organisation. Confusion, at first, was widespread. One transport Union had called out all men involved in food transport but had given permits for the distribution of building materials. Another Union stopped all transport of building materials but issued a number of permits for food. Permits were being issued by a great variety of local Union offices and Strike Committees and were frequently being abused. It was soon discovered that "... the abuse of permits was beginning to reach gigantic proportions. Unscrupulous contractors or employers were conveying any and every sort of goods under the aegis of 'food only' or 'housing materials only'.

This problem was met, firstly, by banning all permits for building materials, subsequently by banning any permits at all except a limited number for essential foods. This favoured private traders with their own cars or non-Union labour, but penalised the Co-ops, whose transport workers were solidly behind the strike. So restrictions on supplies of bread and milk to societies were temporarily relaxed and a more comprehensive solution was being worked out when the strike ended.

Strike breakers from OMS were brought in to work on unloading food ships at Newcastle quayside, where two destroyers and a submarine were moored. Port workers who had been unloading food under permits immediately stopped work. The Regional Commissioner, Sir Kingsley Wood, sought to negotiate some form of joint working, which was refused. It was denied in the House of Commons that there had been any negotiations with the Strike Committee, but this detailed narrative leaves no doubt that they did take place.

Only a small selection of items from this historically interesting document have been given here. The complete story brings out two factors. One was the lack of preparation. Describing the confusion and delays at the beginning of the strike the writer says "All these hitches . . . were clearly incidental to the fact that on the Trade Union side no preparations had been made in advance for carrying out the general stoppage". The

other was the skill and speed with which the Strike Committee sorted out the muddle and improvised a large measure of control over the economy of the two counties. A similar story could be told in many other regions. However disappointing the outcome, the strike was unquestionably a remarkable demonstration of working class solidarity and ability to organise.

The miners refused to give in. They held out for six months before they were starved back to the pits on the owners' terms. Large sums were raised to help sustain them in their struggle, and NUDAW was a generous contributor. At a conference of Union Executives called by the TUC on 23rd November, 1926, to consider means of helping the miners J. Hallsworth, on behalf of NUDAW, moved that members of all Unions should be asked to contribute a 1d per working day, to which NUDAW would make an immediate grant of £10,000 on account of payments which the Executive Council was confident would be made by members. The proposal was carried by acclamation. (By 31 December, 1926, the "miners' penny" had yielded £43,785, including NUDAW's £10,000).

About 10,000 of the Union's members were out during the General Strike, two thirds being transport workers. The largest number involved was in Liverpool, with London coming next. But some members were affected in nearly all the Union's 750 branches. At the end of the year 40 members were still drawing victimisation pay due to their part in the strike.

The cost of the strike to the Union was £43,601, of which £14,000 was grants to the Miners' Federation, £500 to the Women's Committee for the relief of miners' wives and children, £17,659 dispute and victimisation benefits, £9,316 unemployment benefit, £1,000 a grant to the TUC and £1,126 special expenses. In addition, branches and officers of the Union contributed £7,157 to one or other of local and national funds.

After the miners had been beaten back, came the year of revenge. The Conservatives and their allies had won, and used their victory without mercy. As G. D. H. Cole puts it in his *Short History of the British Working Class Movement, 1789-1927* "The Government . . . felt that the Trade Unions were down, and it could not bear to miss the chance of stamping on their face". A Trade Disputes and Trade Unions Act was

hurried on to the Statute Book. The General Strike was declared illegal, as were sympathetic strikes. The right to picket was severely restricted. Limitations were imposed on the Trades Union rights of workers in the public services and on the enforcement of the closed shop by local authorities. Contracting-in was substituted for contracting-out in the case of political contributions. The Attorney General and the Courts were given wide-ranging powers to interfere in Trades Union affairs by process of legal injunction. NUDAW MPs and staff played an active part in the campaign against the Bill by the TUC and the Labour Party. But the Tories had the majority and in due course it became law, and was not repealed until 1946, as one of the first acts of the post-war Labour Government.

If there is any "hero" of the General Strike it is the British worker. He, and in many cases she, came out for no personal advantage. There was an immediate and certain loss of wages. There was no prospect of immediate gain. There was a risk that there would be no job to go back to, for a great many were victimised when the strike was over. Yet out they marched, almost two million of them, because they wanted to stand by other working people in their hour of trial. They stayed out for nine days and no doubt would have stayed out a good deal longer had they been asked. It was a demonstration of comradeship and solidarity that deserved a better result.

13 WAGES AND CONDITIONS TO 1931; THREE UNION CRUSADES TO 1939

WE now turn from the turbulence of the General Strike to the quieter conditions in which most Trades Union activity is pursued. The defence and improvement of wages and standards is the primary purpose, and we saw in an earlier chapter that during the years immediately before 1926 NUDAW had enjoyed considerable success in regaining the ground lost on the wages front in 1921/22. In this chapter we shall follow the Union's experience with wages and conditions up to the national political and economic crisis of 1931. We shall also extend the time-span beyond 1931 to deal with some causes which NUDAW pursued in all conditions, whether of crisis or normality.

In spite of the weakening of Trades Unions power that followed the General Strike, NUDAW was able to maintain most of the gains that had been made in previous years, but was unable to make any significant advance. Nineteen twenty six was more or less a year of marking time. *With the long drawn out closure of the mines and the general aftermath of the General Strike conditions were not conducive to wage increases.* But the annual survey of wage movements in private trade speaks of having "more than held our own", "conditions maintained", "no change in rates". Some small gains were reported. Of the Co-operative Movement it was said that apart from involvement in the General Strike "... the year 1926 has probably been freer from industrial disputes than any year since 1912".

Nineteen twenty seven was a similar period — "Except in isolated cases there has been no serious move on the part of the employers of our members to interfere with the existing agreements". For 1928 the story was "In spite of the continued depression in the basic industries... the general body of our membership have maintained their rates of wages and conditions of employment". In 1929 the Executive reported "... no reduction in wages of any serious amount for any section of our

members" and recorded success "at many points" in improving existing agreements. Similar progress was reported in 1930. Members were rarely called on for strike action during the period. Apart from the General Strike, there was only one serious dispute (with a private firm) in 1926. None is recorded in the reports for 1927 and 1928, one in 1929 against a private firm. There was, however, a major strike lasting almost three weeks against the Co-operative Insurance Society in 1930; partly over commissions and partly over a minimum wage for agents from the day of appointment. It resulted in the establishment of a minimum of 50/-. The Union was unsuccessful, however, in securing reinstatement of a number of CIS agents dismissed after another strike.

In the Co-operative sector this period of comparative calm could probably be attributed to three causes. The retail trade of the Movement was bouyant and had increased from £184,879,902 in 1926 to £217,318,001 in 1930. The biggest increases were in London, South and the Midlands. Societies in the North and in South Wales, however, were experiencing a rough time. But there was no widespread urgency to seek economies through what all too often had been the first target of many management committees — the wages of their employees. Moreover, while NUDAW was ready to fight wherever it regarded a cause as important in principle, the days when the Union had to prove itself to the Movement by battle were past. Willingly in many cases, reluctantly in some, societies had accepted that they could no longer with impunity impose wages and conditions. The fact that the National Conciliation Board, which was introduced in 1926, did not, like its predecessor of 1915, fade out but continued to be extensively used was in itself evidence of this change for the better, even though the Union complained that the Co-operative side too often refused to accept a chairman's award when the parties could not agree.

There were, however, two black spots particularly affecting private trade members. In the aftermath of the General Strike, women workers were being sacrificed to industrial depression, both in wages and employment opportunity. And low as their wages were, they were frequently driven out of their jobs by even cheaper juvenile labour. In the light domestic productive and distributive trades 50 per cent of the workers were under

age of 18. The Union came across one large factory in Cheshire where girls of 15 were refused work on the grounds that they were too old to start.

The idea that the upper and middle social classes were entitled to cheap domestic servants still lingered on, and the Ministry of Labour sought to oblige by forcing women off unemployment registers into the kitchens of their "betters". As NUDAW's report for 1930 tartly pointed out, the demand for servants might be vocal but it was not unlimited and if the Ministry was challenged "... they would not be able to provide anything like the number of vacancies that they claim exist". The Union's own female membership in 1930 was 32,900, equal to 28 per cent of the total; a proportion at which it stood for many years.

Juvenile labour had worried the Union since the earliest days. Partly because of the threat to adult employment and wages, partly for the human and social wastefulness of recruiting young people into blind-alley jobs. The Executive Council reported in 1906 that a favourite argument against a fixed minimum wage in Co-operative service was that societies could have a number of young men just out of their time, to whom they could not afford to pay an adult wage and did not care to sack — "... a state of affairs largely brought about by the employment in the past of an inordinate number of young people for the sake of cheapness". A year later the annual delegate meeting called for a scheme to regulate the number of apprentices and juniors. A similar demand was made in the following year.

By 1910 the annual report was proposing that in no case should there be more than one junior to three journeymen. There was a lull during the war and immediate post-war years but in the late twenties NUDAW sought and obtained the support of the Co-operative Union for the crusade to shut off the blind alley in the Co-operative service. The Labour Committee of the Co-operative Union, working partly from information collected by NUDAW, in 1929 circularised societies urging closer supervision of the number of juniors engaged, the training of juniors employed in delivery and other departments with a view to absorption as adults, transfer of surplus labour between societies, representation to the CWS and SCWS to absorb trained workers who were surplus in retail societies and

the establishment of more superannuation schemes. The problem was largely confined to bread and milk deliveries and societies were urged to examine their delivery systems, since experience in some societies had shown that the work done by boys could more economically be done by adults.

To help unemployed members in the depressed areas the Union maintained a version of the employment register set up by the old Manchester District Co-operative Employees' Association and, more positively, contacted societies advertising vacancies and supplied the names of NUDAW members. In addition, it was reported in 1928 "... we are in constant touch with some of the societies whose trade is most rapidly increasing, and are arranging with them to receive by transfer surplus labour from societies badly hit by trade depression".

Northern branches established a fund to pay the fares of members transferred to other societies. Northern, Midland, London and Southern Divisional Officers in co-operation with the London, Grays, Dartford, South Suburban, Birmingham, Nuneaton, Coventry and other societies — all in Co-operative growth areas — succeeded in providing for large numbers of members from the North East who might otherwise have been in the twilight world of the dole.

Membership of the Union continued to recover from the heavy losses of the early twenties. The figure was 91,488 in 1926 and 119,623 in 1931, an increase of 28,135. The Executive Council missed no opportunity of extending the range of recruitment. Mutuality, i.e. credit trading, clubs were increasing in the Co-operative Movement and the Union set out to organise and introduce agreed scales and conditions for the collectors employed on the clubs. Optical workers, for whom wages and conditions were very bad, were also organised and today form a considerable section of NUDAW. The expansion of the CIS brought an increasing number of agents into membership. Billposters were also organised. Along with other Unions, NUDAW recruited newspaper circulation canvassers, a field of employment which disappeared with the second World War, and has not since been revived by the newspaper industry. Organisation of the hotel and catering trades began, though this highly mobile occupation has proved to be one of the most difficult fields in which to enrol and retain members.

When NUDAW was formed it inherited two cherished objectives from AUCE. One was to establish Trades Union membership as a condition of service throughout the Co-operative Movement. The other was to seek full membership rights for employees, that is, the right to vote and to seek election to the management and other committees of the societies that employed them and of which they were also members. To these objectives there was added a third in the mid-twenties — the establishment of superannuation schemes for all employees. With all three, the initiative must in most cases be local and the campaigns, which we will follow to the outbreak of the second World War, were based on a high degree of co-operation between the Union's national leadership and the branches.

At the beginning of the century a few progressive societies had adopted the practice of employing only Trades Union labour. But the real drive for Union-only labour began after the first World War and as was recorded in Chapter 11, 123 retail societies had adopted this rule by 1921, plus the CWS and the Scottish CWS. The number continued to creep up slowly and by 1930 had passed the 300 mark at 304. Eight years later, on the eve of the second World War, it was 496.

In most of these cases Union labour only had been conceded willingly by management committees. In some cases, local branches of NUDAW had to invoke the authority of ordinary or special meetings of members to win the closed shop. But committeemen, who were mostly themselves Trades Unionists, and in some cases had established the closed shop in their own trades, could not readily find convincing arguments against its application to their employees.

It was a longer haul to convince societies that they should allow full membership rights. This had been a Union objective for many years. At the height of the war, the 1916 annual meeting carried a resolution "... strongly recommending "... the advisability of every branch being represented by one of their fellow employees on all society boards of management". When Whitley Councils were proposed as a means of harmonising relations between capital and labour the NUDAW annual meeting of 1918, on a resolution from York branch, called on the Executive Council to propose a scheme for the Co-operative Movement that would include direct representation of the

Union's branches on societies, boards of management. The resolution only just scraped through (22,520 for, 21,413 against), Syndicalist, Guild Socialist and other ideas for complete workers' control of industry were very much in the air at the time. and an earlier resolution at the ADM (from Midlands District Council) had affirmed that "... no scheme of reconstruction after the war will be adequate which does not give to the organised workers the full control of industry". This probably accounted for the narrow vote. Nevertheless, the York resolution was the basis of the Union's future attempts to gain a voice in the control of Co-operative Societies.

The old idea that since Co-operative workers could become members and, therefore, were virtually self-employed, was long-gone; and in any case, in equity and logic, it could be used to justify their enjoyment of the same rights as other members. But equity and logic are not automatic persuaders. Some management committees, perhaps fearing a Trojan horse at the committee table, argued that representation would weaken their authority.

An extreme argument was that unrestricted representation could lead to boards composed entirely of employees fixing wages and conditions to suit themselves. This argument was taken sufficiently seriously in some societies for them to limit employee representation, when it was introduced, to a fixed number. There were moves to popularise Joint Advisory Councils between committees and staffs which, while desirable in themselves, were undoubtedly seen in some societies as an alternative to employees in the committee room. But experience continued to show that those societies with employee representation were no less successful — sometimes more so — than their neighbours. Although hostility began to diminish, progress was at a snail's pace. There were 72 societies where membership rights operated in 1927 (when the annual report began to publish the figures), the same number in 1928, 76 in 1929 and one less in 1930. By 1939 the number had only reached 111.

It was not until the nineteen-twenties that superannuation became a major interest of NUDAW and the Co-operative Movement. In 1920 the number of societies with superannuation schemes could almost be counted on the fingers of two

hands. By 1938 the greater number of Co-operative employees, retail and wholesale, were covered by schemes (280,326 out of 346,761). In the years to 1939 the accumulated pension funds increased from £899,773 to £11,672,292. It is probable that no other major reform in Co-operative service was ever established so rapidly and, on the whole, with so little friction between Union and employers.

The beginning of the campaign can be dated from the annual delegate meeting of 1923. A cautiously worded resolution was adopted to, first, put the Union's own house in order by establishing a scheme for the staff and, secondly, to gather information on which to base campaigns for pension provision covering the members as a whole. A staff scheme had been established by 1925, based on joint contributions and a maximum pension of *two-thirds of retiring salary at the age of 65*. Schemes had also been introduced in some retail societies, and by 1927 30,000 employees were covered. In the same year the Co-operative Congress urged societies to make pension provision part of their employment practice. The CWS, the biggest employer in the Movement, came in in 1928 (41 years after its shareholders had rejected a proposal by the directors that there should be a pension scheme for employees.) The 1928 scheme was criticised by NUDAW, particularly on the provision made for long service employees who could have only a short period of contributions. Schemes were also introduced by the Scottish CWS, the CIS and the English and Scottish Joint CWS (which handled the enormous tea trade of the Movement).

To these, and subsequent, developments, a vital contribution was made by a national official of the Union, A. W. Petch, the Financial Secretary and Office Manager. He became an expert on the intricacies of superannuation, advising hundreds of Union branches on negotiations with their societies, frequently consulted by societies themselves. His booklet *Co-operative Employees and Superannuation Funds* gave a comprehensive survey of every known scheme in the Co-operative Movement. Model rules were also published.

It was not all plain sailing. While most schemes were satisfactory, there were occasions when the Union had to warn that some were unsound in their financial provision, and branches were urged to consult Central Office before agreeing

to proposals from their societies.

There were two other weak links in the superannuation chain. One was the role of the small societies with up to 100 employees. In 1935 the Union reported that out of 790 societies in this category only 29 made provision for superannuation. In contrast, of the 36 societies with 1,000 employees or more, 32 had schemes, Federal schemes were advocated to meet the problem of the small societies, but by 1938 only 15 had been established (covering 87 societies) out of 711 societies with fewer than 100 employees. The "over 1,000 employees" group had by then increased to 40 societies, and all but one had superannuation schemes.

The other defect was the plight of older workers who came into schemes late in life. In many schemes their actuarially determined pension was insignificant and the Union had only limited success in establishing a minimum of £1.

Partly to meet these problems the ADM of 1936 urged that there should be a national scheme for the Co-operative Movement, with a minimum of £1 at age 60. As an ideal, this was admirable. But as the Executive pointed out in the following year's annual report "There is little likelihood of any of the existing schemes agreeing to co-operate . . . owing to the wide diversity of conditions adopted, and the fact that local control of funds would probably be lost is also important from the employees' point of view."

By the eve of the second World War 355 societies, retail, wholesale and worker productive, had established schemes, covering 83.50 per cent. of the combined total of retail, wholesale and productive employees. While success on a similar scale could not be claimed for the private trade, the Union had received many enquiries from firms interested in making pension provision for their employees. We can fittingly end this chapter by claiming superannuation, with all the limitations of some schemes, as a triumph alike for NUDAW and for the strength of the social conscience among Co-operative members.

14 STORMY WATERS AGAIN

THIS chapter, beginning in 1931, brings us once again into stormy waters, both industrial and political. The industrial storm was to add more than a million workers to the ranks of the unemployed. In politics, the Labour Party went through the greatest crisis of its history, when three of its best known leaders not only left the ranks but deserted to the enemy.

Between 1923 and 1929 the collapse of the early twenties had levelled off into a chronic depression in the older industries such as mining, shipbuilding, cotton. Unemployment fluctuated at an annual average figure either just above or just below 1,250,000 (except in 1927, when the average was just over a million). British capitalism had come to terms, so to speak, with Slump Number One, and more than a million men and women, (plus in most cases their families) paid the price in the grinding poverty of an inadequate "dole" and the humiliations of the Means Test.

It seemed that the state of the nation could not become worse. But Slump Number Two was on the way, and bad was to become much worse. The unemployment average in 1930 shot up to 1,917,000. In 1931 it took a further leap to 2,630,000. Thereafter the figure was not to fall below 2,000,000 until 1936.

The great depression which began in 1931 was world-wide in its impact, not least across the Atlantic, where it deflated the apparently boundless prosperity which it was claimed capitalist enterprise had brought to the United States. "Buddy, can you spare a dime" became an American song that was to echo round the industrial world. A study published by the International Labour Office in the mid-thirties (based on examination of economic and social conditions in 36 countries) estimated that between 1930 and 1934 the cost of economic depression was approximately the same as that of the first World War and that industrial production had fallen by 32 per cent.

The basic cause was the failure of nations to find means of

operating their industrial capacity and international trading arrangements on a scale that would match productive capacity with consumer purchasing power. But the immediate cause in Europe was a partial collapse of the banking system, starting with the failure of a major Austrian bank in May, and bringing down banks throughout Central Europe. Britain was affected by the banking crisis. Through the rising cost of unemployment, falling national income and a diminishing yield from taxation, it was also threatened with an unbalanced Budget, and in those years, much more than now, the Budget was a jealous God who could only be appeased by the incantation "in balance".

A Labour Government, headed by Ramsay MacDonald, was in office, though not in power, at the time of the crisis; with 287 seats against 261 Conservatives. Fifty-nine Liberals held the balance. The Government had proved incapable of devising any strategy — or even palliatives — to cope with industrial depression. The Cabinet, however, accepted that it must balance the Budget and that there must be large economies in public expenditure. The content of an economies programme depends very much on the political and social views of those who draw up the sacrificial list. Incredibly, for a Labour Cabinet, the job was given to a committee under Sir George May, Chairman of the Prudential Insurance Company, and, as Clement Attlee points out in his autobiography, with "... a majority of opponents of Labour on it". Predictably, their proposals were based on severe cuts in Social Services and unemployment benefits. Neither MacDonald nor Philip Snowden (then Chancellor of the Exchequer) gave their Cabinet colleagues a list of the economies intended — except that they must include a 10 per cent cut in unemployment benefit. Without that, it was insisted, confidence would not be restored (i.e. the confidence of the world bankers and Finance Ministers, plus the City of London), and no other item in substitution would do it. On that issue the Cabinet rebelled. MacDonald could have gone to the country, Instead, on 25 August, he began the formation with Stanley Baldwin, the Conservative leader, of what purported to be a National Government. Snowden, J. H. Thomas and a few other Labour MPs followed MacDonald into the Tory embrace, and were expelled from the Labour Party, the leadership being taken over by Arthur

Henderson. Ramsay MacDonald remained Prime Minister in name, commanding a "National Labour Party" of 12.

It was tragedy for Labour, both electorally and to thousands of life-long Party Workers, struck in their very souls by the betrayal of men they had followed and almost revered for years — particularly MacDonald and Snowden. In September Snowden, who continued as Chancellor, introduced a "National" emergency Budget, in which economies amounting to £90,000,000 in a full year included almost 40 per cent from cuts in unemployment benefits or increased insurance contributions by workers and employers. Next came a General Election in October when the Parliamentary Labour Party was decimated. Only 56 Opposition MPs were returned, 46 Labour, five Independent Labour Party and the rest a small Lloyd George group.

Nowhere was the great betrayal felt more keenly than in NUDAW which, apart from its representation in Parliament, was widely active in local Labour politics throughout the country. Two of the Union's three MPs were defeated. Ellen Wilkinson lost Middlesbrough East and R. J. Wilson went down at Jarrow. W. A. Robinson failed to regain Shipley, which W. Mackinder had held as a NUDAW nominee until his death in 1930. At Westhoughton R. J. Davies was victorious for the sixth election in succession since 1921, and once again became the Union's sole voice in Parliament.

In the annual report for 1931 the Executive Council recorded its "... full support to the loyal members of the Parliamentary Labour Party, who decided to become His Majesty's Opposition rather than follow those who misguidedly sold their honour and turned their backs on the people they had led for so many years". And Ellen Wilkinson summed up the reasons for Labour's defeat in an article in *New Dawn*. "What beat us was fear. The Press, the BBC, the Church and the cinema, every employer ... set to work to create the grand "wind up". To which the ADM of 1932 added a rider in a resolution which condemned "... the weak, vacillating policy of the late Labour Government" and criticised the Parliamentary Party for not realising "... that they were slowly but surely being betrayed into a false position by their leaders".

The backlash against wages and conditions was not long delayed, and was soon to show in NUDAW, both in unemploy-

ment benefit to Union members and, on a wider scale, in demands from employers for wage reductions. Unemployment benefit for the three years 1927 to 1929 had totalled £22,723. For 1930 to 1932 the total was £45,229. By the end of 1931, in the private sector, there had been reductions in wages in the paint, colour and varnish, tarpaulin, general warehousing, drug and fine chemical, heavy chemical and meat trades, and *cuts were threatened in other trades*. In the Co-operative sector there had been reductions in the Cheshire and North Wales, Liverpool, Manchester and Yorkshire Divisions, and they were impending in other parts of the country. Some branches had accepted short-time working without consulting the Union, and were warned that in doing so they endangered the legal right of workers employed on weekly contracts to be paid a full week's wages when they were available and ready for work. Thirty-two cases (the highest number since the Board was formed) had been taken to the National Conciliation Board by NUDAW, in twelve of which the decision was in the Union's favour.

In 1932 and 1933 rates were partly maintained, although in 1932, as Jagger put it to the ADM of the following year, "... by now it had become evident that we were threatened with what was the nearest approach to a national attack on our standards that we have ever had to meet" and in most districts they had to accept reductions to some extent. In neither of these years could the Union claim that it was more than approximately holding the line. By 1934, however, the situation changed slightly for the better, restoration of cuts or direct increases being secured in some areas of Co-operative and private trade. The improvement continued at a steady pace. But it was mainly through the restoration of previous wage cuts (although there was a small "bonus" through the fall in prices). By the early part of 1938, however, there was a brake on progress. Resistance to wage claims had become stronger and a year later the annual report for 1939 stated that progress "almost ceased" in the first part of the year. *By then, however, another and mightier struggle was close upon us all.*

We have seen in earlier chapters that the Union had a long experience of conflict in defending wages and conditions in times of industrial depression. While there were some strikes in

the thirties there was nothing on the scale of the great battles of strike and lockout that had been fought in earlier years. One reason in the Co-operative Movement undoubtedly was the existence of conciliation machinery, which had taken much of the tension out of relations between societies and Union. The peaceful influence of the Board was acknowledged in the annual report of 1934, with the words "The lightened burden of dispute benefit in recent years is due chiefly to the operation of the National Co-operative Conciliation Board."

Up to 1937 the CWS was outside the conciliation machinery, and for several years NUDAW had been pressing for both a speedier method of negotiations with the Society, and for conciliation in the event of failure to agree. At the end of 1937 the pattern of conciliation in the retail and wholesale sectors of the Movement was completed by an agreement between the Society and a committee of Unions with Co-operative membership, set up by the TUC. The agreement was based on the principle that "... the relationship between the Trade Unions and the Society differs fundamentally from the relationship between the Trade Unions and private enterprise". It provided that when no settlement could be reached in disputes "... limited solely to the Society's establishments (as distinct from general trade disputes)" the matters at issue should be referred to the Conciliation Board, and unless and until this reference had been made no strike or lockout should take place. The constitution of the Board as to appointment of an independent chairman, decision by unanimous vote, by majority or by agreed arbitration of the independent chairman was broadly similar to the conciliation scheme for the retail societies.

There were to be two secretaries, one appointed by the Society and the other by the Unions collectively. J. Hallsworth was appointed to the latter position.

The thirties were also the years of the great unemployed marches from the depressed areas of England, Scotland and Wales to London. The most famous of these was the Jarrow march between 5th and 31st October, 1936, led for 200 of the 300 miles by Ellen Wilkinson, by then MP for the "town that was murdered".

One hundred and nineteen years earlier in another time of great suffering for working people the Blanketeers had set out

from Manchester on a similar march, each carrying his blanket for sleeping rough on the route; and had been denounced for "traitorous conspiracy", harrassed and many arrested by Dragoons, Yeomanry and Special Constables and finally turned back by Yeomanry as they sought to cross a river in Derbyshire. The times had changed. The Jarrow marchers were welcomed and helped all the way on the long road to London, not least by NUDAW branches and Co-operative societies.

For NUDAW members the thirties were a period of see-saw in wages, with reductions followed by a partial or full restoration but little real advance except insofar as they benefitted from lower prices. The Union's members fared better than workers in many other industries. But the real gains of the period were less in earnings than in improvement of conditions, such as the widespread introduction of superannuation schemes described in the previous chapter.

Superannuation affected Union members in all trades in which the Co-operative Movement was engaged. Sectional improvements in conditions were also won in particular trades, for groups of employees of which two examples will be given. "Working conditions" can cover almost any aspect of employment from the heating and lighting of workplaces to the physical effects of a particular job. One issue of the latter sort was taken up in the twenties on behalf of employees in the CWS and privately operated flour mills. Flour for Co-operative bakeries and for the home-baking trade of retail societies was traditionally packed in 280 lb. sacks, which were heavy to lift, awkward to manhandle and could bring about strain or other injury. On the Union's initiative in 1920 the Joint Industrial Council for the milling trade recommended millers to replace the weight by 140 lb sacks when the heavier stock was worn out.

Some progress was made in private and CWS mills but the heavier weights continued to be used by the CWS Sun (Manchester) and Star (Oldham) Mills; the Society contending that it had to supply them because they were specifically ordered by its retail customers. When approached by the Union some societies (and, apparently, some of the Union's own members) argued that these sacks were the most convenient to handle for their trade, and discounted the health danger. In reply, the Union tactfully suggested that "...if the decision were

compulsory, means would soon be found to adapt to new conditions", and pointed out that only two CWS Mills were still using the 280 pounders, so "... everybody else seems to have fitted in their arrangements accordingly". It was a long haul, but eventually the 280 pounders joined other mementoes in the records of industrial archeology.

Another reform that had to be patiently worked for over many years was one day off in seven for dairy roundsmen. Britain's daily delivery of milk to most homes does not exist in other countries, and is the main reason why our consumption of milk is one of the highest in the world. But it hinges on a decidedly unsocial starting hour for dairy roundsmen in particular, and for a long time there was an equally unsocial working week of seven days.

The attempt to secure one day off in seven had simmered for many years without getting very far. A questionnaire sent in 1932 to 600 NUDAW branches covering 185 societies resulted in 181 replies. They showed that only 24 societies operated a six day week (some only for inside workers). In twenty-five societies there were alternative methods, such as one day in fourteen, extra annual holidays, one day every seven weeks. When branches were asked what steps had been taken to secure the reform, it was found that in 123 societies *no approach* had been made to the employers. Nor did the roundsmen seem particularly concerned. Comments in the replies to Central Office included "roundsmen do not want a six-day week"; "members concerned do not wish to press the matter"; "day off obtained unofficially"; "unsuccessful in getting agreement among workers"; "competition too keen in this district".

From this rather discouraging response the Executive concluded that as yet there was "... not a sufficiently strong desire among our own dairy membership to take drastic action to secure a six-day working week". They decided that what was required was more propaganda among the branches, to be followed by district conferences.

There were, however, militant roundsmen who *did* want the six-day week and they sponsored a resolution at the 1933 ADM criticising the Executive for not giving a strong enough lead. This was defeated, but a resolution calling for further efforts was carried. The campaign gathered momentum and subsequent

annual reports had a much more encouraging story to tell.

By 1936 there were agreements in the Midland Division of the Union, the North Western Section of the Co-operative Union, and "substantial progress" towards an agreement in the North Eastern Section. Where Divisional agreements could not be secured, a number of societies had put the reform into operation as a result of the Union's activities. By 1939, when this chapter ends, the dairymen of the Movement were well on the way to securing a more civilised working week. When societies such as London, Royal Arsenal, South Suburban, Enfield Highway, Newcastle upon Tyne, Barnsley British, Stockport, Manchester and Salford, Coventry, Birmingham, Liverpool, Hull, United Co-operative Dairies (a federal body of societies in the Manchester area) — and scores more with a large dairy trade — were all on the six-day week it could safely be claimed that the reform had become established. (At the time of writing the agreement between the Co-operative Employers' Association and the Joint Trade Union Negotiating Committee is for a 40 hours working week, arranged as far as possible over five days).

With other reforms there was less success. The demand for Saturday half-day closing at 12.00 noon was frequently made but rarely conceded, probably because of the great volume of non-food trade that is done on Saturday afternoon. A campaign for Thursday payment of wages — to minimise congestion late on Friday, particularly in food shops — was building up when war broke out. The war itself was to encourage this reform, which was widely introduced to ease the problems of weekend shopping.

The general theme of this chapter has been one of constant struggle against adversity. We can end on a more heartening note. Amidst all their problems the Executive Council did not forget the men whose past effort, and in some cases sacrifice, had made the Union strong to face the problems of the times. In 1933 it was decided to make presentations to branch secretaries with a continuous record of 21 years' service. For members who could claim 30 years in the Union there were to be certificates and medals, plus concessions on retaining membership and funeral benefit on retirement. By 1934 30 branch secretaries had qualified, the longest serving secretary being

A. Shaw, of Silverdale (Staffordshire), who took up office in May, 1899. Close behind was A. Thornton, of Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire, with a record beginning in July 1901. H. N. Hunter, Pittington (Co. Durham) had served since September, 1904. It was estimated that about 1,300 members would qualify for certificates and medals. Truly, a Grand Army of pioneers. And to their number we can add the army of the future — the 74,283 new members who had joined the Union between December 31st, 1931 and December 31st, 1939.

15 AS WAR DREW NEAR

*Amalgamation: Politics: "New Dawn" and Education:
Federations: Structure and Staff*

NINETEEN-TWENTY-ONE saw the amalgamation between NAUCE and the Warehousemen's Union which resulted in the formation of NUDAW. Efforts to bring about a wider organisation of distributive and allied workers continued with the encouragement of the TUC. By 1926 several Unions had dropped out of the talks but three went to a ballot on a scheme of amalgamation — NUDAW, the Shop Assistants, and the Women Clerks' and Secretaries' Association. A special delegate meeting of NUDAW endorsed the scheme and all three Unions balloted their members. For Trade Unions to amalgamate required a minimum of 50 per cent of the members to vote, and the votes in favour must exceed those against by not less than 20 per cent. NUDAW qualified on the 50 per cent but failed — just, by 197 votes — to secure the 20 per cent. The other Unions did not poll the necessary 50 per cent.

During the year, there was, however, one slight consolation for NUDAW when it took over the Irish Linen Lappers' and Warehouse Workers' Union, based in Belfast. And, nothing daunted by the major reverse, the Executive at the end of the year was discussing possible mergers with the Scottish Bakers' and Belfast Butchers' Unions. Nothing came of these talks. But amalgamation, particularly with the Shop Assistants' Union seemed to wax and wane in approximately four to six year cycles. In 1930/31 and 1937 there were two more determined efforts to bring about the merger which both Unions had sought for so many years.

The first began at NUDAW's annual meeting of 1930, when a resolution was submitted in favour of amalgamation or federation "... with any Trade Union or Unions catering for distributive and/or allied workers... provided that the

Executive Council considers that such . . . would be in the interests of our present membership". The resolution was thus widely drawn to cover the whole field of distribution and other trades. But what the delegates had in sight was not a blanket merger but one with a specific Union — that of the Shop Assistants. The qualification at the end of the resolution brought into the open discontent at the failure to make any progress along that road. There were charges from the floor and the platform that the Executive Council was, in effect, "dragging its feet" and the "interests of our present membership" phrase was suspected as a loophole through which any agreement could be frustrated. Two members of the Council said there was "procrastination" and "division" among their number. J. Halls-worth said he was opposed to the resolution on the grounds that "It gets you no further than you are today, than you were twelve months ago, or even five years ago". The charges were rebutted but they undoubtedly reflected a feeling of frustration that so little headway had been made.

Eventually, standing orders were suspended, the first resolution rejected and a substitute proposal moved "That the Executive Council be instructed to communicate with the National Union of Shop Assistants and other kindred organisations with a view to amalgamation . . . as speedily as possible". The result was to be reported to a special delegate meeting or to the next ADM. This resolution was carried by 52,303 votes to 21,774.

There was no "procrastination" in carrying out the instruction, but the ADM of 1931 showed a surprising lack of fervour for the merger it had demanded so vigorously in 1930. Agreement between the NUDAW and Shop Assistants' Executives had been reached in good time for NUDAW's annual meeting. Looking at the terms in retrospect, it can be seen that NUDAW, which was much the larger Union, had been generous in the provisions for control, finance, staff and other sensitive factors. For three years the two Executives (which were equal in number) were to form a combined Executive, with NUDAW having no numerical advantage beyond the casting vote of the chairman. At the end of three years the members would determine the size of the new Executive. The different patterns of contributions and benefits prevailing in the two Unions were to continue for a

period until experience showed which was most popular with the members. NUDAW was to provide for the first three years the three principal elected officers — President, Industrial General Secretary and Political General Secretary, with the General Secretary of the Shop Assistants as Publicity Officer. Appointed members of the staffs of both Unions were to be retained on existing remuneration and status.

The proposals were debated on a simple resolution that they should be submitted to a ballot of the members, and the debate was one of the longest in the history of the Union, covering seventeen columns of *New Dawn*. All the old arguments were traversed again and again. That the Co-operative employee and the private trade shop assistant were oil and water — they could not mix . . . then why, it was asked, did NUDAW already spend time and money on trying to organise private trade distributive workers? . . . that private trade workers were unorganisable — their conditions could only be improved by legislation . . . that Co-operative conditions would be dragged down by a deadweight of private trade members . . . then why did the Co-ops repeatedly reproach NUDAW for not organising private trade? That the Shop Assistants were too concerned with provident benefits, and they were not a fighting Union. But had they not fought many doughty battles against private employers? And so on. The divisions were deep, and at the end of the day they were irreconcilable. The resolution was defeated by 50,026 votes to 37,404 — figures not all that much different from those in which the previous year's ADM had demanded immediate action *for* amalgamation.

Against that vote, however, amalgamation seemed a dead duck. But it would not lie down — for within six years a scheme not dissimilar to that of 1931 was again before the ADM.

This time it was approved by the 1937 annual meetings of NUDAW and the Shop Assistants' Union and went to the ballot required by law. And this time it was the democracy of the ballot box that defeated the project. NUDAW met both the 50 per cent and the 20 per cent requirement, Out of 170,395 members, 81,813 voted in favour, 15,931 against. The Shop Assistants' fell short on the 50 per cent count — a total vote of 27,042 out of 72,695 members, with 23,962 in favour, 3,080 against.

Amalgamation was to be out until the end of the war. But it did not mean renewed bitterness between the two Unions. They had a working agreement, which continued, and when war broke out two years later Maurice Hann, General Secretary of the Shop Assistants', was to record that he and J. Hallsworth were "... working in the closest co-operation ... particularly on the question of war-time problems which are common to both Unions".

POLITICS

Over politics, NUDAW could report much greater progress up to 1939. After four years of "National" government, with unemployment still at astronomical levels, with the inhumanity of the "dole" and the Means Test, the memory of the first fleet mutiny in the Royal Navy for 134 years when, in September, 1931, the seamen of the Atlantic Fleet at Invergorden refused to put to sea in protest against cuts in Service pay, with rampant depression in industry, with all these and other arguments for a change of Government, Labour had reason to hope for electoral victory when the General Election came in 1935. For the Party the result was disappointing. Although there was a large increase in the Labour vote over 1931, the number of seats won was only 154, with four Independent Labour Party and one Communist. There was 20 Liberals. The Tories won 387 seats outright, plus 40 odd satellites (National Liberal, National Labour).

For the Union, however, the result was heartening. Ellen Wilkinson regained Jarrow for Labour, J. Jagger entered Parliament for Clayton (Manchester), W. A. Burke won Burnley, W. A. Robinson won St. Helens and the indestructable R. J. Davies retained Westhoughton for the seventh successive election. To these could be added H. Midgley, who, via the Parliamentary Panel, was a Union nominee for the Northern Ireland Parliament (which had different election arrangements from those for the rest of the country.) He was the Member for the Dock Division of Belfast.

J. Jagger, MP, gave up the position of Chief Organising Secretary, which he had held since 1929, retaining, however, the Presidency, to which he had been elected in 1919. He was succeeded by A. W. Burrows (Midland Divisional Organiser), with G. Beardsworth (Cheshire and North Wales Divisional Organiser) as Assistant Organising Secretary.

Contracting-in for political contributions had begun in 1928, when 74 per cent of the Union's membership had signed the necessary form. By 1939 the percentage was 87, a fine record for a Union whose membership was widely scattered and in many cases worked in very small groups. In 1933 the political contribution was increased from 1/6d. to 2/-d. per member per annum, amended two years later to $\frac{1}{2}$ p per week.

One great shadow lay over the political scene of the thirties — the increasing power of Fascism and the threat of a second World War. Or, what was even more frightening, the apparent ability of the dictators to take over Europe without any real resistance. Benito Mussolini had seized power in Italy with a *coup d'etat* in 1922. But he was a pigmy compared with Adolph Hitler, who became dictator of Germany in 1933. Almost overnight he destroyed the once strong German Socialist, Trades Union, Communist and Co-operative Movements. His nightmare racialism and his conviction that the Germanic *Volk* were destined to become the master race, expressed in his book *Mein Kampf*, had been dismissed as the posturings of a half-mad visionary. They were soon to be seen as the day-to-day policies of a dictator ruling without any effective challenge over a powerful nation.

By the end of the thirties Germany, Italy, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Portugal, were under dictatorships, Franco was close to victory in Spain, the Balkan countries were becoming satellites of the two senior dictators and Japan was successfully pursuing a similar policy of aggression in Asia.

How to combine peace with resistance to Hitler was a problem never absent from the Labour Movement's thinking and controversies of the period. Some argued for a United Front of all anti-Fascist forces to bring down the Tory Government and seek through the League of Nations to mobilise overwhelming power against the dictators. Others contended that such an alliance of Labour, ILP, Liberals and Communists would never hold together. A better course, they maintained, was to strive for a straight Labour Government. Russia was obviously a key factor in any common front against Fascism. But there were deep suspicions in Labour ranks that the British and French Governments were lukewarm in seeking a Soviet alliance, and hoped that Hitler could be induced to divert his

ambitions eastward.

Communist members in NUDAW and other Unions were foremost in demanding a pact with Russia and other potential victims of aggression. For their other diverse activities attempts were made in the Trades Union Movement to restrict the activities of Communists, but NUDAW resisted any such moves on the grounds that the rules gave power to deal with any members who sought to subvert Union policies. Western Communists in general turned a somersault after 23rd August, 1939, when the German-Russian Non-Aggression Pact was signed. The war in the West which followed was then denounced as an imperialist adventure. They back-somersaulted in 1941 when Hitler struck at the Soviet Union.

All these influences were strongly reflected in NUDAW during the tense and troubled years of the mid and late thirties. All were expressed in speeches and resolutions at successive annual meetings. For a United Front, for a general strike in the event of war, for a ban on German goods (called for by the TUC), against the wicked farce of the non-intervention agreement which denied the Spanish Government the right to buy arms, against British rearmament, denouncing the successive and successful aggressions of Hitler, Mussolini and their Japanese allies. But as freedom died in one country after another the conviction was growing that attempts to placate the dictators only increased their appetite for conquest. In 1935 the TUC and the Labour Party, in condemning the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, accepted economic sanctions and the use of force through the League of Nations to halt the aggressor. At the conference of each body NUDAW delegates had supported this decision. A number of Union branches took the unusual course of requesting a special delegate meeting where an attempt was made to challenge the Union vote at the TUC and Labour Party. But by a large majority (83,688 to 12,490) the delegates' action at those conferences was endorsed. It was unlikely that the vote troubled the dreams of Mussolini or Hitler. But small straws can signal a rising wind, and this decision by a Union with NUDAW's pacific and anti-war tradition was a sign that the wind of resistance was rising in the West.

Other causes prominent in the thirties — superannuation, membership rights, etc., — were mainly of a non-political

character and have been described in previous chapters.

THE NEW DAWN: EDUCATION

In 1934 L. Lumley retired from the position of editor of *The New Dawn* and Publicity Manager. He had been a Union member since the foundation year of 1891, was President of the Oldham Industrial Branch at 21, became the Union's first organiser in 1906; a unique record. No immediate successor was appointed, the General Secretary acting as editor-in-Chief of the Journal until in August, 1935, Cyril Hamnett was appointed editor and placed in charge of publicity.

Circulation had hovered round the 13,000 mark for a long time, and did not keep pace with increasing membership. This was a matter of concern to the Executive, conscious of the fact that the pioneering generation was passing on, and that it was of prime importance to ensure that a new generation was aware of the Union's traditions and principles, and in touch with its manifold activities.

The introduction of more pages and features and a renewed circulation drive raised the print to 17,500 in 1935. A NUDAW news service was introduced in the same year to maintain contact with the Press and other media. By 1938 *New Dawn* circulation had passed the 19,000 mark and when war broke out a year later arrangements were made to supply free copies to branches for members in the Forces. A similar arrangement for employees was made with the *Co-operative News* by many retail societies and on land or on sea, from the jungles of Burma to the chilly mess decks of Atlantic convoys, the two publications kept Co-operative employees in touch with home and peacetime job.

The Union's two earlier monthly journals (*The Co-operative Employee* and *The AUCE Journal*) had been printed by the National Co-operative Publishing Society. When *New Dawn* began as a fortnightly, printing was transferred to the Labour Press, Manchester. In 1926 printing returned to the NCPS (now Co-operative Press Limited) and the Union's publication is still printed there in its present newspaper format and new title of *Dawn*. In 1928 the price was reduced from 2d. to 1d.

Educational work continued to be carried out mainly through the National Council of Labour Colleges. The scheme began modestly in 1923 when 251 NUDAW students attended one or

more of the 293 classes available, 34 took correspondence courses and 540 attended lectures. A year later the number of Union class students was 1,025, 116 were taking correspondence courses, and adding in day and weekend schools, plus lectures to Union branches, the total number of students was 3,322. Five years later the total for 1930 had slipped back to 2,734, of which correspondence courses (584) were the biggest single group. By 1939 the total number of students was 4,541, almost half of whom (2,135) were on correspondence tuition.

Year by year the Union sent contingents of rank and file members to the annual NCLC and TUC summer schools. There had been suggestions that it should run its own national summer school, but that was not to come until the educational plan was revised after the second World War. Financial or other help was given to members who won TUC scholarships to Ruskin College, or to other appropriate centres of further education. For many years in succession A. W. Petch lectured at the TUC school on "The machinery of a modern Trade Union". Indirectly, the Union became involved in the Co-operative Union's very widespread provision of correspondence or class technical training for Co-operative employees, when in 1932 Co-operative educational machinery was reorganised under a *National Educational Council*, on which NUDAW was represented.

FEDERATIONS

As AUCE branches began to multiply earlier in the century, so, too, did Union activists in various districts begin to look for means of meeting together to discuss common problems. This desire was expressed from around 1911 in the formation of federations.

The Executive Council recognised the need and drew up model rules in 1912. The objects of a federation were to include any duties allocated by the Executive or District Committee, special attention to weak branches, pooling arrangements for representation at the ADM and other conferences to help branches which could not afford to send delegates. Boundaries were to be decided by the then District Councils, which were in each case to appoint one member to a federation committee. Funds could be raised by an affiliation fee of 1d. per member per annum, with a maximum of 2d. and in all matters concern-

ing Union policy federations were to act on the instructions of the District Council.

The Executive Council, while willing to encourage anything which promoted democratic participation in Union affairs, appeared to have some fears that federations might develop as an alternative to the District Councils. Some members suspected they were mainly a platform for candidates in the Union's elections. So for some years federations had a sort of twilight existence, recognised as being of, but not quite in, the official machinery of the Union. Their number waxed and waned, some having only a brief existence, others settling into permanency. On the whole, however, the number tended to grow.

Many of them were doing a good job, in line with the Union's concern for democratic discussion and wide member participation. Reports of federation conferences, one day and weekend schools, annual dinners, are plentiful in the columns of *New Dawn* in the twenties and thirties. From 1921 onwards they began to press for official recognition through branch resolutions at the Union's annual meetings. It is probable that their claim was not helped by moves in the twenties to replace the Union's Divisional structure with the smaller areas of federations. The argument continued at other "annuals" until in 1934 a more conciliatory resolution was adopted asking the Executive to prepare a scheme for officially recognising federations as part of the machinery of the Union. This was done, and a year later the Union's Rules were altered to provide that "for the purpose of assisting the Executive Council and Divisional Councils . . . branches may form Federations", the rules of each Council to be approved by the Executive. Financial help was given from National funds. Fourteen federations, the annual report for 1935 stated, were then in existence, three in Scotland, the rest in England.

By 1940 the number was 33, located in Ayrshire; Border (Scotland); East of Scotland; Falkirk and District; Fife and Kinross; Glasgow and District; Lanarkshire; Scottish Inter-Allied; Beds. and Bucks.; Birmingham; Bristol and District; Cheshire, North Wales and North Staffs; Cornwall; Devon; Eastern Counties; East Riding; Gloucester and Hereford; Hants., Wilts. and Dorset; Huddersfield and Calderdale; Kent; Leeds and Heavy Woollen District; Leicestershire and

East Midlands; London; Manchester; Manchester and District CWS; Northants; North East Lancashire; North Lonsdale; Nottingham; Sheffield; Shropshire and Mid-Wales; South Yorkshire; Surrey and District.

STRUCTURE AND STAFF

Little has been said up to now about the Union's staff, although it will be obvious that it must have increased in number in line with the ever-growing membership. Nor has the structure of the Union been mentioned for several chapters, and we will look at that first. In 1921 Divisions replaced the former District Councils, and by 1939 there were eleven of them — Cheshire and North Wales, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Midland, Northern, Scottish, Southern and Eastern, South Wales and Monmouthshire, South Western; Yorkshire; each with its elected Divisional Council. Among the 81 Divisional Councillors was one woman — Miss A. Brown of the Southern and Eastern Division. Membership in the Divisions varied widely, from 2,754 in South Wales and Monmouthshire to 32,471 in the Manchester Division. Although private trade membership was rapidly growing, both in numbers and the variety of trades and firms organised, the bulk of the membership in 1939 still consisted of Co-operative employees. At the top of the Union's structure was the Executive Council of 14, elected on a Divisional basis, with the two General Secretaries.

The staff enjoyed the full membership rights which the Union sought to establish in the Co-operative Movement, and officers of the Union were elected to Divisional Councils and the Executive Council. The total staff numbered 260 at 31st December, 1939, comprising 5 Central Officials (J. Hallsworth, General Secretary; W. A. Robinson, M.P., Political Secretary; A. W. Burrows, Organising Secretary; G. Beardsworth, Assistant Organising Secretary; R. A. Campbell, Principal Chief Clerk), 3 National Organisers, 11 Divisional Officers, 66 Area Organisers, 95 Central Office Clerks, 7 other clerks, 24 Divisional Office Clerks and 49 Branch Accounts Clerks.

The large number of clerks was not a reflection of bureaucracy. It was, in fact, a measure of the highly efficient financial and administrative links between Central Office, branch officials, members' subscriptions and benefit payments. Inadequate financial and administrative systems were a weakness of many

Unions and NUDAW was and is a model in the efficiency of its control over these important factors.

From time to time there were proposals at the annual meeting that specialist organisers should be assigned to particular trades. There had been developments in this direction in AUCE, e.g. national organisers for boot repairing, the meat trades, drug and chemical. But as NUDAW, the Executive Council resisted the proposal, contending that the Union was better served by general organisers, regionally based, who, in any number required, could be concentrated on any particular problem. This was not, however, to be a permanent policy, as we shall see in later pages. Many new appointments were made to the organising staff in the thirties and more were planned when, in 1939, other and sterner tasks faced the nation and the Union.

This chapter must end with a grievous loss suffered by the Union in 1935. A. W. Petch, Financial Secretary and Office Manager since 1921, died suddenly at the age of 49, eleven days after the death of his wife. His work for superannuation schemes within the Co-operative Movement had been mentioned in an earlier chapter, and he had been a tower of strength in the administrative and financial organisation of the Union. A bronze plaque was installed at "Oakley" in memory of his services to the Union.