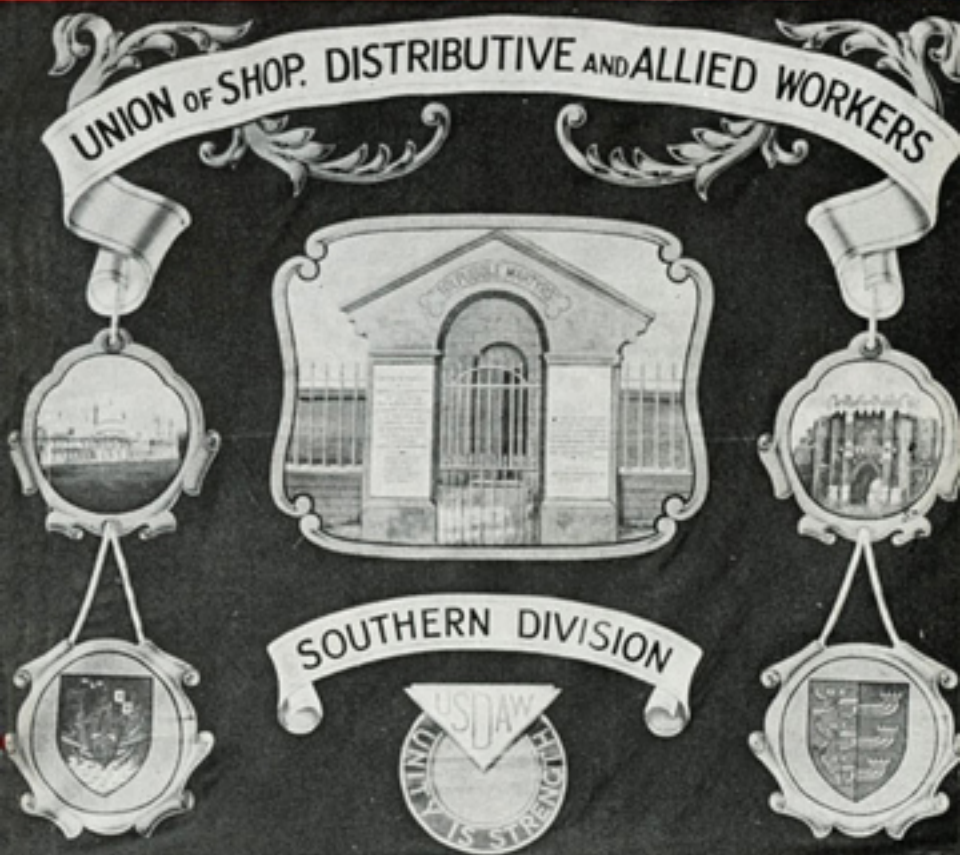


A UNION OF MANY TRADES

THE HISTORY OF USDAW



Sir William Richardson, the author of this book, was Editor of *Reynolds News/Sunday Citizen* until the closure of that newspaper in 1967. Earlier he had been Editor of the *Co-operative News*.

He joined the National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers (as USDAW then was) at the age of 16, later becoming a member of the National Union of Journalists when he transferred to newspaper work. On the closure of *Reynolds News* he became Chief Executive Officer of the printing and publishing activities of the Co-operative Press Limited; rejoining USDAW in addition to retaining membership of the NUJ. He is a Life Member of both Unions.

He is the author of *The CWS in War and Peace*, covering the history of the Co-operative Wholesale Society from 1938 to the 1970s.

A UNION OF
MANY TRADES

The History of USDAW

BY
SIR WILLIAM RICHARDSON

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS book owes much to men and women who are active in the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, and to others who have retired but are rich in memories of the days when they served the Union. It also owes a great deal to some who died many years ago but whose work is enshrined in the records at "Oakley".

You cannot, of course, learn to know a person or an organisation solely through print. But you can learn a great deal if you follow an individual year by year through reported speeches, through articles, pamphlets, interviews, the tributes of contemporaries. I have come to know those personalities of the past from the columns of *Gleanings for Members*, *The Co-operative Employee*, *The AUCE Journal*, *New Dawn* (the successive publications of the Union, now embodied in *Dawn*), from the large pamphlet literature which was a feature of the AUCE, from the printed reports of Annual Delegate Meetings and from the recollections of colleagues. Many of those stalwarts of the past appear in the following pages. I thank the memory of all of them for help in understanding and recording the forces and controversies which in an earlier generation laid the foundations of the large and diversified Union of today.

I thank also those of the present generation who have done much to make this book possible. From present and retired officials and members help and advice have readily been given, both on facts and on the accuracy of chapters or paragraphs dealing with particular events in the Union's history. I have been

greatly indebted to Lord Allen, particularly in writing of the complexities of wages relationships between Governments and Trades Unions in recent years, J. D. Hiscock and John Phillips, successively retired from the role of Assistant General Secretary, and John Flood, recently appointed under the new designation of Deputy General Secretary; all of whom have helped me in dealing with the Union's breakthrough into the multiple shop trades, and other developments of recent years.

W. H. P. Whatley, the General Secretary newly elected as this book is completed, has advised on recruitment and other problems of the years since the second World War. National Officer W. Cowan, provided information for the brief history of the Insurance Section (formerly the CIS National Branch), of which he acts as Secretary; and additional information came from F. F. Cullen, editor of the agents' journal. Other National Officers have been ever-ready to help: as have the Administration Officer, H. L. Booth, the Central Treasurer and Executive Officer, A. W. Hilton, P. Rosenfeld (Education), A. C. Heywood (Legal), Diana Jeuda (Research) and members of her staff.

Time and distance did not permit of interviews with all members of the Executive Council nor with all the eight Divisional Officers. From the Executive members I was able to meet I received much useful guidance on past and present problems of the Union. With Divisional Officers, I had informative conversations with A. Forman (Scottish Division), T. P. Callinan (Eastern), R. A. Hammond (Southern) and J. Toogood (Midlands). Retired Divisional Officer, W. A. Hutchinson, one of the few survivors of those who experienced living-in conditions, shared with me his memories of that iniquitous system and I had the opportunity to read some written recollections of another retired officer, Cecil Mortimer, of events following the 1921 merger of AUCE and the National Warehouse and General Workers' Union. W. John Jones, Divisional Officer, South Wales and Western Division, checked the references to the Union in Chapter 34, as did D. Wylie, Area Officer, Northern Ireland. Miss Esther Quinn, Scottish Divisional Council, contributed valuable research material to the same Chapter.

With the President of the Union, S. Tierney, I had a long conversation, as with the four former Presidents now living in

retirement — Walter Padley, Rodney Hanes, R. B. Seabrook and J. Hughes. All of them gave freely of their time in discussing past and future problems of the Union and/or checking my research on particular events. Two retired senior officials, Lord Hamnett and H. G. Pridmore, were equally helpful; and the latter also prepared the Index.

The closest working association during research and writing was with the Publicity and Public Relations Department under P. H. Jones. To him and his staff, Ken Edwards, Mrs. Sylvia Bertenshaw and Mrs. Bessa Head I owe much for their guidance to sources of information and on the general administrative structure of the Union. To their names I add that of Mrs. Sheila Walker, who has typed every word of this book. The accuracy of her typescripts has been a tribute to her skill in interpreting the variable quality of my handwriting. I am indebted also to A. Rathbone and his staff in the Printing Department at "Oakley" for the rapid duplication of chapters.

The Union's own library at "Oakley" has been the principal source of research material, running to many hundred pages of notes. But I also thank Roy Garratt and his staff at the Co-operative Union library in Manchester for research facilities into the days when Co-operative "servants" were first turning to Trades Unionism, and to the staff of the TUC library at Congress House, London. For general historical background extensive use was also made of the British Newspaper Library at Colindale, London, the Stockport Reference Library and the files of the *Co-operative News* and *Scottish Co-operator*.

I am grateful to the management and staff of the Co-operative Press printing works at Newcastle upon Tyne and the Sales Department in Manchester who carried out promptly and efficiently the operations involved in the production of this book.

Finally, an overall "thank you" to the many I have not been able to name, and in particular to the efficient USDAW staff at Central Office, who never failed to produce verbal or documentary answers to my many questions.

FOREWORD

by Lord Allen of Fallowfield, C.B.E.

IT has been my privilege to hold the position of Principal Officer of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers for the past 17 years, until my retirement from the full-time service of the Union, and throughout that period to have also been deeply involved, through the General Council of the Trade Union Congress, in the wider problems of the nation and the Trades Union Movement. They have been years of spectacular change in the size and scope of USDAW and in the influence that Trades Unionism generally now exerts on the affairs of the United Kingdom.

In not much more than two decades we have also seen fundamental alterations in industry and commerce. Nuclear power, the computer, plastics, entry into outer space and now *microelectronics* are a new industrial revolution in themselves. To these could be added the revolution in retailing. The pace of change has been so rapid that we scarcely realise its extent. For that reason, and also because there are lessons for today that new members and old can draw from the past, the Executive Council decided, following a recommendation made to them some two years ago, that this was a good time to tell the Union's story from the closing years of Queen Victoria's reign to the new age we are entering today.

When, as a young employee of Bristol Co-operative Society

in 1930, I was learning the rudiments of Trade Unionism in the then National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers (NUDAW) by far the greater number of the Union's members were Co-operative employees. We, together with colleagues in the then National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks (NAUSA) had been actively recruiting in the private trade sector for many years but had made only marginal impact on the national and transnational multiples, the department stores and chains, food manufacture and processing (outside the then two Co-operative Wholesale Societies) or the many specialist trades and services that are now organised by USDAW.

Neither the Co-operative Movement nor NUDAW itself was greatly different, except in size, from the structure that had been familiar to early Co-operators and to the pioneers who founded the Manchester District Co-operative Employees' Association in 1891. Had any of our progenitors in the Union paid a brief return visit to the scene of their terrestrial activities, he or she would have found much that had changed in scale but little that had altered in substance.

They would have had no difficulty in recognising both the Union and the Co-ops of 1930. Retailing practice was much as they had known it. The familiar 'divi' checks or tokens were still part of every purchase. In the Union's Annual Report they would still see the familiar names of branches that went back to the pioneer days of the nineties.

A return visit today, however, would astonish our pioneers with a scene of almost total change, not only in the Union they had helped to build, but in the nation as a whole. Not, however, I am pleased to say, change in essentials. There has been no change in the democratic base of the Union nor in its primary purpose of striving to improve the material and social standards of working people and the quality of their life. These have remained constant.

In retailing practice, however, in comparatively a few years — most certainly in my active service within the Union — we have leapt from counter service and small shops, in which our imaginary pioneers would probably have spent their working lives, to self-service and self-selection, supermarkets, hypermarkets, discount houses, shopping precincts in which almost

the entire range of human needs is gathered under one roof as a gigantic palace of the consumer.

But it is in our own Union, in USDAW (a merger in 1947 of NUDAW and NAUSA), that they would see the most striking evidence of change. Co-operative members are still a large, active and loyal section of the Union but in my term as General Secretary, our base of recruitment has shifted massively towards those fields of private trade employment that our predecessors strove so long to organise.

Also, as readers will see in one chapter of this book, the proportion of women workers in Union membership, which in the thirties hovered around 28 per cent of the total, has now risen to more than 60 per cent. The greatest change, however, has been in the Union's relationship with the national and multinational retailers and department stores.

This history shows that it was a long, hard struggle and even a few years ago it would have taken an act of faith to believe that by 1979 the Union would have substantive agreements with most of these giants of the retail scene which today are household names. Mainly, the agreements cover both their shop and store employees, in addition to those in manufacturing and warehousing.

It is pleasing to record that there are now few sections of the retail and associated trades in which USDAW is not established and many in which it has a closed shop or is the sole representative of organised workers.

None of this success has easily been achieved. Which brings me to one conclusion that can be drawn from this history — the hard core of the Union today, as in so many yesterdays, is still the activists in the branches, Divisional Councils and the Executive Council, and in the ranks of the national, divisional and area officers and other officials who have directed, planned, encouraged and given a fine example of how to administer the great march forward of the past few years. The pioneers who in 1891 went out to recruit for their infant Association can be matched by their many successors today; now, however, with women colleagues by their side and with the expertise and experience of skilled departmental staff and the back-up resources they provide.

For most of its history, USDAW has been affiliated to the

TUC and the Labour Party. Two of the four General Secretaries of the Union, of whom I am proud and privileged to be one, have presided over the TUC Congress, the other being Sir Joseph Hallsworth. Sir Alan Birch, who I succeeded in 1962, and I each presided over the Economic Committee of the General Council of the TUC. Three of the Union's MPs, Ellen Wilkinson, Wilfrid Burke and Walter Padley, have been Chairmen of the Labour Party's Annual Conference.

As I know from experience as Chairman of the Economic Committee for the past four years, the role of the TUC has become much more important since both Conservative and Labour Governments began to intervene as third parties in wage negotiations and industrial relations, and even Conservative Administrations have had to at least profess interest in national economic planning.

From the early fifties, Government guidelines on, or direct imposition of, the rate of wage increases have been the biggest single issue before the General Council and its relevant committees. For the whole of the 19th century and a large part of the 20th, national economic policy was determined by Government and employers. Today the Trades Union Movement is an essential third partner. It is a role which imposes heavy new burdens and responsibilities and offers new opportunities to lead the nation out of its present malaise. Several chapters record how USDAW has faced these new problems, particularly on wages and industrial relations.

Another strand in the Union's long history will be noted. Ours has always been a grass roots democracy. The power of decision runs direct from the branch to the Annual Delegate Meeting. Specialist trade conferences play an increasing part in the Union and are themselves derivative from the basic democratic principle. But the final decision on all matters of policy lies with the ADM, and each branch from the smallest to the largest has the right of representation. Long may it continue to be so.

Almost every major event in the Union's history features in one way or another in the pages that follow. Veteran members will be reminded of struggles and triumphs in which they took part. New members will, I hope, draw inspiration and encouragement when they see how rights and standards which we take

for granted in the Union of today were once, and not so long ago in some cases, seen as almost impossible of attainment. There are, however, still victories to be won, wrongs to be righted, none greater than the continuing scandal of low pay. In my lifetime, USDAW has substantially raised the real standards of the majority of its members, but there are still too many in or near the poverty trap. Distributive workers have not yet attained the status that is commensurate with their essential role in society. They are technicians in their own field but this is not yet reflected in career structures and training.

Even greater efforts will be necessary to win equality of opportunity for women members.

The principal employers with whom we deal now accept and respect the Union. But respect is earned by strength and our strength can only derive from unceasing vigilance in recruitment, in the scope of service we provide for members and in an efficient administration soundly based financially.

Yes, there is plenty to challenge the younger generation. There are those in the media and in politics who at times appear to be puzzled by the influence which Unions such as USDAW exert over their members. The answer, which is perhaps too simple for them to understand, is implicit in this book. It is that *many generations of working people* have learnt from experience that their only strength lies collectively in unity and that only through unity can they protect and improve their standards of living. Never was this more true than in the age we are now entering, when new technologies can wreak havoc in jobs and conditions unless their introduction is controlled and planned and when transnational companies can shift their operations round the world in search of cheaper and more docile labour.

It is trite, but nevertheless true, that in unity is strength and in the years ahead it will be needed more than at any time since the first industrial revolution.

PART 1

ORGANISING THE
UNORGANISABLE—THE
FIRST TWENTY-FOUR
YEARS

1 "LIFE IN THE SHOP" — a tale of hardship and tyranny

THE Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers is the sixth largest British Trade Union and it is third in size among the general Unions. Its membership spreads over workers in traditional food shops, modern supermarkets and hypermarkets, department stores, dairies, bakeries, breweries, laundries, food manufacturing and processing factories, dental and optical technicians, research and laboratory assistants and dozens of other manufacturing or service operations. But historically USDAW began as a Union of Co-operative employees and it was not until the end of the first World War that it expanded into a wide-ranging general Union of distributive, productive and service workers.

The story begins in the period between Queen Victoria's two Jubilees of 1887 and 1897. The Industrial Revolution had run its course of good and evil. Britain was one of the richest nations and the greatest colonial power in the world. True, increasingly severe competition from the industries of Germany and the United States was beginning to alarm a people accustomed to thinking of their country as the workshop of the world, and Socialism, after flickering faintly for many years, was again beginning to cast a red glow on the political arena. But on the whole, all seemed well for those at the top and middle of the social scale.

In his *English Social History* G. M. Trevelyan thus sums up the mood of the decade: "The Queen's Jubilees of 1887 and 1897 were celebrated by all classes with real pride and thankfulness... for the 'hungry forties' were still remembered. Manners were gentler, streets were safer, life was more humane, sanitation was improving fast, working-class housing, though still bad, was less bad than ever before. Conditions of labour had been improved, real wages had risen, hours had shortened. But unemployment, sickness and old age, not yet regularly provided for by the State, still held terrors for the workman."

“But” is the significant word in Trevelyan’s paragraph. And while no doubt all classes cheered the parades and other events of each Royal occasion, the middle and upper classes had much more to cheer about than the great majority of working people. The euphoria of the two *Jubilees concealed* poverty and insecurity for most of those who lived by their labour, and whose share in the wealth created during Victoria’s reign was either minute or non-existent. Approximately one in five manual workers had fought their way through Trades Union action to a reasonable level. But behind this elite of the working class was a great army of the unorganised and the underpaid. In 1891, when USDAW began (although under another name) there were 1,502,000 agricultural workers whose lot in terms of income and social status was possibly worse than that of their peasant ancestors of the Middle Ages. Domestic servants, including catering and hairdressing but excluding coachmen, grooms and gardeners, numbered 2,329,000, for most of whom hours were excessively long and earnings miserably low.

Distributive workers, whose story is the subject of the first part of this book, were estimated to number between 700,000 and 750,000, and were mostly employed in shops. In wages, hours and working conditions they were one of the most exploited sections of the employed population. They had greatly increased in number during the nineteenth century. The newly affluent middle-class had developed more sophisticated tastes and shops expanded to supply them. Industry and importation multiplied the quantity and variety of goods. The development of the department store, particularly in London and the larger cities, required scores and sometimes hundreds of workers to be gathered under one roof. The traditional pattern of binding one or two apprentices to a grocer or draper was declining. Shop work in most cases did not require long training or special skill, and attracted an ever-growing number of younger people.

The fact that the rewards were poor did not deter recruits. A job was a job, whatever the wage, and if you did not have the protection of a powerful Trade Union you had to take what you could get, starve or seek the death-in-life of the Poor Law. Trades Unionism was non-existent in distribution. In the shops worker competed with worker for jobs, for individual wage-

rates, for the slight chance of promotion, for commission rates, for "spiffs" (the premium given for selling more or less unsaleable goods, or special lines).

In this chapter we shall look at the hours, wages and general conditions of distributive workers at the end of the last century; firstly, from the standpoint of the greater number who were employed by private firms, secondly from that of Co-operative employees, who formed a rapidly growing section of distributive employment, and were the founders of what has since become the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers.

Socially, the status of the male shop worker was low. In Victorian literature he was the "counter-jumper", lacking the "manly" qualities of the industrial worker. Hours of work were long in all industries, but in distribution they were brutally so. And in most of the drapery stores work was carried on in conditions which medical men warned were dangerous to health, particularly for women, and inevitably shortened the expectancy of life.

To sit when not serving a customer was forbidden in many stores by the house rules which governed and also terrorised the assistants. For most of the working day they had to stand — or run, if brought back from a brief meal break to serve an exigent customer. A vivid picture of "Life in the Shop" was drawn in 1898 in a series of articles published by the *Daily Chronicle* (many years later to become part of the now defunct *News Chronicle*). The articles were a first-class example of what nowadays would be called investigative journalism. Although written by a member of the paper's staff they were basically the work of a quiet little woman employed in the drapery trade who moved from job to job, noting in minute detail the conditions in which the assistants worked and lived. She was Margaret Bondfield, who carried out her under-cover assignment at the request of the Women's Industrial Council. Later she was assistant secretary of the Shop Assistants' Union, became a Labour MP, and was the first woman Cabinet Minister. Since little of her data was controverted in subsequent official enquiries, we shall draw on her research for much of the first part of this chapter.

In one of two of the "better-class" West-end shops the *Chronicle* articles reported that the average hours actually

worked were about 67½ in the winter months, 69 to 70 in the summer. In the other case the hours were: August to March 61½, March to June 63, July summer sale (first week) 68, February (winter sale) 64. In suburban shops carrying on miscellaneous trades it was reported that "... the drapers and grocers are the hardest worked. The hours are anything from 75 per week up to 85 and in some districts 90 or more".

Nor could the exhausted worker, at the end of the day, take his tired body to a home or a room of his own. He, and more than 400,000 of his colleagues, male and female, lived on the job. "Living in" prevailed in hundreds of stores, large and small. It was a method of paying wages in kind through the provision of accommodation and meals that were often abominable and rarely provided more than a bleak minimum of comfort. A Committee of Enquiry into the operation of the Truck Acts (which did not apply to shops) was set up in 1906, and was told that an estimated 400,000 to 450,000 shop assistants thus worked, ate, lived and slept at the will of their employers.

Men and women could be packed half-a-dozen to a score in a room, sometimes two in a bed. In a great many cases there was minimal provision of sanitary and washing facilities. They were subject to capricious fines and deductions. One large store had 198 rules with fines attached. A common penalty was sixpence for "unnecessary talking and noise in bedrooms". (One wonders whether this applied to the harsh cough of the many who contracted tuberculosis under those unhealthy conditions). Instant dismissal from a well-known West-end store was the penalty for "any assistant allowing a customer to go away unserved without first appealing to the buyer or a superintendent". Presumably, the counterman or woman was expected to forcibly detain an impatient customer while frantically beckoning for a buyer or superintendent. A more "merciful" version of the rule in other stores substituted a 6d fine for allowing a customer to escape. Not uncommon was a catch-all rule which a bullying shop-walker could interpret as he wished — a sixpenny fine "for unbusinesslike conduct".

The employers who drafted these rules (and frequently charged their workers 6d for a copy) were not necessarily callous men. Many of them had come up through the same system and, like most "self-made men" considered that if they

had succeeded under these conditions, others could do the same. But if they were not consciously cruel they were incredibly insensitive in stamping out any touch of domesticity in the lives of their assistants. In some of the rules it was an offence "to put flowers in water-glasses or bottles". One firm, acknowledged for being among the best in London in the provision it made for living-in, still ruled "No needlework to be done in bedrooms". In many cases no pictures or photographs, nothing to remind of home and family, could be allowed "to disfigure the walls of bedrooms". And while no employer dared formally to forbid assistants to marry, it was generally known that to do so meant the sack.

Against such a background it is not surprising that the only common factor about wages was that invariably they were low. "Each makes his own terms" said the *Daily Chronicle* writer and in conditions where each worker must bargain for himself, secrecy about individual earnings was the general practice, encouraged by the employers. P. C. Hoffman, who became a Labour MP but was for many years an officer of the Shop Assistants' Union (now merged with USDAW), recounts how William Whiteley, in personally engaging staff for his great store in Westbourne Grove, London, always ended with the question "What is the lowest possible salary you will take?" But Margaret Bondfield did succeed in unearthing some startling examples of beggarly payment. In one firm assistants were expected to work for a period in return for board and lodgings only. In another they would be engaged on a salary of, say £30, but at the end of two months this would be reduced by £10 and a commission of 1½ per cent given. A "well-known and very high-class West-end draper" paid only £20 starting salary to men, whatever their experience. In a store with twenty-eight women assistants, twenty-four were paid between £10 and £25, plus premiums which ranged from £8 - £18.

Finally, there was The Terror — the threat of instant dismissal. Many workers at that period were subject to dismissal at a minute's notice. But only shop assistants living-in could find themselves in a single minute without a job or a roof over their heads. At any hour of any day, they could be ordered to pack and get off the premises. A great many London assistants came from Wales and the West of England. For them there was

the terrifying possibility of finding themselves homeless on the streets of London, perhaps on a winter's day, and without even the fare to carry them back to their native place.

Most of the nineteenth century shop workers, particularly in drapery, endured these conditions and, frequently died young or left the trade at an early age. Charles Booth, in his survey of *Life and Labour of the People in London* (carried out between 1887 and 1892), when analysing the Census returns, noted that "While 49 per cent of the men returned as drapers are under 25 years of age, no less than 65 per cent of the women are below that age".

A few assistants clawed their way upwards to become shopwalkers or buyers (and were themselves then vulnerable to hungry competitors treading on their heels). Even fewer would become the Lords of All, one of the shop owners who determined wages, exercised the power of dismissal and drew up the rules that governed the waking and sleeping hours of their staffs.

It is hard today to realise that within living memory these conditions were a way of life for tens of thousands of ordinary people. They were not without sympathisers and some employers were opposed to living-in. Among public figures, George Bernard Shaw, Mary MacArthur, Ramsay Macdonald, H. W. Massingham (the reforming editor of *The Nation*), H. G. Wells (who had been apprenticed to a draper and after two years of living-in ran home to his mother. He tells the story in his novel *Kipps*), prominent clergymen, medical men, progressive store owners who had abandoned the system: all denounced the serfdom of the shops. But in the end it was only when the shop workers belatedly turned to Trade Union action, principally through the National Union of Shop Assistants, that the walls of tyranny began to crumble.

So much for the private sector of distribution. We now turn to those workers whose story is in part the special purpose of this book — the employees of the Co-operative Movement. The living-in system scarcely existed in the Co-ops. Co-operative societies in general, with some bad exceptions, were better employers than the average and by the early eighteen-nineties a few societies in Northumberland and Durham were introducing the 48-hour week. But many societies fell short of the

standards which should have been observed by a Movement which itself had been founded as a challenge to capitalist exploitation of working people. The consumer dividends of the retail societies, particularly in the North, were then very high, and in some cases had become almost the sole preoccupation of managers and committees. Management Committees insisted that they must follow the level of shop hours and wages prevailing in their localities, however bad, and some side-stepped their principles with the argument that where wages in local employment generally were low, they could not be any better in the Co-op.

By the eighteen-nineties the Movement was firmly established, based on the principles successfully launched in 1844 by the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers. It was still growing, not only in total membership but in the number of societies. In 1890 123 new societies were registered under the Industrial and Provident Societies Acts. Of them, about one third, judging from their titles, were probably consumer retail societies (the balance included many building and land societies and such oddities as the South Shields and District Hire Purchase Society, the Bull's Head Inn Permanent Money Lending Society and the Joint Stock Trust Society). But while more than 1,400 consumer societies were listed in Co-operative Union statistics for 1890, many were very small.

In the Midland Section of the Union 119 out of 194 societies had fewer than 250 members. Only four had more than 5,000 — Leicester, Dudley, Derby and Lincoln. In the Northern Section (mainly Northumberland and Durham) 39 societies out of 130 were under 250 in membership. But the Section also included 40 with 1,000 members or more, of which Newcastle upon Tyne was one of the Co-operative giants of its day with 10,089 members. Bishop Auckland came close with 8,541. The North-Western Section (which then included much of Yorkshire, now in the North-Eastern Section) had 164 societies out of 436 in the under 250 category. But the Section towered above all others in the number of societies with over 1,000 members (97), and it could boast seven of the giants — Barnsley British (12,228), Bradford (10,336), Leeds (26,846 — biggest membership in the Movement), Bolton (15,080), Manchester Equitable (11,936), Oldham Industrial (10,566) and Rochdale Pioneers (11,352).

Huddersfield, Bury and Pendleton were all within a few dozen of the ten thousand. Only two other societies (apart from Newcastle upon Tyne, already mentioned) had passed the 10,000 — Aberdeen Northern (11,169) and Plymouth (16,902).

Like Topsy, the Movement had "just growed", and in growing it had given no systematic attention to clarifying its relations with those it employed. Employees could be members of their societies (although in most cases they were denied the right to vote or seek election to the management or other committees) and the theory was that they could not be exploited by a body of which they were part. But a general theory can have particular applications, and no attempt had been made to recognise in national or sectional scales of wages and hours that employees were members with a special relationship to their societies.

The man behind the counter or in the warehouse rarely appears in Co-operative Congress reports until the eighteen-nineties. Between 1870 and 1888, scores of discussion papers were presented at the annual Co-operative Congresses and, whether actually read or not, were printed in the report of the Congress proceedings. They covered almost every subject affecting the Movement — except the position and role of shop employees. Not, however, that the Co-operative worker was entirely ignored in the Congress debates; if anything, the role of one minority group absorbed *too much attention*. Long, and sometimes impassioned, debates were staged on the esoteric issue of "bonus on wages" (ie, a share in the profits), mainly for Co-operative workers in the productive factories of the CWS, the Scottish CWS and, to a lesser extent, of retail societies. This issue was kept before the Movement by the Christian Socialists, a group of clergymen and lawyers who repudiated what they regarded as the un-Christian basis of the factory system established by the Industrial Revolution. In its place they urged the establishment of self-governing Co-operative workshops, in which workers would share in the control and profits. The group included the Rev. Charles Kingsley (author of *Westward Ho!* and *Hereward the Wake*), Thomas Hughes (author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*), Edward Vansittart Neale, first secretary of the Co-operative Union, J. M. Ludlow, who became Registrar of Friendly Societies, and the Rev. F. D. Maurice, who was the inspiration and leader of

the group. Many of these "productive societies", as they were called, were established and a few, although in a modified form, are still in existence. James Dyson, the first president of the Co-operative Employees' Association which developed into the present *USDAW*, was for many years manager of a productive society, the Working Hatters' Co-operative Association.

The Christian Socialists exercised great influence over Co-operative opinion, and they had earned it. They had been largely responsible for securing the passage of the Industrial and Provident Societies Act of 1852, which gave a legal identity and protection to registered societies, and for the Act of 1862, which permitted one society to invest in another and thus made possible the formation of the Co-operative Wholesale Society. They were always on call when the Movement required help in Parliament or along what are now called the corridors of power. But battle was joined when the CWS began to open its own factories and contended that the profits rightly belonged to the consumer and should be returned to him (more usually, her) through the CWS dividend.

The argument raged for years. While it centred mainly around productive workers, there was a somewhat lukewarm acceptance that distributive workers, too, should not be denied their share, and the principle was adopted by some retail societies. In too many cases, however, it degenerated into an excuse for failing to pay a decent basic wage. Eventually, the issue died of its own accord, as experience proved that the two Co-operative Wholesale Societies were by far the most successful means of carrying out Co-operative production on a national scale, and the productive workers of retail societies — bakers, tailors, clogmakers, etc. — found Trade Union action a more effective means of improving their earnings.

The Christian Socialists were a grand body of dedicated and unselfish men. But it must be admitted that their particular doctrine absorbed so much Co-operative energy for so long a period that it probably postponed by many years the attention which the Movement should have been giving to the main body of its employees — the men and women in the shops.

We saw earlier that many Co-operators serving on the committees of retail societies genuinely believed that there

could be no need for a Trade Union among Co-operative workers. That view was shared by not a few of the men who founded on 18th March, 1891, the Manchester District Co-operative Employees' Association, the progenitor of the present USDAW. They knew that there was increasing dissatisfaction among "Co-operative servants" (as the term then was) over wages, hours and conditions. But as they saw it, all that was necessary was to go to societies with a reasonable and documented case in harmony with Co-operative principles and their grievances would be remedied. They were not wrong in the long term. But to breathe life and general acceptance into a principle can often take much hard negotiating, in which muscle as well as principle is required. In future chapters we shall see how the gradual realisation of these facts influenced the policies that led the MDCEA into wider and rougher fields than had been foreseen by the founders.

2

THE BEGINNING OF REVOLT

WE have now looked at the position of distributive employment in private trade and in the Co-operative Movement. In the first case the picture was dark with hardship and exploitation. In the second, it was very far from what it should have been. In both cases the traditional remedy of the worker was Trades Unionism, and by the last two decades of the nineteenth century the Union Movement was strongly established in an important, though still limited, area of the economy. But it was no longer the fiery crusade of an earlier period, and showed little interest in the plight of shop assistants and other unorganised workers.

By the eighteen eighties the Movement was concentrated mainly in the metal working, mining and cotton textile trades, plus a large variety of small Unions of men engaged in specialist crafts (eg, Liverpool Mast and Block Makers' Association — 120 members, Granite Workers' Protection Union, Aberdeen — 380 members, Scissor Grinders' Society, Sheffield — 200 members). Sidney and Beatrice Webb in their *History of Trade Unionism* calculated that of approximately 1,500,000 Union members in the United Kingdom in 1892, half were employed in cotton, coal mining and engineering, and only about one manual worker in five was organised.

Trades Unionists and other reformers had almost despaired of many large bodies of workers, distributive workers in particular, ever organising to improve their lot. The only reference at any length to distributive workers that this writer could find in TUC reports of the period occurs in the presidential address of R. D. B. Ritchie at the Dundee Congress of 1889, and even he appeared to consider shop assistants incapable of Trade Union action. "How, apart from legislation", he asked, "can the case of the shop assistants be met? Hitherto shopkeepers' assistants have been exempted from participation in the beneficent legislation which has been

extracted from Parliament in behalf of other classes of workers. Future legislation must, however, be more comprehensive, embracing as nearly as can be all classes of wage-earners”.

His remedy for long hours was the shift system. He was “. . . not prepared to say that shops shall only remain open for eight hours each day . . . A reduction of the hours of labour must be effected by other means than that. A wider adaptation of the shift system to suit the exigencies of the various trades seems to be a simple and effective method of overcoming objections”.

No clarion call there to exploited workers to unite and seek salvation through their own exertions! Socialists of the period seemed equally despondent of shop workers ever acting collectively, as witness this extract from a Fabian Society pamphlet of 1898 on *Shop Life and its reform*, which declared “. . . no other class of workers have shown themselves so careless of their responsibilities towards themselves as shop assistants . . .”.

So — outside Trades Union ranks remained the great army of the unorganised (many said the unorganisable). Our concern is with the shop workers, but the wilderness was crowded with other trades where conditions ranged from the abominable to the barely tolerable. General labourers, home workers, most agricultural workers, dock and riverside workers, many clerks, employees of the numerous “small masters” who existed in scores of trades, many railway workers, women workers, domestic servants; they were joined in a common tragedy of low wages, long hours, absence of job security, and with charity and the Poor Law as the only “social services” available to them.

Nor, for many years, did the leaders of the long established Unions appear to be concerned that so great an army of the working people was outside Trades Union ranks. The “Front Bench”, as the Webbs called the leaders of the TUC, was composed of able and sincere men. Most of them had spent the greater part of their lives in building up craft or occupational Unions. They had fought many battles, and won great victories, for Trades Union rights in their earlier days.

At the beginning of the century, from 1799 to 1824, the Combination Acts had legally prohibited any collective action

to raise wages or reduce hours. Even to talk about action was an offence and many workers went to prison for daring to preach organisation, or had to submit to the humiliation of pleading with their employers to withdraw prosecutions begun under the Acts. By the end of the century, however, Trades Unionism had *come out from* under the shadow of the law, and for the skilled workers had won many improvements in wages and conditions. The "Front Bench" of the Movement was proud of the legal and respected place that had been secured in society. But respectability often breeds complacency, and complacency was the prevailing mood. Leaders of the TUC just did not want to know that for at least four-fifths of the working class Trades Unionism meant nothing and had done nothing.

It took the "New Unionism" of the eighteen-eighties and nineties, and the work of such social investigators as Charles Booth — mentioned in the previous chapter — and Seebohm Rowntree (*Poverty: A Study of Town Life*, published in 1899) to galvanise the Movement into the energy and policies more appropriate to its purpose and traditions. The "New Unionists" were led (and sometimes divided) by a number of middle and working-class Socialists which included H. M. Hyndman, Marx, Ben Tillett, Tom Mann, William Morris, Annie Besant, John Burns, Keir Hardie, the Webbs, Will Thorne. Those of the group who were active Trades Unionists as well as Socialist politicians sought to put more muscle into the TUC and to direct it into wider fields; both through international links abroad, political action and more energetic industrial policies at home. Congresses of the late eighties became a battleground between the "Front Bench" and the new militants. They preached Socialism and also practised Trades Unionism by going to the reputedly unorganisable masses, organising them, and leading them to victories that echoed round the country.

Nowhere would the news of these victories be followed more attentively than among the underpaid and the overworked (except perhaps among those members of the middle-class who saw the spectre of Red Revolution peering through the window). News of the East London girls employed in the unhealthy occupation of making lucifer matches; girls who probably never previously had organised anything more ambitious than a tea party, but who came out in 1888 against intolerable

conditions and under the leadership of Annie Besant won their strike in two weeks. Even more resounding news from the London docks where in 1889 thousands of casual workers, led by Ben Tillett and some of his Socialist allies, closed the Port of London for four weeks and won the "dockers' tanner" as an hourly rate. Equally remarkable, in the same year, news that without having to strike, the newly formed Gas Workers' and General Labourers' Union, led by Will Thorne, had brought about a reduction in the working day from twelve hours to eight, and had won a slight increase in wages.

Shop workers played no part in these great events. But the industrial drama of the eighties must deeply have influenced thoughtful men in both the private and the Co-operative sectors of distribution. Here was clear evidence that no body of workers, however apparently fragmented and demoralised, was outside the scope of successful collective action. The message would be pondered and discussed — probably in whispers — in many a living-in dormitory and more openly in Co-operative stores. Within three years of the London dock strike the Manchester District Co-operative Employees' Association was formed on 18th March, 1891 — and eleven days later the National Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks (as it eventually became known) came into existence at a Birmingham meeting on March 29th and 30th.

The two Unions existed side by side for more than half a century. There were periods of conflict between them, particularly over the organisation of Co-operative workers, and at other times they co-operated on issues common to all their members. Eventually, in 1947, they merged to form the present Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers. But we have to pass through two world wars and a host of other problems and achievements before we reach that happy event. This chapter ends in March, 1891, when shop workers at long last have their feet on a road that their brothers in many other industries had travelled since early in the century.

3

FROM MDCEA TO AUCE

IN the last chapter the Manchester District Co-operative Employees' Association was brought onto the stage. We must now back-track a little in time to study the events that led up to the historic decision of 18th March, 1891. There is still available a fairly full documentation from which, with a little imagination, one can trace the cautious movement of "Co-operative servants" from isolation into collective action. The New Unionism was the catalyst. But it worked on discontents that had been simmering over a long period of time. The feeling that committees of management took their "servants" too much for granted, that hours were too long, wages too low, and resentment that both were arbitrarily determined by committees. The feeling that societies were becoming so obsessed with dividend that in thus seeking to return to the consumer the margin between wholesale and retail prices they were ignoring the essential role and legitimate interests of their employees.

No doubt these grievances were often locally expressed when employees of neighbouring societies met each other on business or at social or sporting events. They surfaced nationally in the pages of *The Co-operative News*, which published a weekly Employees' Column (actually, a page) consisting of news and letters. A few excerpts will show the way the wind was blowing.

In the *News* issue of 20th June, 1885, a letter from "A.C.B." asked for information on times of opening and closing of Co-operative stores in the North; also if a weekly half holiday was given or "only from four or five o'clock one day in the week" (a question which indicates that when some societies claimed they gave a half holiday, it wasn't quite what most people would understand the words to mean). In subsequent issues during July and August information on hours came from several sources, of which one will be quoted. From "one of the largest societies in Northumberland" a correspondent wrote

that they opened every morning at 8.00 a.m. except Wednesday, when the time was 7.00 a.m. They closed Monday, Tuesday and Saturday at 6.00 p.m., Wednesday 11.00 a.m. (the half holiday), Thursday 7.00 p.m. and Friday 9.00 p.m. Which makes 58 hours, with 13 hours on the Friday.

"A.C.B.", in a further letter, found that on these hours Northumberland employees were "singularly favoured" compared with fellow workers on the "monotonous round" from 7.30 a.m. to 7.30 p.m. and 10.15 on Saturdays, which assuming him to be writing about his own conditions, gave him a working week of $62\frac{3}{4}$ hours, with no half holiday. And, as we shall see later in this chapter, $62\frac{3}{4}$ hours was far from being the limit.

A correspondence on hours soon broadens out to include wages and *News* readers were quick to raise that topic. "Practical", in the paper's issue of 22nd August, 1885, cited "a large society in the Midlands" which paid managers from 18/- to 30/- a week, "most of them having less than 20/-". A writer over the initial "F" suggested that "a union of storekeepers . . . would not only result in their material benefit but also [be] to the benefit of all interested in the Co-operative Movement". This brought an offer from "Unionist" to co-operate with any store managers "who would undertake to carry out the formation of a society". J. Goldsmith, of Hampton, Middlesex, wrote approving of the idea and declared that "A Co-operative employees' union would show directors that their servants are not slaves of the stores, but that the well-being of the one is bound up with the other". W. Rayner, of Hammersmith, recommended "... more storekeepers' conferences and a closer union between them and committees". He added "It is painful to witness the domineering way in which committeemen talk to employees".

In Yorkshire, it was reported, there were societies which paid wages by a method not unlike the "butty" system that operated in some industries and coalmines, in which a ganger contracted for so much work and was responsible for hiring labour and paying wages. In these societies branch managers were paid a commission ranging from 4d to 6d in the £, leaving them to hire and fire at will. This system continued well into the twentieth century, although before it disappeared AUCE had in some cases established that the Union rate must be paid to

shopmen.

For year after year wages, hours, conditions and status were the principal subject of the Employees' Page. But letters to *The Co-operative News* would only be the tip of the iceberg. They appeared with such regularity over so many years that they must have measured a growing volume of discontent expressed whenever employees discussed their jobs and conditions. Sick and benefit clubs were then common in societies and they may frequently have become a forum for ventilating wider grievances. There were false starts on the road to united action. A. Hewitt (first secretary of the MDCEA and of its successor, the Amalgamated Union of Co-operative Employees), in describing the establishment of the Association, refers to "experimental associations" which were still-born or died an early death. Moreover, in spite of the harsh words that have been used about committeemen, in many boardrooms there were members who sympathised with employee aspirations and were willing to help in efforts to harmonise relations between committees and "servants".

One such development, reported in *The Co-operative News* of 6th April, 1889, was a conference of the Manchester District Co-operative Association — one of the area groupings into which the Co-operative Union divided its society members — jointly attended by representatives of committees and employees, at which the subject was "The Co-operative Employee: his position and influence in the Movement". The speaker, J. Thompson, secretary of the Ashton-under-Lyne Society, accepted that as buyers and sellers of labour, committees and employees were opposed to each other, but in the Co-operative world this should be subordinate to the relation of "... fellow labourers in a great and noble effort to improve the conditions of the people". But employees "... are in many cases not looked upon as very important factors in the Co-operative world but treated more as divi-making machines". Strong stuff — but qualified by the speaker deploring that few employees "... take any real interest in the principles of the Movement or know or even care to know anything of the nature or working of those principles". He suggested that committees should form classes for teaching the history of Co-operation, not only to their employees but (a sharp barb, this) to *themselves*.

The chairman of the conference was a Mr. Hollingworth, Manager of the Pendleton Society, who probably undid whatever good had been done by the speaker by remarking that he "... did not know that Co-operative employees had much to complain about... the chief thing for employees to do was to study their employer's interests, keep the shops tidy and make the most profit. It was all very well to talk about the glory of the cause, but to him the glory of the cause was to make as much profit as he could, sell as low as he could, and do a large trade". One can imagine a few mutterings as those words rolled around the conference room.

This ferment of complaints, ideas and discussion was soon to lead to action. But the first moves did not, as is widely assumed, come in the Manchester district. A. Hewitt states in a brief history of the MDCEA that the idea of an association of employees with members in many — and, ideally, all — societies originated in London in 1889, and this is confirmed by a letter in *The Co-operative News* of 30th November of that year. Signed by C. Cooper, it reports that a total of 150 employees from St. Mary Cray, Gravesend, Cambridge, Ashford, Grays, New Brampton, Brixton, Brighton, Bromley, Hastings Societies, the CWS and the Co-operative Printing Society had agreed to join a Co-operative Employees' Association. But London, too, could be challenged for the position of first in the field. In 1887 a Northumberland Co-operative Employees' Mutual Protection and Aid Association had been formed "Based on Trade Union principles" and with the purpose of securing "adequate remuneration, protection in case of oppression and to help members who are thrown out of employment". It was registered as a Trade Union in 1888, but thereafter disappears from the records. An employees' Trade Union had also been established in Bolton Society by branch managers and second shopmen in 1892. It was not registered, and was to merge with MDCEA when that organisation was converted into a registered Union. It is not uncommon, however, to find that an organisation which has given its name to a movement or a social tendency was not actually first in the field. The Co-operative priority of the Rochdale Pioneers has been questioned in both England and Scotland. What matters is: which local or regional group or association went on to become truly

national, and on that score we can safely date Trades Unionism among Co-operative employees from the formation of the MDCEA.

A series of conferences led up to the establishment of the Association. The first was held in the Co-operative Hall, Failsworth, on 21st October, 1890, and was sponsored by the Manchester District Association of the Co-operative Union. Committmen of societies as well as employees attended and to that extent Trades Unionism in the Co-operative Movement was born under the joint auspices of employers and workers. But it was a committee of employees that carried the project to fruition. They decided on an independent association for the Manchester area on the grounds that it "... will have a better chance of success than the formation of a branch of the London Association". After much debate, definite proposals were put to a meeting on CWS premises, Manchester, on 18th March, 1891, attended by thirty delegates representing employees' and societies' committees. The name "Manchester District Co-operative Employees' Association" was formally adopted, together with a code of rules. It was announced that upwards of 150 employees had signified their willingness to join.

Officers elected were: President, J. Dyson (Manchester Equitable), treasurer T. Fowe (Manchester Equitable), joint secretaries A. Hewitt (Co-operative Newspaper Society) and J. Thompson (Ashton-under-Lyne). The latter gave up his position for personal reasons in October, 1891, and thereafter A. Hewitt was sole secretary. Although the membership of the committee changed rapidly in the early years, the pioneer members are given here for the record — J. T. Watson (Droylsden), J. Bills (Eccles), J. T. Wrigley (Failsworth), A. H. Booth (Hyde), A. Winkle (Pendleton), J. Hibbert (Prestwich), W. Raw (Ringley and Kearsley), A. Morrell (Mosley).

Thus did Trade Unionism come to a Movement where many employees themselves had considered that it was unnecessary. But the first rules contained little hint of what the future was to bring. Unlike the Bolton Employees' Union, MDCEA did not immediately set its sights on the improvement of wages, hours and conditions. These problems were not mentioned, except insofar as an ambiguous reference might be read into clause (c) below. The objects of the Association were given as "... to

promote the social and intellectual welfare of its members by (a) periodical discussions and meetings for the interchange of ideas on practical and *theoretical* subjects affecting the well-being of Co-operative employees and the Movement (b) compiling and keeping a register of all members out of employment or desirous of a change of situation, and recommending such to societies when requested (c) the advancement of the Co-operative cause generally and of the interests of employees in particular, by any means which may appear to the members judicious". Twelve miles from Manchester was to be the area of operation but if members were recruited outside that limit, sections could be formed and were soon to exist in the Airedale area of Yorkshire and the Northumberland/Durham area. Subscriptions were to be not less than 6d a quarter, and if there was any surplus after paying expenses it was to go into a fund for the relief of distress among members.

The first committee meeting was held on 21st April, 1891, at the Downing Street premises of the Manchester Equitable Society. Thereafter, meetings were mainly at Co-operative Union offices, City Buildings, Corporation Street, Manchester, until that organisation and the (by then) Amalgamated Union of Co-operative Employees both moved in 1901 to newly built premises of the Co-operative Newspaper Society in Long Millgate.

The early days of a new organisation, particularly one with a crusading purpose, are often dangerous and sometimes fatal. The energy and enthusiasm expended in getting it off the ground can, when the organisation is ready to walk, deteriorate into inertia and occasionally differences of opinion. Not so with the committee of MDCEA. Its members were dedicated men. To them what had gone before was the preliminary, the real challenge had only begun. Most of them worked very long hours but they devoted many hours more to committee meetings, followed by forays in and around Manchester to address meetings of employees. Eighty societies were circularised in the first few months, and in many cases meetings were arranged.

The jobs registry was established in November, 1891, (with A. Hewitt in charge) and by the time of the first annual meeting in July, 1892, there were 117 names on record, 217 had been

supplied to 66 societies and 19 had received appointments. A fee of 1/- was charged to societies that applied for names, and the London Association also took part in the scheme.

Wages, whether or not they were included in the objects rule, soon reached the committee's agenda. The meeting on 1st September, 1891, resolved "That this committee take steps to obtain all the information possible relating to the wages paid by Co-operative societies". Repeatedly, in the years ahead this issue was to come up as MDCEA and, later, the Amalgamated Union of Co-operative Employees, sought to obtain a clearer picture of the infinitely varying wages and hours that then prevailed in Co-operative service.

The first of the discussion conferences provided for in the rules was held at Belle Vue Gardens, Manchester, on 8th July, 1891, and dealt with a question which frequently complicated the Association's affairs — the day of the weekly half holiday, on which most meetings must necessarily be held. Societies in one part of Manchester closed on a Tuesday, in the other part, on a Wednesday. The conference came down unanimously for Wednesday, and many societies conformed when approached. But not all, and for long dual meetings had to be held for "Tuesday closers" and "Wednesday closers".

The Belle Vue meeting ended with the company dispersing "... to seek an evening's rational enjoyment among the diversified attractions of the gardens" (to quote *The Co-operative News*). There was a sequel, slightly comic to us today but a more serious matter in the nineties, when there was a large and powerful total abstinence movement. J. Tyldesley, of Roe Green, suspected that the demon drink might have been an irrational contributor to the "rational enjoyment". He had a son who was a member of the Association, and in a letter to the *News* he deplored that his time of recreation should be "... spent at a pub, whether there be a monkey house added or not" (for readers unfamiliar with Manchester's still flourishing Belle Vue, the zoo was for long a popular feature). A. Hewitt pointed out in reply that "While there are on the premises licensed refreshment rooms for those who require them, the extent and completeness of the arrangements for the accommodation of abstainers and tea drinkers, apart from the places where intoxicants are sold, are unrivalled".

The first annual meeting of the Association was held at Belle Vue on 20th July, 1892, for "Wednesday closers", with a second meeting for "Tuesday closers" on 2nd August. Modest progress was reported. There were 738 members in 47 societies (but the committee reminded the meeting that there were an estimated 30,000 employees of retail societies). Apart from the Belle Vue event, conferences had been held at Eccles, Oldham, Heywood and the CWS. The President and other members of the committee had addressed meetings at Bury, Radcliffe, Pendleton, Crewe, *Hebden Bridge*, *Shipley (Yorkshire)* and Preston. At the four last named, branches had been formed. A scheme for sickness and unemployment benefit was being considered, and the meeting authorised the committee to prepare detailed proposals.

Sound organisation is the only permanent basis for a successful Trade Union or any other concern. But a little luck helps. In 1893 help from an unforeseen quarter gave the Association added strength and impetus in its relations with employees and the committees of retail societies. At the Co-operative Congress of that year, held at Bristol, a paper by William Maxwell, the President of the Scottish CWS, broke the "conspiracy of indifference" which had hitherto marked the attitude of the Congress to the Movement's shop employees. His basic theme was expressed in one sentence — ". . . if we take the greak bulk of [Co-operative] retail distributive employees . . . it will be found that they do not consider it any part of their business to interest themselves in a cause which many of them think exists only for the enrichment of purchasers and which up to now has done very little to improve the position of their class as a whole".

He gave a table of hours showing 1,096 societies where shops were open for more than 60 hours weekly, 509 of them open more than 66 hours and 163 with hours ranging from 70 to 85. And for good — or, rather, bad — measure he added that closing the shop did not mean the end of the working day. Up to four hours a week more could be added on preparatory work for the next day. With the exception of managers and head shopmen, he considered that wages were also too low. He made many suggestions for improvement, one being that the MDCEA could become the centre of a national organisation

of employees.

There was little dissent from his conclusions in the Congress debate and on the motion of W. Campbell (Harrington and Skipton Society) a resolution was adopted declaring that "... the long hours of labour and the small remuneration paid to employees in a large number of Co-operative stores is discreditable to the Movement and opposed to the principles and aims of Co-operation; and the Central Board are requested to take immediate action with a view to bringing the subject prominently before the different sections of the [Co-operative] Union". Seconding the resolution G. Scott (CWS Newcastle) accurately described it as the "explosion of a bombshell".

Co-operative Congress resolutions are not mandatory and many a resounding declaration has been acclaimed at Congress and ignored in local boardrooms. But after Maxwell's speech things could never be quite the same again, particularly with what was soon to be a vigorous Trade Union of Co-operative employees to drive home the message to hundreds of committees.

The logic of Maxwell's paper and the Congress resolution must have impressed itself on many employees. True, the resolution called only upon the Co-operative Union to take specific action. But implicitly it advised employees to support that action by their own exertions. And a century of industrial history had demonstrated that only by collective action through a Trade Union could the individual worker exert any influence on his wages and conditions.

So far as the MDCEA was concerned, other developments were impelling the Association towards the same conclusion. The first annual meeting had authorised the committee to prepare a contributory scheme of sickness, unemployment and other benefits, and almost every committee meeting of 1893 had spent much time on this far from simple project (the first draft scheme was rejected after discussion at conferences and in branches). There had been several contacts with the Trade Union of the Bolton Co-operative Employees which was also preparing a benefits scheme and these led to proposals for amalgamation.

To give legal protection to the funds of MDCEA in whatever form it operated it was desirable to register under an approp-

riate statute. The Association could have registered under the Friendly Societies or the Industrial and Provident Societies Acts and undoubtedly one or other of these would have been preferred by some of its members. But provision for out-of-work payments was a basic part of the benefits scheme and this was precluded to bodies registered under these two Statutes. Another reason was that registration as a Union would facilitate amalgamation with Bolton. All of which led to one conclusion — that the Association should become the Union.

It is unlikely that all members of the Committee were wholeheartedly in favour of the change and there is evidence that the chairman, J. Dyson, and the secretary, A. Hewitt, held different views; the former against and the latter in favour. But both were realists: if disagreement existed it was probably more philosophical than practical and negotiations for amalgamation, on the benefits scale and for registration as a Trade Union continued throughout 1893 and 1894. One problem was the insistence by Bolton that all members of the new Union should compulsorily subscribe to the benefits scheme. A vote of MDCEA members on this point showed that at least 500 preferred an optional provision (mainly because so many of them were already contributing to local benefit clubs). This difficulty was overcome by providing that membership should comprise associates who would pay 6d a quarter and members who paid according to their choice of a varying scale of benefits.

Eventually, rules for the new body were agreed, and sent out to branches of the MDCEA for discussion and decision. At the committee meeting of 20th November, 1894, the secretary reported that there was "an overwhelming majority in favour of the new rules." As a title for the new organisations the committee itself had preferred Co-operative Employees' Association, or, as a second choice, Federation of Co-operative Employees. But wisely the members voted to give the Union a title which spelt out precisely what it was — the amalgamated Union of Co-operative Employees. "Amalgamated" was included in the title partly to cover the impending adhesion of Bolton but also in the hope of future amalgamation with London and Scotland.

The final step was registration, which was carried out immediately, the temporary registered address being the

secretary's home in Romiley, near Stockport. The AUCE then came formally into being on 28th January, 1895. The next step was to complete the amalgamation with Bolton and on 16th April, 1895, a form of agreement to that end was signed by J. Dyson, J. Lees and K. H. Whitehead for the MDCEA and for Bolton by J. Wallbank, C. Wood, A. Sheppard and E. Tunstall. The benefits scheme which had taken so long to agree was:

Scale	Weekly Subscriptions	A Weekly payments when out of employment			B Permanent Disablement Fund	C Weekly payments when sick or temporarily disabled			Funeral Allowance
		First 4 weeks	Second 4 weeks	Third 4 weeks		First 6 weeks	Second 6 weeks	Third 6 weeks	
I	4d	15/-	10/-	5/-	£5	9/-	4/6	2/-	£4
II	3d	10/-	6/6	3/-	£3	6/-	3/-	1/6	£3
III	2d	5/-	3/-	1/6	£2	4/-	2/-	1/-	£2

While "upon the funds" members had to pay full contributions. It was not necessary to take the entire range of any scale, e.g. a member could opt for sick, temporary disablement and funeral benefit only, at a reduced contribution. Superannuation, based on a special fund, was also optional. As was common in benefit schemes, members drawing sick benefit were subject to close supervision. They were not to be out of the house after specified hours (unless with the consent of the branch visitor whose duty it was to call upon sick members once a week).

The preamble to the AUCE objects rule was broadly similar to that of the MDCEA, plus provision for the benefits scheme, legal aid and affiliation to local Trades Councils. The detailed rules provided that District Councils of the Union were "... at all times to be subject ... to the control of the Central Executive Council".

The benefits scheme was based on a principle which was strongly evident in long-established Trades Unions, although by the end of the century it was being challenged. It was a century which revered the principle of self-help (and for long abused it as an excuse to deny social legislation). The benefit provisions of Friendly Societies and Trade Unions were then

the only form of self-protection against the hazards of unemployment, sickness, disablement and old age. Many of the New Unionists, however, repudiated the whole concept of benefit scales, arguing that concentration on benefit funds weakened the will of Trades Unions to *fight for better* immediate conditions and for State provision for the unemployed and the physically helpless. But MDCEA of those years was very much a product of the Co-operative Movement, itself strongly imbued with belief in thrift and self-help, and to this day the Union (as the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers) provides unemployment, sickness and death benefits on a generous scale.

We have now brought Co-operative employees along a slow, cautious road to fully pledged Trade Unionism. We shall soon see that within a surprisingly short period of time their Union was to develop a militancy that would have been inconceivable to some of its founders.

4 LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS

In the last chapter we described the higher strategy, so to speak, of MDCEA/AUCE in the four years and a few days between the formation of the Association in March, 1891, and its transformation into a national Trade Union in 1895. But the days between those two dates were filled by much more than issues of high policy, and in this chapter we shall look at some of the activities through which MDCEA and the Association Movement generally became established as a permanent part of the Co-operative scene. What, for instance, was happening in other parts of the country beyond the immediate neighbourhood of Manchester?

London had been first in the field and for a time the Association Movement seemed to flourish in and around the capital. In 1893 there was even a proposal to establish a branch so far north as Newcastle upon Tyne, where MDCEA was itself trying to recruit and where there were moves on Tyneside by the employees of the Walker Society to form a separate Northern Association. London, however, never really got off the ground as the base for a national organisation. There was some talk of amalgamation with Manchester. But the rot had already set in and at the MDCEA committee meeting of 19th March, 1895, a letter was read from W. Openshaw announcing the demise of the once promising London Association.

The separatist moves on Tyneside died out. A conference of northern employees at Newcastle upon Tyne in December, 1893, made the decision to join Manchester, and in due course a Northern District Council was formed. The report of MDCEA for the year ended 30th June, 1894, records the existence of 27 branches in Northumberland and Durham, linked under the Northern Council, with 948 members, almost half the total of the Association's then membership of 2,151.

What of Scotland? A Glasgow Association was formed in the Autumn of 1889 and as late as 1893 was reported by

MDCEA as "making great strides among the servants over the border". Many branches were formed, but they vanished into the mists. The diary of an AUCE organiser who campaigned in Scotland in 1907 has survived, and he records many cases of recruiting from zero in societies that were reported to have Association branches in 1893. The Movement continued to exist but did not develop the strong national organisation that was growing south of the border. There was a tenuous "Co-operative Employees' National Association", with which AUCE unsuccessfully sought amalgamation. When this failed, the Union began in 1907 to recruit and open branches in Scotland, today one of the strongest of USDAW's Divisions.

Branches which faded out were not a problem peculiar to Scotland. There must have been many bitter disappointments at MDCEA committee meetings when, as too often happened, the secretary had to announce that promising branches had withered away. The committee's second annual report, while happy that recruitment had been particularly successful in the West Riding of Yorkshire, stated that elsewhere some branches had failed to renew their subscriptions and some had been dissolved. The report blamed a "materialistic turn of mind" among members who expected immediate results in cash or hours, and if they were not forthcoming, lapsed their membership — a problem not unknown to many other movements of reform.

But the committee never gave up. The word used in the minutes to report the collapse of a branch was "secession" and invariably it was followed by plans for "resuscitation", based on retaining contact with local enthusiasts in readiness for a new start. The fourth annual report, in welcoming a large influx of new branches, was particularly proud that several prodigal branches which "had become inert" were active again, "Ashington, Crewe, Manchester and Pendleton being particularly promising among this class".

Since both idealism and materialism are qualities of human nature it was to be expected that many employees would judge the Association by the material benefits it gained for them. So what did the MDCEA actually achieve in its early years?

On wages, it would have been impossible to make an immediate breakthrough. There were well over a thousand

separate retail societies when the Association was formed and there were certainly scores, and possibly hundreds, of bases on which pay was determined. Almost the only common factor was that decisions were made arbitrarily and without any negotiation with employees as an organised group. We saw earlier that one of the first tasks of MDCEA was to seek information on rates that were actually being paid. The committee, or the Executive Council when AUCE was formed, was repeatedly frustrated in its efforts to get a comprehensive picture. It was six years before there was sufficient data on which to adopt a minimum wage policy. But that was in 1897, and belongs to the next chapter. In the earlier years it is probable that little advance was made on the wages front.

It was a more hopeful story with hours. There had long been a national movement for the earlier closing of shops. In many Co-operatives the weekly half holiday was already operating (it became general through the Shops' Act of 1912). From 1892 onwards many retail societies were persuaded to reduce the total number of hours worked. The Association reported in 1893 that about 90 societies were known to have granted reductions of from one to eight (eight!) hours per week. "Of these, ten at least reduced their working week to 48 hours . . ." The total of 90 corresponds closely to lists published weekly in *The Co-operative News* during 1892 and 1893. The pioneering ten on 48 hours were all in Northumberland and Durham, where Co-operative Societies must have been the first employers in the country to reduce shop hours to what was then a Utopian level.

The 1893 report voiced a complaint which Co-operative and other shop workers have echoed many a time since. Writing of those customers who persistently arrive just on closing time, the committee commented: "Among the greatest offenders are members living nearest to the shops, and people who have nothing to prevent them coming earlier. Some of these make it a rule to be the 'last customer' no matter at what hours the shops close and those who were last before earlier closing was adopted still maintain their position". As they say in the North, "There's nowt as queer as folk".

Most of the reductions in hours resulted from applications made by the employees, and many of these based their case on

information supplied by the Association. On hours at least it could be claimed that a large number of Co-operative workers had benefitted from their subscription of 6d. a quarter — not to mention those who had not joined the Association but none the less enjoyed the benefits of the shorter hours.

The Association continued to seek close links with the official organisations of the Co-operative Movement. From its first year it had sought and obtained representation at conferences of the Manchester District Association of the Co-operative Union. It sought the help of other District or Sectional Boards of the Union in organising joint conferences to introduce the Association to employees and management committees. At its 16th August meeting of 1892 the committee instructed the President and Secretary to seek an interview with J. C. Gray, the General Secretary of the Co-operative Union "... with respect to a scheme for obtaining reliable returns as to rates of wages and hours of labour; also as to the eligibility of the Association to become a member of the Co-operative Union and thus secure the right of representation at Congress".

On the first subject they were advised to seek the information direct from societies. On the second, the minutes are silent. A formal application for membership was, however, made in 1897, by which date the Association had become the Amalgamated Union of Co-operative Employees. It was rejected on the grounds that in the opinion of the Co-operative Union's legal advisers AUCE did not conform to the rules of the Union nor to the statutory provisions — the Industrial and Provident Societies Acts — under which the latter operated. Accepting this situation, the Executive asked for the privilege of fraternal representation at the Co-operative Congress. But by then the AUCE had affiliated to the TUC and it was pointed out that the annual fraternal delegation from the TUC to the Co-operative Congress represented all affiliated Trades Unions. The Co-operative Union did, however, urge societies, especially the large ones, to include at least one employee in their delegations to Congress, and AUCE had some success in securing that this became a practice. Other means were also adopted to bring the Union to the attention of what Co-operators called their Parliament (although they frequently ignored its "legislation"). An employees' day, participation in the Congress exhibition of

Co-operative trades, and a window-dressing competition were long used to put over the message that "we, too, are part of the Co-operative Movement".

These experiences underline a quality which makes AUCE probably unique amongst British Trades Unions. Most Unions had to establish themselves against the opposition of employers who denied, or, at any rate, grudged their right to exist. Co-operative employees began Trade Unionism with a considerable measure of goodwill, and frequently of help, from their employers. True, there could be discord when goodwill had to be translated into wages and hours and, as we shall see, there were to be occasions of open conflict between the Union and individual societies or group of societies. But over the greater part of a century the Union's relationship with the Co-operatives has developed as one of mutual respect, and free from the tradition of hostility which to this day embitters employee-worker relations in some British industries.

Model branch rules were drafted in 1893. This book is completed in 1979, in a decade when, more than once, USDAW has discussed the possibility of specialising its branch and national structure on the basis of individual trades. It is interesting to note that 86 years earlier the first rules for branches provided that they should comprise "Delegates [elected] from the grocery, butchering, drapery, boot & shoe and other departments . . ." The rules also provided for interests somewhat beyond those now common in USDAW or other Trade Unions. The duties of a branch included arrangements ". . . of a more social character, such as . . . say, social parties, singing and elocution classes, or debating classes for mutual subjects during the winter months; and picnics and rambles in the summer". There were to be separate meetings of head shopmen and employees ". . . namely, grocers, butchers, drapers, shoe and clog . . . to discuss and exchange ideas on the work of their departments".

One of the rambles similar to those visualised in the rules was reported in *The Co-operative News* and was probably typical of many. On an Autumn Wednesday of 1891, 153 employees, of both sexes, gathered for a ramble along the Manchester Ship Canal (then being excavated) from Salford to Barton, on to "a 9d tea" in Eccles Society's hall, followed by

inspection of the Society's bakery and other premises, then a meeting at which the Association President, J. Dyson, read a progress report, followed by a concert and ending in a dance. It is not recorded at what time the party ended or how they made their way back home. But there must have been some tired feet in the shops next morning to face a long working day.

It all sounds rather quaintly old fashioned today. But in the eighteen-nineties people had largely to make their own entertainment, and leisure was a scarce commodity for most workers. They knew, perhaps better than we do now, how to make the most of it — and it was not all spent at the “pub with the monkey house” that so concerned J. Tyldsley of the previous chapter.

5 BEGINS WITH A MINIMUM WAGE, ENDS WITH A STRIKE FUND

IN the last chapter we went on a ramble. In this chapter, with AUCE now registered on the roll of British Trades Unions, we must return to more serious subjects, of which the first was wages, hours and conditions. The Executive Council was well aware that this was the make-or-break issue for the Union. If AUCE was to grow in membership and influence it must demonstrate to employees that only by acting collectively could they raise the wages and reduce the hours against which they complained individually.

The first task was to get the facts on record, to obtain an overall picture. With hours that was not too difficult, for they were publicly known. But with wages it was at first impossible. The variations between neighbouring societies, between workers in individual societies, between North and South, were too wide. Even an apparently adequate rate of, say 24/- for males at age 21 could in some societies conceal an unacceptable practice of employing large numbers of low-wage juniors and sacking them when they came of age. Alternatively, they could be kept on but their number used to justify an appallingly low adult rate.

The problem was further complicated by the inability or reluctance of many branches of the Union to supply accurate information. Possibly the secrecy over individual wages that was common in private trade was not unknown in Co-operative service. Yet, so tangled was the web that some societies went to the opposite extreme — they published individual wages of employees in their reports to members.

All that AUCE could establish in the early years, and all that can be given here, was a tendency built up from numerous indicators. Thus, the first annual report in 1892 gave some figures on wages, based on information supplied by branches at twelve societies in the neighbourhood of Manchester. They were:

	Wages per Week
General Manager	24/- to 95/-
Departmental Managers	21/- to 60/-
Branch Managers or head countermen	18/- to 40/-
Other countermen	7/- to 25/-
Warehousemen, porters, etc.....	6/- to 30/-
Boys	2/- to 13/-

The report stated that there was probably some confusion in the three last items — boys in some cases having been included with porters or countermen. As the figures were for the Movement's heartland in and around Manchester, they would include some long established and — for the period — large societies. Unfortunately, no indication is given of the *numbers* at each end of the scale. But most would be countermen and, even allowing for the confusion over the last three items, there must have been many men in the shops on or below wages of 20/- a week at the age of 21 and over.

These figures are partly substantiated by information for the late 1890s from two large North-Western societies, Oldham Industrial and Bolton, both by then strongly established and prosperous. L. Lumley, soon to become the Union's first full-time organiser, listed actual individual wages for 26 employees in six trade groups at Oldham Industrial in April, 1898. The following examples are the highest rates given:—

Branch Managers,	21 years' service	—	36/-
" "	15 " "	—	30/-
Drapery Managers,	13 " "	—	32/-
" "	12 " "	—	34/-
Second Counterman,	29 years of age	—	28/-
Third "	22 " " "	—	18/-
Drapery Assistant	22 " " "	—	21/-
Butcher	31 " " "	—	32/-
Youths	18 " " "	—	12/-

Note that these figures are for *individuals* and do not reflect an age/wages scale. Thus, behind the 31 years old butcher on 32/- was a 33 years old colleague on 28/-, the draper of 22 years on 21/- had two colleagues of 18 and 19 years respectively who were on 14/- and one of 18 years on 12/-: the drapery manager with the longest service (13 years) was 2/- a week below his

colleague with 12 years' service. The Society did have a list which was supposed to be a guide to payment at each age, ranging from 6/- at 14 to 24/- at 22. But A. W. Burrows, who, in 1943, made an analysis of Lumley's data, said that it was found in practice to vary "from 6/- less to 3/- more". Chance, favouritism and possibly in some cases outstanding ability determined what an employee was paid.

Bolton also had a scale, ranging from 5/- at 13 to 24/- at 21, branch managers from 30/- to 38/-, butchers from 19/- to 33/- and shoe managers from 28/- to 33/-. It is not known, however, whether every employee received no less than these amounts.

Both these societies, by the standards of the day, ranked as good employers. Among a great many others, particularly in the South and Midlands, wages and conditions were very much worse. The variations in pay for the same jobs were frequently breathtaking. A. W. Burrows, in another article, quotes these figures from a table given in 1910 by a Mr. Anderson, Secretary of the Ayrshire Co-operative Conference Association:

ADULT ASSISTANTS—

			Highest	Lowest
Grocery	—	Males	30/-	15/-
		Females	17/-	10/-
Drapery	—	Males	35/-	20/-
		Females	20/-	10/-
Butchery	—	Males	30/-	14/-
		Females	14/-	14/-

Against this background it is apparent that wages depended on the degree of social — or Co-operative — conscience prevalent in any individual society's Committee, on the Union's ability to stir the membership to protest against excessively low pay, or, as Burrows put it, "... if you were one of the 'white-haired' boys, you might, if you went to the same chapel as the President, get one shilling a week merit increase — but under a solemn pledge not to reveal this to anyone".

As late as 1908 the Union was frequently informed of cases of men being paid 17/- for a net working week of anything from 54 to 60 hours. The Women's Co-operative Guild, which developed close links with AUCE on the issue of wages, discovered that in the North considerably more than one-third, and in the South, South-west and Yorkshire, rather more than

one-half, of the women working in societies were paid under 13/- a week. One example will personalise a situation that was far from being uncommon. Ted Skinner, now a life member of USDAW, recalls joining the grocery department of a Suffolk Society at the age of 13, on a wage of 3/- for a 60 hour week, with 10 p.m. closing on Saturday.

As data slowly accumulated the Executive Council and the District Councils obtained a clearer view of the challenge they had to meet. But they were also aware that they must tread carefully. The Union was still a delicate plant (there were only 2,151 members when AUCE was formed, with cash in hand and in the bank of £98.3.2). Among Co-operative employees there was no tradition of collective action on which to build. There were members who still had reservations about the need for a Union at all. In other cases, employees hesitated to join (or kept quiet about their membership) for a very human reason — wind-up. They feared a black mark from manager or committee. A. Hewitt, writing in 1909, recalled that "... their enthusiasm was damped ... by an oblique glance directed by a manager or committeeman against the Union", or they panicked at the thought of the word "strike". "Many of the employees were timid as hares and the least hint by a speaker of the possibility of trade disputes was sufficient to send them flying back to their burrows of individualism", wrote Hewitt in the same article.

But the Union had two advantages, one human, the other moral, in the campaign to raise standards which must begin if AUCE was to justify its existence. It was led nationally by men of strong and resilient character, not easily rebuffed and motivated by idealism and convictions that had been formed and hardened by their experience in life. In most retail societies there was a nucleus of employees who shared these qualities and were to become the pioneers and leaders of local branches.

The moral asset was in the nature of the Co-operative Movement. Not even the most reactionary committee could deny that in Co-operative principle, fair treatment of the worker ranked with a fair deal for the consumer. Joseph Hallsworth made telling use of this argument in an article in *The Co-operative Employee* (more about this journal later), when he quoted from the then basic textbooks of the Movement, *Working Men*

Co-operators (by Ben Jones and A. H. D. Acland, MP) and *Industrial Co-operation* (edited by Catherine Webb). He pointed out that in the latter, and most up-to-date of the two, the purpose of the Movement was defined as "... including among its root principles the payment of fair wages to, and the just treatment of, employees". For good measure he also drew on the printed notes for correspondence courses on Co-operation issued by the Co-operative Union, which included among the Movement's leading principles "workers to have (a) good conditions, (b) fair wages, (c) fair hours".

Unfortunately, too many committeemen did not read the Movement's textbooks. But many did, and the Union frequently had allies in the seats of power who realised that the dichotomy between principle and practice could not permanently be tolerated.

The more active branches began to argue the case for a minimum wage policy almost as soon as the Union had been formed, and from then on the subject was rarely missing from the agenda of the annual delegate meeting. In 1896 the West Pelton (Durham) branch proposed that the Union should adopt a uniform scale of wages. The Executive Council did not need to be pushed — it was already engaged in tabulating data on wages and hours received from 35 branches, to be circulated to District Councils and branches, discussed at conferences and, finally, put before the annual meeting of 1897. At this meeting the first step was taken to establish a national scale, with local or regional variations. A resolution proposed by the Executive Council and adopted by an almost unanimous vote declared Union policy to be "... a minimum wage of 24/- per week for all employees over 21 years of age, each district and branch to be empowered to adopt a higher scale if practicable." A proposal by West Pelton calling for a 48-hour week and pay at the rate of 7½d an hour was heavily defeated. The minimum wage clause was also incorporated in the rules.

But the decision left unanswered one short interrogative word: how? The dread word "strike" was not mentioned, although it must have been in the minds of many of those present at the annual meeting. Action was to be through persuasion of societies' committees, and by appeal to Co-operative principle. Nor was this reticence necessarily an

evidence of timidity. Apart from the lukewarm attitude of some members towards full scale Trade Union action, AUCE still in 1897 had only 3,186 members and associates. Although 126 branches were claimed, only four numbered more than one hundred members (Oldham Industrial, Pendleton, Annfield Plain and Bolton), and in many cases single members were listed as a branch. The general fund stood at only £873.19.2½. After all, David made sure he had a sizeable stone ready before he took on Goliath!

But the 24/- minimum had now been nailed to the mast and it was for branches to carry it into action, aided and advised when necessary by the Executive Council or, more usually, the appropriate District Council. The first year's experience (if one reads correctly between the lines of the annual report) was not particularly good. The best the Executive could say in the 1898 report was that "Many branches have taken steps to secure the observation of the minimum wage clause with varying success, while some societies have voluntarily adopted a minimum far above the modest sum our rules suggest" (Sunderland and Jarrow were specially mentioned as leaders in this respect).

It had been a slow start, but the campaign began to gather momentum, strengthened by two national developments. Early in 1896 the Executive Council had considered the publication of a journal and after various enquiries decided to recommend an employee edition of the *Wheatsheaf*. This monthly publication was issued by the CWS with a basic content of general magazine reading and publicity for the CWS, plus at front and end local pages which were changed for subscribing retail societies. The original intention was to publish a Union edition of 3,000 copies quarterly, but when publication began in January, 1898, this had been altered to a monthly issue of 2,500 copies carrying four pages of Union material under the title of *Gleanings for Members*. Branches received free copies pro rata to membership and could have extra copies at 3d per dozen. The number of pages was increased to eight in 1900 (sometimes more for special events, such as the annual delegate meeting).

The publication, of which A. Hewitt was appointed editor, helped to energise the wages policy by carrying news of the

campaign to all parts of the country. It also helped to create a corporate identity for the Union by encouraging employees isolated in small branches to feel that they were part of a nationwide movement. The *Gleanings* continued to spread the good seed until 1908, when, in June, the Union began to publish a self-contained monthly journal of its own under the title *The Co-operative Employee*.

The second development also concerned A. Hewitt. The ever-active West Pelton branch had successfully proposed to the 1898 annual meeting that the Union should have a full-time general secretary. By that date there were 4,320 members and an accumulated fund of £1,785. An elaborate benefits scheme, the employment register (with 272 names on the books at June, 1898), contact with 147 branches, a vital wages policy to stimulate and service, editorship of *Gleanings* — these constituted a formidable work load for a part-time secretary who had his living to earn as a proof-reader at the Co-operative Newspaper Society. In due course, at the Executive meeting of 28th February 1899, Augustus Hewitt — to give his full name — was appointed as the first full-time general secretary.

Improved national administration and communication was reinforced by a more flexible organisation. To the three existing District Councils of Manchester (later to be re-titled North-Western), Northern and Yorkshire (formerly known as Airedale), there were added a Midland Council in 1898, Southern in 1901, Western in 1905, a Cumberland Sub-District in 1906 and a Scottish Council in 1908. The annual meeting was held on a District basis, the votes of each District being aggregated when decisions had to be made. Also, in 1906, L. Lumley was appointed to the staff and soon became a full-time organiser, the first of a devoted band who have since served the Union in that capacity. The annual meeting of 1908 recommended the appointment of two more organisers, but rejected an amendment from Leith and Cowdenbeath branches that one should be male and one female (at that date the Union had 1,020 women members). W. T. Scott (Sunderland) and E. J. Bull were later appointed.

Supported by more efficient central and district services the campaign for the minimum — plus improvements in hours, holidays and sickness pay — waxed and waned in the earlier

years of the twentieth century. In 1901 branches were reported to be "doing their utmost to secure recognition of a flat rate". By 1904 the "deplorable state of the general trade of the country" led to a slackening of pressure. By 1906 District Councils were attempting to work out regional scales from junior to branch manager. In the same year a minimum of 30/- for branch managers was added to the national scale.

The Union continued to have the support of those societies that operated the minimum and in some cases had improved it. Moreover, the long drawn out campaign troubled the conscience of sincere Co-operators who accepted that conditions in too many societies were a denial of the Movement's reforming principles. The Co-operative Congress of 1893 when W. Maxwell read his historic paper, had been the first to express these feelings. They surfaced again in the Congresses of 1907, 1908, 1909 and 1910. At the first of the series, held at Preston, a resolution affirmed that the Movement "... should establish a minimum wage for various classes of workers below which the societies should pledge themselves not to fall". A sub-committee was appointed to draw up a scale. From AUCE, R. J. Wilson and A. Hewitt, together with representatives of the Women's Guild, assisted the Committee in its work. At Newport a year later it recommended a minimum wage "... which we hope will not be applied as a maximum", of 24/- for adult males at 21, and for females, 17/- at age 20. For younger workers the scale proposed was:

BOYS							
14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
6/-	8/-	10/-	12/-	15/-	18/-	21/-	24/-
GIRLS							
5/-	7/-	9/-	11/-	13/-	15/-	17/-	—

This scale was remitted for discussion throughout the Movement and at the Newcastle Congress of 1909 was adopted, with the recommendation that it should be operated by all societies.

But for each delegate at Congress there was a varying number of committeemen at home. Barely a third of the 1,251 societies which the Co-operative Union urged by circular to implement the scales had been represented at Newcastle, and there was a different mood when the circular reached committee room

tables. The Plymouth Congress of 1910 was informed that of the 195 societies which replied to the Union, only 79 were willing to act and 116 declared that they were unable to do so.

These dismal figures do not, however, reflect the full results of AUCE's campaign. While the Union does not appear ever to have obtained in those days a complete picture of the wages scene, figures drawn up by Messrs. Hallsworth and Davies and published in their *Working Life of Shop Assistants*, covering Co-operative grocery assistants and shop managers, show the results achieved between 1907 and 1910. The average works out as follows:—

Year	Shop Managers				Shop Assistants			
	Number of Societies	Average of Minimum Rate	Number of Societies	Average of Maximum Rate	Number of Societies	Average of Minimum Rate	Number of Societies	Average of Maximum Rate
1907	167	30/10	162	37/8	179	23/2	179	28/1
1910	195	31/8	176	38/3	210	24/2	186	28/8

Nothing spectacular in these figures. For the first time, however, in Co-operative history minimum scales were being established and what was equally significant, they were being *negotiated* by organised employees. But... more than a thousand societies were still on the bad old system of arbitrarily determined and frequently beggarly wage rates.

Nevertheless, the Union's continuous campaign, often supported by local Trades Councils and branches of the Women's Guild was slowly pushing recalcitrant societies onto the defensive, and what was to become known as the "Congress Scale" added to the pressure.

It will be noted, too, that the figures so far given applied to shop workers. The so-called unskilled workers — warehouse and flour room men, carters and bread deliverers — were usually worse off on wages and over the limit on hours, particularly the latter two, who could have to come in twice on Sundays to attend to their horses — for 18/- or 20/- a week. In due course, this challenge, too, was taken up by the Union.

But meantime something more was needed. Persuasion and moral pressure had been successful up to a point. What was lacking was the power of enforcement. "Strike" was no longer a dirty word to a new generation of Union members. At the

annual meeting of 1908 the Oldham Industrial and Coventry branches proposed the establishment of a strike fund. As adopted by the conference the proposal read "That the desirability of establishing a strike fund, adding new rules to govern strike pay, and making provision for the maintenance of such a fund be . . . referred to District Councils and branches for discussion".

For some members this was still a traumatic issue. They flinched from the last recourse of Trades Unionism and clung to the belief that in the end persuasion and principle would win the day. To judge from the columns of the *Co-operative News* and *The Co-operative Employee* during 1909 it almost seemed that the Union as a whole was reluctant to face the issue. In 71 reports of branch meetings and 89 of social gatherings and excursions published in the *News* there are few references to the strike fund nor, surprisingly, were there many letters on the subject.

In its report for the year the Executive Council acknowledged that "Opinions are divided on the matter", and evidently decided that more must be done to stimulate debate. It proposed that a decision should be deferred until discussion papers on the subject had been prepared and circulated, and this proposal was adopted. The same annual meeting carried another resolution which, in itself, epitomised the Union's dilemma over the strike issue. This resolution set out a plan for inducing more societies to adopt the minimum scales. District Councils were to write to off-scale committees asking them to pay up, followed if necessary by a deputation, followed by a challenge at members' meetings if a committee refused to budge, followed by public demonstrations supported by other Trades Unions. Then, "As a last resource, the Executive Council be empowered to take what steps they deem necessary". All these methods, singly or in combination, had been tried. In some cases they had won results, and were to continue to do so. But when all had been tried and failed, what was to be the "last resource"?

As decided by the 1909 ADM, separate discussion papers were prepared. They were by A. Hewitt and by anonymous authors in the Coventry and Oldham Industrial branches. Each was printed in *The Co-operative Employee* and circulated to branches for discussion. In his paper the General Secretary

gave a brief historical description of the strike as an industrial weapon, ending with the words "The perfectly successful and acceptable substitute for the strike has, however, yet to be discovered, and the employees of Co-operative societies appear to have . . . a far better chance of securing their joint demands by the use of the means already at their disposal than most of their contemporary workers have by such means plus the strike". Coventry's case was based on two propositions: that the policy of moderation and conciliation had been treated by some societies as evidence of weakness and this accounted for the failure to win general recognition of the minimum scales. Resolutions would not change the situation without power to enforce them.

Oldham Industrial argued that in the ten years that the minimum had been Union policy "we have done too much requesting . . . we are at present held cheap". It acknowledged that the strike ". . . is a rather clumsy weapon but, . . . better have a clumsy weapon in reserve than none at all".

The debate continued, with the balance of argument swinging towards giving the Executive powers to call a strike, but with opinion divided on the necessity to raise an immediate strike fund. Both points of view were neatly covered in an Executive resolution adopted by the 1910 annual meeting. It provided "That an early opportunity be taken to include in the rules such an amplification of the present provisions as shall provide support for members who may lose their situations through disputes with their employers, whether in the nature of strikes, lockouts or discharges in consequence of action taken by or on behalf of the Union, when approved by the Executive Council". The "early opportunity" was the following year's ADM, and at the 1911 meeting a lengthy resolution set out the powers and procedure of the Executive Council in calling a strike, financing the cost and enlisting the support of non-members.

A strike could be called by the Executive "with the consent of the majority of the members of the branch concerned, and after consulting with the District Council . . .". In such a case all members were simultaneously to tender notice and any member who refused to do so was to be expelled. To provide a strike fund an initial levy of 6d from adult males, and 3d from females and juniors under 21, was to be called for, with further levies

if the special fund fell below £500. Strike benefits were to be 20/- a week for adult males, 10/- for females and juniors, for "as long as the strike shall last"; with the same benefits in the case of a lockout. For non-members who supported a strike, the Executive Council was given power to make weekly allowances not exceeding half of what was paid to members, but which would not be made in the event of a lockout. A new rule embodying these proposals was adopted with what the Executive described as "practical unanimity".

So — in twenty years the wheel had completed the circle. First, the Manchester District Association of Co-operative Employees had flinched from the name of Trade Union, then it had become a Union but without providing for full Trade Union action. Next it had adopted a wages policy, still hoping that it could be implemented by persuasion. Now, after much hard experience and much heart-searching, it had decided that when all else had failed it would use the last sanction of a free *Trade Union* — *it would strike*.

The strike clause was no paper tiger. The first stoppage was in 1912 at the CWS Avonmouth flour mill. The Union lost that dispute when it went before the Joint Committee of Trades Unionists and Co-operators which, under the auspices of the TUC and the Co-operative Union, had existed since 1893 to conciliate or arbitrate on disputes between Co-operative employees and societies. Moving a year ahead of the time span of this chapter, there were disputes in 1913 with the Grays (Essex), Warrington, Lincoln, Leeds and Coalburn (Scotland) societies. The Executive reported "At the two first named places a settlement was arrived at and notices withdrawn before they expired. At Leeds and Lincoln agreements more or less satisfactory to the Union took place within a week of the withdrawal of labour". At Coalburn, thirty employees were still out. The dispute began over the dismissal of a Union member on the unsupported evidence of a customer. It was a bitter battle, with strike-breakers brought in, violence, and, as the organiser in charge (W. T. Scott) recalled, several warnings by the police, that the lives of strike leaders were in danger. The strike continued to the end of 1914, when the Union called it off and members still out, or who had not obtained other jobs, were placed on out-of-work benefit. AUCE lost the battle but the

tenacity with which it fought increased its prestige throughout Scotland.

It was said at the beginning of this chapter that it was essential for AUCE in its early years to convince lukewarm Co-operative employees that a Union could win for them better wages, hours and conditions. We have seen the methods adopted to bring this about. How far had they succeeded by 1914, when the world lurched into war. We cannot give an exact figure of the number of societies covered, for so casual were some branches that a society could have been on the 24/- minimum or other scale for some time before the news reached Central Office. But in 1912, the Executive Council reported "So many societies have now come to recognise our minima as a matter of course, that some of our friends have been encouraged to advocate the fixing of higher rates for certain districts".

As this passage indicates, District scales were multiplying. The 1915 report lists such scales for most Districts, plus variations covering groups of societies inside Districts; Oldham and Manchester scales in the North-West, six local scales in Scotland (including the mysteriously named Old Pink Scale and the White Scale). But whatever the variety, all scales started with the Union's minimum and not infrequently went beyond it (eg the Manchester District scale went up to 28/- at 25). Considerable progress was also being made in the number of societies that had reduced the working week to 53 hours or less.

Another measure of success was the ever-increasing membership. In 1896, when discussion on the minimum began, there were 2,179 members, in 1912, 32,741.

A Union which had to spend its early years in "... coaxing, persuading, urging and enticing Co-operative employees to join... a large percentage of them regarded Trade Unionism as unnecessary in the Co-operative world, and strikes were anathema" had increased its membership fifteenfold since the minimum wage campaign began. We can end on that note. AUCE had passed the test. It had been proved that it could deliver the goods.

IN 1912 AUCE members could sing of their Union "We're twenty-one today". Appropriately, the coming-of-age was celebrated in Manchester. The annual delegate meeting was held there, no longer on a divisional basis, but for the first time as a single national event. A souvenir record of 21 years progress was published and a memorable social gathering was held prior to the meeting, not only for delegates, but for any members who could come into the city for the evening. Among them were pioneers of the original Manchester District Association, many of them retired stalwarts who could tell younger members how they had braved the frowns of committee or manager in forming a branch, and perhaps warn them that there were battles still to be won.

It will be noted that 1912 was the first *national* annual delegate meeting. The Executive Council had been working towards this reform for some time. The increase in the number of *District* Councils, each holding its own regional version of the ADM (although for decision-making the votes were aggregated), had led to seven meetings by 1909. For 1910 this was reduced to three; one for Lancashire, Yorkshire, Ireland and the North Midlands, one for the South Midlands, South and West of England and South Wales, and the third for Scotland and the North of England.

This was administratively a tidier system. But the case for a single national meeting did not rest on administrative convenience. AUCE must stand or fall as a national Union, seen to be such by employers and other Unions, felt to be such by its members. Regional meetings could encourage regional attitudes, blur the wider vision, and the change was accepted as a means of concentrating and symbolising the national character of the Union. District conferences continued to be held, however, and frequently policy issues were remitted to them — and to branches — for discussion before they reached the annual

delegate meeting. Consultation at geographical level and at specialist trade and professional level is still intensive within USDAW. But since 1912 policy decision has been the prerogative of the national "Parliament" of the Union.

Previous chapters have dealt with the highlights of the first twenty-one years, in particular the development from comparative placidity to a fighting policy on wages and conditions. But the Union was also branching out in many other directions. In particular, it was establishing links within the wider working class movement.

The first was with the Trade Union Congress, or the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC, as it was then generally known. A proposal to affiliate was brought before the annual meeting of 1898 by the Executive Council. It was accepted, but with some reluctance. The Yorkshire and Northern meetings voted against, some delegates (according to the report in *Gleanings*) "... contending that the Congress was becoming so much of a Party Political organisation as to render inadvisable the close connection with it of Co-operative employees". But Manchester was in favour, and provided an overall majority of twenty for affiliation. A year later the Union was represented for the first time at the Congress of the TUC, held that year at Plymouth.

Political action through membership of the Labour Party was an even more contentious subject. The Union was still strongly influenced by what could be called, without disrespect, and Old Guard of Liberals. They could accept TUC affiliation at a pinch, but in their belief, support for Lib-Lab MPs was as far as Trades Unions ought to go in politics. They successfully resisted early attempts to bring AUCE into the Labour Party. But both the law and the revival of interest in Socialism were turning the tide towards independent working class politics. The law was invoked against Trades Unions in two notorious Court judgments: in the Taff Vale case of 1901, which crippled the right to strike, and the Osborne case of 1909, which had a similar effect on the right to spend money for political purposes. These decisions were overruled by subsequent legislation. But at the time thoughtful workers in AUCE and other Unions saw them as class discrimination which could only be defeated by political action.

The annual meeting of 1905 voted for politics and a year

later the rules were altered to authorise membership of the Labour Representation Committee, as the Party was originally named, and expenditure of Union funds for local and Parliamentary purposes. For a period the Union's involvement was limited mainly to representation at the annual Party conference. But in 1908 R. J. Wilson, President of the Northern District Council, was elected to the Labour Party executive and in 1910 the ADM decided to seek Parliamentary representation, the choice of a potential MP to be made by ballot. Fourteen members came forward, five withdrew and the rest went on to the vote, from which R. J. Wilson emerged as the Union's nominee to go on the Labour Party's list of approved Parliamentary candidates. Later, the Union was to be briefly out of the Party, and for a period not quite in and not quite out — but these adventures belong to future chapters.

In chapter 3 we saw that AUCE and the National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants were formed within a few days of each other. In 1895 the Shop Assistants' Union invited AUCE to become affiliated, but nothing came of that proposal. By 1912 they were the only two medium-sized Unions in the distributive trades. The Shop Assistants' had members in Co-operative service but by far the greater number of Co-operative employees was in AUCE. *From time to time there were discussions on amalgamation, usually direct between the two Unions, on occasion under the auspices of the TUC. But AUCE, while in favour of joint action, did not believe that there would be any virtue in outright amalgamation. It argued that the number of unorganised workers in the private distributive trades was so enormous that to turn two comparatively small Unions into one would not make a worthwhile impact on the problem. It would however, probably dilute and weaken the efforts through which AUCE was winning improved conditions in the Co-operative sector of distribution.*

The Shop Assistants' considered that an amalgamated Union should confine itself to distributive workers. AUCE, based as it was on the diversified operations of the Co-operative Movement, took in productive and service workers in the retail societies, the CWS and the Scottish CWS (although, by a decision of 1903, it excluded craft workers for whom there was an appropriate Union unless they continued membership of

their craft Union as well as AUCE).

There was also a difference of opinion over benefit funds. AUCE held to the principle that the advance or defence of wages and conditions took precedence over all other purposes, including benefit provision. Basically the Union operated on only two funds, a general fund and one for political purposes (the latter required by law) and, as we shall see later, it did not hesitate to reduce benefit provision in a time of crisis. This policy had a practical base in the substantial degree of stability in Co-operative service. Most members of the Shop Assistants' Union, however, worked in private trade, where employment was much more hazardous. That Union fought some redoubtable battles on behalf of its members, but it also placed a high priority on the separation and safeguarding of its benefit funds, and this factor was a recurring difficulty in amalgamation discussions.

AUCE continued to press for joint action on common purposes, leading to a federal organisation which would include both distributive and service (eg, clerical) workers. A joint action programme with NAUSA was agreed in 1906. It included a provision that organisers of either Union, when canvassing, would not seek to recruit anyone they found to be a member of the other Union. In the same year the agreement was reflected in a Trafalgar Square demonstration to protest against the exclusion of shop assistants from a Workmen's Compensation Bill than before Parliament.

A year later a federal body was formed, adopting a title which used up almost a quarter of the alphabet — National Federation of Trade Unions representing Shop Workers, Warehousemen and Clerks. The basic objects rule was "To combine for trade purposes, to secure unity of action" between the members. The members were AUCE, National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants and the National Union of Clerks, shortly to be joined by the Railway Clerks' Association.

The Federation did some useful work in such matters as organising a petition in support of a Shops' Hours Bill (AUCE branches secured about half of the 80,000 signatures), agitating against living-in (yes, that abomination was still in existence), and in mediating in disputes between AUCE and the Shop Assistants' Union over recruitment and other activities, partic-

ularly in Scotland. But for one reason or another, relations between the two Unions continued to deteriorate. No doubt there were faults on both sides but it was the Shop Assistants' who brought the issue to open war on a national scale.

A further attempt to amalgamate the two distributive Unions had been made by the TUC in 1913. AUCE stood by the principle that the service (clerical) Unions should also be brought in. Rather than immediate amalgamation, it proposed they should plan for a more active and militant Federation. That was the breaking point for NAUSA, which persisted in pressing for a two-part amalgamation of the distributive Unions (although it must have known that AUCE's annual meeting of 1912 had voted against amalgamation by a large majority). The Shop Workers' National Executive served notice on AUCE that all agreements on canvassing and organising Co-operative workers were ended. All Co-operative societies were informed that the NAUSA was the Union for the distributive trades and must have a voice in any settlement for shop workers. Thereafter, NAUSA left the Federation, which broke up. It was to be open war between the two Unions for some years, plus, as we shall see in the next Chapter, a widening gap between AUCE and the TUC.

Next in influence to wages and conditions was a soundly based benefit scheme. We saw the first scale of benefits and contributions in Chapter 3. The scales were adjusted from time to time during the first two decades and because of lack of support provision for superannuation was dropped in 1907, *contributions being returned to members*. By 1912 a total of £93,972 had been paid out since benefit provision began in 1896. When the National Insurance Act came into operation on 15th July, 1912, AUCE became an Approved Society for Health Insurance purposes and thereafter the report of the National Insurance Department became a special section of the annual report.

By 1912 women were becoming an increasingly important part of the Union's membership. They were first particularised in the membership figures in 1898, when their number was only 127 — 2 in the Airedale District, 45 in Manchester, 96 in Northern (23 of them in the Annfield Plain branch, which also had the largest total membership — 142 — in the District). By 1912

there were 3,014 women in a total national membership of 32,741. Northern District was still ahead with 754 women members.

There was fear that low-wage women workers would replace men. But, perversely — as it was reported to a Sunderland conference in 1908 — some branches refused to take the obvious course of inviting them into the Union. A letter from Mari Yarworth in a 1908 issue of *The Co-operative Employee* declared “It is not our desire to oust men from positions; our aim is to attain a higher standard of efficiency, to obtain better work and better pay, to obtain equal educational advantages for the making of better saleswomen, clever dressmakers, artistic milliners and capable manageresses”.

The AUCE also had close links with the Women’s Co-operative Guild which since 1906 had been campaigning for a minimum wage for women in Co-operative service, particularly in the factories of the CWS. There were joint committees with the Guild in AUCE districts and close contact in many branches where the Guild was an ally in working for acceptance of the minimum wage for Co-operative shop workers.

The Legal Department of a Trade Union rarely gets a thought from members — until they need it, when, for a time, it can become a major factor in personal or family affairs. From early days the Executive minutes record payments for legal advice and assistance. Illegal deductions from wages, compensation in cases of accident, shortages of cash or goods, wages in sickness, slander of Union members; on these and other hazards AUCE provided a shield of law in cases where the individual employee would virtually have been helpless against an arbitrary decision of committee or manager. Grocery workers were warned by the legal department against one new hazard of shop life in the annual report for 1909, when it was reported that “A terrible accident resulting in the death of a member should make everyone employed in a grocery department alive to the new peril in shop life caused by the introduction of bacon-cutting machines, and the necessity of fixing them securely on counters or elsewhere”.

Throughout the first twenty-one years the Employment Register continued to provide a useful service. During the period there had been 1,822 applications by societies for

names of "servants" (the term was still being used in 1912, although "employees" was gradually being substituted). These societies had been supplied with 7,731 names, and 489 appointments had been made. Rank and file employees were not the only ones to use the service. General, departmental and branch managers and secretaries were on the 1912 list.

Many other events of the first twenty-one years can only briefly be mentioned. The *Union began the interest in international affairs* which continues to this day. The first direct overseas contact was with the German Co-operative Shop Assistants' Union in 1901. AUCE was represented at the Congress of the International Co-operative Alliance held in Manchester in 1902 and for some years subscribed to the funds of the ICA. In 1908 it affiliated to the International Federation of Employees in the Distributive Trades, and in 1910 to the Scottish TUC. In 1903 A. Hewitt was elected to the Board of the Co-operative Newspaper Society now Co-operative Press; a representation which has continued down to the present time. Educational work was continuous in the columns of *The Co-operative Employee*, pamphlets, conferences and association with the Co-operative Union through a seat on its Central Educational Committee and participation at district level. There had been a small beginning in persuading societies to include a fair wages clause in their rules, and rather more success in establishing Trade Union membership as a condition of employment (in the annual report for 1913 60 societies were named as following this practice).

When so many men and women give their time and energy to a cause it is a delicate task to name individuals. But three must be mentioned before this chapter ends. In 1897 J. Dyson failed to secure re-election as General President and was succeeded by T. Howe (Sunderland). And at the Executive meeting of 26th November, 1901, J. (Joseph) Hallsworth, aged 17, member of the Droylsden branch, was appointed to the staff on a wage of 15/- a week. We shall see much more of him in later chapters.