



Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru
The National Library of Wales
Aberystwyth



Cylchgronau Cymru
Welsh Journals Online

Awdur
Author

Gwyn A. Williams.

Teitl erthygl
Article title

"Merthyr 1831:"

Teitl cylchgrawn

*Llafur : Cylchgrawn Cymdeithas Hanes
Pobl Cymru*

Journal title

*Llafur the journal of the Society for the
Study of Welsh Labour History.*

Rhifyn
Issue

Vol. 1, no. 1 (May 1972), p. 3-15.

url

Crëwyd a chyhoeddwyd y fersiwn digidol hwn o'r cylchgrawn yn unol â thrwydded a roddwyd gan y cyhoeddwr. Gellir defnyddio'r deunydd ynddo ar gyfer unrhyw bwrpas gan barchu hawliau moesol y crewyr.

The National Library of Wales has created and published this digital version of the journal under a licence granted by the publisher. The material it contains may be used for all purposes while respecting the moral rights of the creators.

JISC

Noddir gan
Lywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Sponsored by
Welsh Assembly Government



MERTHYR 1831: LORD MELBOURNE AND THE TRADE UNIONS

PROFESSOR GWYN A. WILLIAMS

University of York

Some of the most dramatic correspondence I have ever read in the public records are the letters exchanged in October and November 1830 between the magistrates of Manchester, Robert Peel of the dying Tory government and Lord Melbourne of the incoming Whigs.² What they called *The Trade Union* lay like a black shadow across their every thought. Even at the height of the labourers' revolt, Capt Swing, it was *The Union* and the political movement hardly distinguishable from it which occupied their thoughts. Dolleaus, the French historian, said baldly that a working class movement in both Britain and France emerged in the period 1829-34. I think he was absolutely right. I see that time of almost European tension which we call the Reform crisis as the matrix. I sense that the winter of 1831-32 was seminal. I feel that some of our received wisdom on the subject is mistaken.

That is another story. What is certain is that it was the drive for a general union, what Foster of Manchester called a kind of *levee en masse*, which was central. The popular movement, infinitely complex and varied, but infinitely resilient and persistent, rises like a great tide in the winter of 1829-30 and flows right through the Reform Bill crisis and the reshaping of community into Chartism, hopelessly entangled with the travail of the political nation but in a very real sense in secular independence of it. If one wants a starting date I suppose the Ramsay spinners' conference of December 1829 will do as well as any.³ For central to it was the drive for a general union of the working classes, usually Owenite in inspiration at least among the leaders, which found one expression in John Doherty's National Association for the Protection of Labour and its organ the *United Trades' Co-operative Journal*. The temporary success of this movement is really quite remarkable. It gives the year 1830 its character.

The legalisation of unions in 1825 provided the opportunity. What is striking about the unions affiliated to the NAPL is their sophistication. They made an art of industrial confrontation. Mobilisation first, the massing of funds, the creation of club houses and money depots, the swift and painless transfer of necessary funds from sector to sector, sometimes at opposite ends of the country; the selective strike, the choice of a weak enterprise as target and the concentration of the whole force of the union on that sector; the skilful and often ruthless exploitation of rivalries and divisions among the masters, of quirks and oddities in the Poor Law, the application of pressure on farmers and outsiders, on public opinion, the wooing of irate and old-fashioned Tory paternalists appalled at the spectacle of upstart millicrats; above all the formation of unions firm in organisation and solidarity with an underground power compounded of the oath and the occult, the secret articles designed to establish an important measure of what we today would call workers' control. Small wonder that the anguished letters which flooded into the Home Office in 1830 from the North and the Midlands in particular sound like the last despairing cries of a crumbling order. In every region where the NAPL operated, there was a response which came close to panic – and baffled panic at that.⁴

Because after 1825 authority couldn't get at them. In Manchester in October 1830 they were obsessed with picketting. The picket groups were small, they were strangers, they practised intimidation. Summonses were useless. What could they do? There was a clamour for new legislation, for powers of instant and arbitrary arrest. In the last days of the Tory government, Foster and Peel, both in utter frustration, were actually considering the provocative display of military force to sting the unionists into some flash reaction which would legitimise massive repression. Peel left this correspondence as the most important issue of the day to his successor Melbourne. The latter of course sent for Nassau Senior and his celebrated report on the unions and remained obsessed with *The Union* throughout the crisis. But even the piercing and painful mind of Nassau Senior failed utterly to foresee the unions' manipulation of the Poor Law and settlement practices as a disruptive force, failed to grasp the sheer guerilla cunning of which these men were capable. Inevitably, frustrated minds came to rivet on the union oath, on union secrecy, union ritual, which could be conjured into illegality, particularly since it was here, not in the political nation, that the French Revolution of 1830 made its impact. John Betts, the NAPL organiser in the Midlands, unfurled the tricolour and opened proceedings with the Marseillaise; the almost European anticlericalism of the radical movement at this time ran through the election of branch delegates. It was now that old men began to talk of digging up Paine's *Rights of Man* from the secret place where they'd buried it under Pitt, for had not 1830 proved Tom right after all?⁵ To misquote Aneurin Bevan, there was no immaculate conception of workers' solidarity.

It was the global political crisis of 1830-31, I think, that in the end broke them, at least for a time, but as far as I can see, it *is* this movement which represents the first breakthrough after that decade of silent insurrection of the 1820's.

And it was, of course, a group affiliated to the NAPL which first brought trade unions properly so-called to Wales. It would be false to call Wales virgin territory. There had been any number of combinations and associations. The work of David Jones has shown us how surprisingly organised such temporary groupings could be, how resourceful and imaginative our lost and semi-visible grandfathers were. In Monmouthshire in 1830, even in that Black Domain of David's, they were practising what was in effect trade unionism. But it remains true that such phenomena were transient, particular, ad hoc; they lacked a hard bone of semi-permanence, the straining after institutionalisation, the sense of wide and mobilised organised solidarity, that political sense and vision which could raise funds from Newcastle colliers to deploy in Staffordshire. In this sense, trade unionism came to Wales from the NAPL. Its first lodgment, appropriately enough, was in Robert Owen's Newtown in July 1830 where, characteristically enough, it took prompt advantage of rivalries among the masters. The first serious lodgment however was by a colliers' union in North Wales, on the coalfield in Denbighshire and Flintshire, in November 1830. For months, well into 1831 through the Battle of Chirk Bridge and the Acrefair riots, that coalfield was in tension and turmoil, the coming of the union evoking that same enthusiasm, almost millenarian, that one senses in the Merthyr Riots a few months later. By April 1831, this union, The Friendly Associated Coal-Miners' Union Secretary, based on Bolton in Lancashire, with branches in Yorkshire, Cheshire, Staffordshire and North Wales, formally affiliated to the NAPL.

It was created in March 1830.⁶ Authority Lodge was at Bolton. The hinge was the Lodge committee of seven, elected by the branch. A sub-committee of three delegates went to quarterly

union meetings. There were four officials, the secretary and the treasurer, paid officials. The key officers were perhaps the four inspectors who tried to exercise a measure of control over wages and working conditions and on whose reports action was based. The entrance fee was stiff, 10/6; subscriptions seem to have varied. Published regulations were resolutely respectable, concerned mainly with fines and penalties directed at good conduct; politics and religion were taboo, meetings opened and closed with a prayer.

The secret articles were tougher. They were directed mainly at restricting free entry to the craft and at protection against blacklegs. The central planks in the union's programme were resistance to wage reductions, the equalisation of wages between workplaces, which occupied a central position, control over many aspects of hiring, firing and work practice, which made serious inroads into managerial authority. In the service of this programme, the union would employ selective strikes, manipulation of the poor law, boycott and various forms of persuasion and intimidation. It was cemented by the solemn oath and a profound secrecy.

It is not clear how far the unions which penetrated Wales followed strictly the Bolton pattern. Certainly the financial management of the union was skilful and effective; it did prove possible to milk one region to serve another and the North Wales lodges were well integrated into the national pattern. There is no reason to think that the South Wales lodges before the great lockout were any different.

Those South Wales lodges of course precipitated the lockout which broke the union in Wales. They appeared in the shadow of the Merthyr Riots of the early days of June 1831; those riots which began as an almost classic natural justice action on a mass scale and after the shooting on 3 June developed into a serious insurrection which twice defeated the armed forces of the Crown. It was perhaps the most serious, sustained and traumatic popular revolt in modern Welsh history. Naturally the connexion between this uprising, colourful, dramatic, complete with semi-religious ritual and the martyr figure of Dic Penderyn, and which belonged to an archaic world of action and sensibility, the connexion between the uprising and the first appearance of union lodges in the area, a union moreover which was, shall we say, technologically advanced and politically sophisticated, that connexion must first engage our minds.

Trade union lodges appeared in the Merthyr area *after* not *before* the Merthyr Riots; this is incontrovertible. The first direct statement I have, however, comes very soon after those Riots. On 18 June, little more than a week after the dust had settled, Evan Thomas, Chairman of Glamorgan Quarter Sessions, in a report to the Home Office included the sentence 'The attempts to initiate Union Clubs of some description among the workmen since the disturbances have been....' I couldn't read the word but the implication is, unsuccessful. He underlined the word since.⁷ The next reference comes on 3 July when the Marquis of Bute promised Melbourne to send more information on the Clubs at Merthyr as soon as he could and added that the only printed paper found was a large placard called the Workman's Manual which carried the clauses of the act of 1825.⁸ Mid-June and early July then, was a shadowy period of sensed growth.

But it is not as simple as that. On 8 June, only two days after that last confrontation with the rebels at Dowlais Top and while the military and police raids were still scouring a disturbed Merthyr, Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, himself at grips with trouble in his own area, wrote from

Wynnstay to the Home Office.

He had been told by Kirk, a coal owner then on duty with the militia that he, Kirk, had been told by 'Robert Hughes a collier who stated that he was going to Bolton in Lancs where he was to be employed as a captain by the Union that there was to be a general turn out among the colliers in less than a month's time. I should not have troubled your Lordship with this detail did not the period fixed for turning out tally exactly with that mentioned in South Wales as the time for insurrection by the colliers throughout the kingdom'.⁹

Tie this in with that remarkable report on the colliers' union from Ruabon which was sent to the Home Office on 29 June and which has but recently entered this area of discussion. It gave a very detailed account of the operation of the union, which was quite sophisticated, and said that itinerant preachers of the union had recently visited the area, William Twiss from Bolton and William Hughes a Welshman from Rhos.¹⁰

'Twiss is the leading person and travels to every mining district in the kingdom for the sole and avowed purpose of instigating the colliers to form themselves into societies for the purpose of fixing the price of wages.' He describes the almost millenarian enthusiasm which Twiss had evoked, closely kin to that displayed in Merthyr during the riots, talks of men out of work and without food borrowing or even stealing from their parents the 10/6 needed for entrance money to the Union.

Twiss 'is a person of slender make and exceedingly effeminate. His sermons or addresses are highly extolled and stamp him as a man of more than ordinary abilities. He says that he was educated for the Church of England from which he has seceded. Twiss boasts much of the wealth and strength of the Union and holds out to the poor misguided wretches here that when it becomes necessary for them to stand out, that they will not only be liberally supplied by the parent societies but by private Gentlemen also one of whom during the strike in Lancs, remitted to the Directors to the amount of £300'.

The informant continues — 'He went from hence to South Wales carrying with him the whole of the cash collected at the various Depots and arrived there a short time previous to the disturbances at Merthyr Tydfil'.

The arrangement was that when necessary, North Wales funds would be directed to South Wales and vice versa and the writer speculated that over £1000 had already been remitted in South Wales. He added —

'It is also generally understood by the members of the Club in this neighbourhood that the recent disturbances in South Wales were not altogether in conformity to the previous understanding amongst the head managers, as it is said to have been the turn of North Wales to have stood out before their brethren in South Wales and much disapprobation is expressed at the premature draught of the South Wales societies funds to support the turn outs in South Wales, as it has much deranged their plans for a general strike, in Denbighshire, Flints, parts of Shropshire in the month of October next.'

Melbourne took Watkin Williams Wynn's general strike warning of the 8 June seriously enough to alert the authorities in the North and Midlands. They found nothing to confirm it. He also ordered a hunt for Twiss in Bolton. The report from Bolton was that a William Twiss had emigrated to America some years earlier and that nothing further had been heard of him.¹¹

The Ruabon report, however, with its wealth of circumstantial and I should add thoroughly credible detail, is categorical in stating that the Union Preacher, Twiss or a man calling himself Twiss, moved with funds to South Wales and arrived there shortly *before* the outbreak of insurrection in Merthyr.

Let's look for evidence in Merthyr. The starting point of the troubles of course was that mass meeting on the Waun above the town, nominally in the cause of Reform, which thousands attended. It was clearly a confused meeting and most reports of it are equally confused. At times several speakers seem to have been haranguing the crowd at the same time. But it can be taken as the detonator of those crowd actions which brought the soldiers in and grew into armed insurrection.

The best report is by John Petherick the Penydarren agent who was remarkably brave, persistent and clear-headed in moving through the Riots at almost every stage.¹² There were banners, no chairman or minutes and the ostensible purpose was to petition or rather address the King in support of the Reform Bill. One man spoke from notes on the revenues of the Bishops and the Church. This suggests to me the 1830 edition of John Wade's *Black Book* of corruption in its second, anti-clerical version. Several spoke to the theme of reform. Another speaker raised a new matter, two or three complained about the parish officers and the Court of Requests (which of course they later attacked). The speeches, said Petherick, were generally incoherent and rambling.

Then he reports, one said they must have the Court of Requests down. He also said, and here Petherick adds 'he was a stranger to me' – he also said – 'You have been petitioning Parliament several times and for years and there is no notice taken of them. My plan is to bring the matter to a short conclusion and I advise every one of you to refrain from working any longer. He told them to apply to the parish officers in the parishes you live in for the relief which is allowed by law; you will then be removed to the Parishes to which you belong in the case of you being strangers. All this and your support will cause very great expense, which must fall on the rate payers who are generally farmers and who cannot afford to pay more than they now do and perhaps there may be some of them present and who hear me for I have no ill will against them, but only wish to reach the Great Men through them. The farmers would be unable to pay their rents and taxes and then something decisive will take place for which otherwise they might go on petitioning for ever without obtaining any benefit'.

A resolution to stop work was then carried with acclamation.

There are a number of points to be made about this rather strange report.

1 It *is* strange; it is out of place. The tenor of the meeting changed abruptly when the stranger spoke. Indeed the next speaker, according to Petherick, 'drew attention to what, he said, was the original object of the meeting, to address the King on the subject of reform'. One can almost hear

him saying it, but he got little response.

2 Petherick singled out this speaker as a stranger to him. It is difficult to imagine any of the others being strangers to him.

3 The technique the speaker advocated was actually a technique recommended if not employed by the NAPL.¹³

4 On 31 October that year, in the middle of the great lookout, the man called Twiss was reported as doing just that, billeting strikers and their families in groups of 80 and 100 out in their native parishes.¹⁴

5 In so far as this mass meeting reached any resolutions, they were the abolition of the court of requests and of imprisonment for debt, the suppression of regrating in anticipation of the market (a traditional popular demand) and finally, an undertaking that no miner would take a stall abandoned by another miner except at an increased price. This latter, a natural reaction of course, was another standard precept of the colliers' union.

6 One of the first actions of the crowds unleashed by this mobilisation was to march against the ironmaster Fothergill who was said to have boasted that he could pay lower wages than Crawshay and get away with it. Equalisation of wages was the fixed objective of the coal union.¹⁵

Add to this Evan Thomas' report of the 18 June which surely implies that the formation of clubs must have begun very soon indeed after the riots, which were still an insurrection as late as the evening of the 6th.

Obviously none of this is in any way conclusive, but when you relate it to the very precise report from Ruabon and even to the vague rumour of a miners' general strike which reached Wynn from South Wales, you surely cannot escape the inference that the arrival of Owenite trade union delegates was one factor in the Merthyr riots. Union notions and practices flicker in the smoke. It was obviously a minor factor. Any attempt to launch unions was swamped in the cataclysmic natural justice uprising which followed. But the unions begin to emerge into the light, or at any rate into magistrates' letters, as soon as authority begins to clear up the rubble.

I believe the two ran into each other in the mind of Lord Melbourne. Mention of ropes carried by the Merthyr rioters at the back of crowds riveted his mind on the problem of intimidation which was precisely the central issue in his continuing struggle against *The Union*.¹⁶ He was extremely persistent on this point in his exacting letters to the Merthyr authorities. This struggle with *The Union* and the parallel and indistinguishable popular political movement was filling his thoughts and emotions. Digby Mackworth in his reports persistently referred to the trade unions as political union societies which was actually quite a natural identification to make.¹⁷ The reprieve of Lewis Lewis, Lewsyn yr Heliwr, according to Merthyr magistrates, gave a fillip to the growth of the union.¹⁸ One could argue an at least academic and paradoxical case that Dic Penderyn, through the oblique prism of Melbourne's mind, unconsciously, indirectly, obliquely, but ultimately died a martyr to the National Association for the Protection of Labour.

The union grew in an atmosphere of sedition and revolt as a direct outgrowth from the rising. On 1 August, the inhabitants of Merthyr petitioned for the retention of the garrison in the town, the 100 men of the 98th who walked the streets with their weapons cocked. 'We further beg to

state,' ran the petition, 'that the workmen have formed secret associations and clubs among themselves and from their conduct and behaviour towards witnesses and others reluctantly engaged in the late prosecutions at the late Cardiff Assizes, from insinuations thrown out by many and from the insidious (sic) and poisonous nature of communications made by strangers calling themselves delegates from some parts of England we firmly believe they would seize the first favourable moment for assembling in large bodies and would commit excesses hitherto unknown in this district if military aid were not on the spot.'¹⁹

The reprieve for Lewis Lewis and the stay of execution granted Dic Penderyn threw alarm into the local powers. The coming of Joseph Price with his petition in favour of Dic, the crowds milling around the Castle Inn to give evidence, the ultimate execution and that same night the crowd attack on the house of James Abbott the barber who had given what people believed to be perjured testimony and who was driven in panic to hide among the kidney beans in his garden, all were directly related in official reports to the ominous, silent, mushroom surge of *union* power.²⁰ It was as if a silent army had taken possession of the *Blaenau* from Newport round to Swansea. It was this sense of worker control, the intense anger and fear at the union oath and union secrecy which created a kind of panic wherever the union penetrated. Only a man like William Perkins, the radical solicitor who was a rival to the established Meyrick, saw fit to point to the innocuous public rules of the union which were painfully respectable.²¹ Most talked only of oaths and secret articles and servants controlling masters. There was a dreadful polarisation in the town, as an already imperfectly integrated society ground apart like some clumsy cast-iron mechanism. The political radicals, many of them far outriders to the left in politics, closed ranks with their political opponents; the chapels turned a face of brass. The Riots and the unions between them divided Merthyr district into two spiritual ghettos.

But if the rise of the union generated panic, it also precipitated action, action which was carefully thought out and resolute. On 27 August a series of letters went out from Dowlais House to other regions which had been affected by the union, to Monmouthshire and North Wales, to Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Cumberland for certain, probably to other coal regions. It was a circular. Every answer gave the same message; nip the movement in the bud, crush it before it could grow; unity among the masters had to be achieved; lack of it had undone the defeated regions whose spokesmen sounded as if they lived under an enemy army of occupation.²²

The most active response to Dowlais came from W.H. Bevan of Beaufort in Monmouthshire, who devised a dismissal form to service united action.

' "I hereby certify that the Bearer, William Jones Collier, 'not being a member of any Union or other Society combined for the purpose of regulating Wages', is this day discharged from the employ of Messrs. Kendalls and Bevan, in pursuance of notice to that effect given by (or to) the said William Jones on the 2nd of August last.

W.H.Bevan.

Would not the above form answer all purposes? Should the man be a Member of the Union, the words between the Commas being drawn through with the pen would be a sufficient hint.

The Notices should be printed in duplicate so that a Register would be Kept of each man's discharge. The Words scored under to be left blank. Will Mr. Guest give it his Consideration. ²³

Mr. Guest did, and together with Anthony Hill of the Plymouth works proposed a general

dismissal of union men. Six works agreed but unity was not achieved and probably could not be. William Crawshay I, the old fox in London, informed his volcanic son at Cyfarthfa that the men had as much right to a union as the masters and maintained his position. William Crawshay II kept some contact with union men throughout and thought the union would do the trade good in raising prices and reducing the make.²⁴ But he was prepared to stand by and the others were ready to lend spiritual support. In mid-September Dowlais, and Plymouth works began to refuse employment to the men unless they renounced their union. The response was virtually unanimous and the works ground to a halt.²⁵

So began one of the most bitter struggles in the black history of the coalfield, a harsh, unrelenting dour battle which brings to mind 1926 and indeed recalls the equally unrelenting drive of the insurrection of the previous June. Responding in classic NAPL style, the men at other works stayed in and sent flour and other supplies; some came from as far afield as Maesteg. None came from England, where Bolton itself was already engaged in what was to prove its death struggle. But Twiss came back in the middle of October, established himself and his family, organised mass petitions for poor relief, mass migrations into home parishes. 'My Lord, the union is so important to me that I will live on 6d a week rather than give it up' one miner told a magistrate. By late October, 4000 men and their families were half-starved. Mass meetings were threatened, crowds hung around the club houses, beggars infested the streets, frightened shopkeepers were clamouring once more for soldiers and flying artillery.²⁶

The masters were able to turn the whole force of what organised society there was against the union men. One minister at Dowlais had to apologise to Guest for attending a public meeting of the union.²⁷ Some chapels split. Very active in this social mobilisation was Guest's brother, the rather inappropriately named Thomas Revel Guest. For Thomas was a Wesleyan Methodist whom some, as Wilkins put it, thought too rigid. His appearance at Dowlais House was sufficient to put an immediate stop to any and every sign of frivolity among the servants.²⁸ In November, he wrote a Plain Address to union men who were also church members which is worth quoting.

Brethren, the Christianity of the Bible recognises all men of every station in life as Brethren, who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, allow one, who humbly hopes that by the grace of God he is a partaker of the common salvation, to address you in reference to the great absorbing subject which occupies the thoughts of most men in this neighbourhood at the present moment, viz. the Union Lodges. It will not be denied that the Kingdom of God is Righteousness, Peace and Joy in the Holy Ghost, we are exhorted to follow Peace with all men, to use our best efforts to promote peace, this then being an object which must be powerfully influential on every real Christian, let us enquire whether Membership with these Union Societies tends to promote "Peace on earth, goodwill towards men" or, whether it is not calculated to injure if not destroy that spirituality of mind which Saint Paul refers to, in Romans 8.6 "to be carnally minded is Death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace". With respect to the oath of initiation into the lodge and as to which I am rejoiced to hear the consciences of many have been troubled, let me ask are there any oaths imposed on individuals seeking membership with a Christian Church or any other religious Society? I answer decidedly No, our Bibles teach us, Swear not at all, thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain, let your communication be yea, yea, nay, nay, whatsoever is more than this cometh of evil, so that this very oath as a profanation of God's Holy Name cometh of evil, and we cannot have fellowship with evil without grieving the spirit of God.....

... is it not written "provide things honest in the sight of all men" and again "take heed and beware of covetousness" so that in providing for your own house you are not to infringe on the providential order of God, by invading the rights of others, by attempting to force upon those whom God has set over you, the

adoption of such regulations and the payment of such wages as would be beneficial to yourselves while they would be ruinous to your masters...

.... Is not this "Union" a confederacy that brings you into those places where as men fearing God you should not be found, the Public House is not the usual place of resort for the Disciples of Christ....

... God requires of you, Isaiah 1.16, 17 "Cease to do evil, learn to do well", come out from among them and be ye separate.....²⁹

The celebrated pamphlet which appeared at this time, *On the Oaths taken in the Union Club* by Looker-On is couched in exactly the same style, directed against the Oath as a violation of the Third Commandment. Thomas Guest was very active in its distribution, sending copies in Welsh to North Wales and others all over the country. He may well have had a deal to do with the pamphlet. At least six of the great works in the district lent support to the embattled two. And at every stage there was close co-operation with the government, close consultation. It became a set-piece battle, a test-case, with Melbourne exhorting, encouraging, advising at every turn. For as he wrote on 24 October, 'The unions may and probably will produce much mischief to the country, much loss and distress to those who engage in them. They may impede trade, they may diminish profit...they may lead to serious disturbances...I feel convinced that the ultimate result of them will be to teach those who have formed them and those who have acceded to them that they have proposed to themselves in the settling and securing a certain rate of wages and a sure supply of employment objects which it is impossible by any means whatever either violent or otherwise to obtain.'³⁰

Government support was not limited to exhortation. Early in October there was a decisive action, or rather decisive inaction.

On the 5th J.B. Bruce, the stipendiary magistrate, sent a harassed letter to the Home Office, reporting a new and worrying phase in the struggle. Three to four thousand were now out and during the last few days great crowds had besieged the Justice Room demanding summonses against the parish officers for refusing them poor relief. The officers had proved that there was an abundance of work available on condition of their giving up the unions, which they refused to do. 'The workmen say', said Bruce, 'they do not wish to control their masters and that they do not exceed the powers given them by 6 Geo IV, cap. 129 and that therefore the Masters have no right to annex any conditions to their returning to work.'

Bruce was clearly nonplussed by this pugnacious erudition. Have I the right to order this relief? he asked, and added that he had sent posthaste for the magistrates of Caerphilly Hundred and for E.P. Richards the Cardiff solicitor. He feared 'the excitement naturally attendant on questions where want of food may occur'.³¹

The Home Office got the letter on October 7th. They were clearly quite as nonplussed, for Melbourne on the 10th referred the matter to the Law Officers of the Crown.³² The Attorney-General replied the same day. He had been unable to contact the Solicitor General and merely gave his personal opinion.

'I think that a workman willing to hire himself but refused employment because he belongs to a Union is entitled to parochial relief unless the union be illegal or unless the members of it are bound by stipulations inconsistent with the performance of the servant's duty to his master.'³³

On the next day, the 11th, the Law Officers delivered their formal opinion from Lincoln's Inn.

'If the present had been an abstract question as stated in the letter submitted to us "whether under the existing laws, Justices of the Peace are warranted in withholding parochial relief in cases where full employment can be given to the individuals applying for that relief" we should have stated it as our opinion that the Magistrates were justified in withholding such relief. But if the Employment can only be had upon the terms of the labourer submitting to a condition imposed upon him by his employer as to political or other public matters which the law does not impose upon the labourer, we are of opinion that although the master has a right not to give employment except to those who may submit to his condition, yet that the labourer is not on his part bound to submit to the condition and that in such case he is entitled to relief, if the employment to which such condition is attached is the only employment he can get. The question submitted to us therefore taken in connexion with the Magistrate's letter seems to resolve itself into this; whether the union societies of which the workmen are members are illegal societies. If not, we think that the workmen are entitled to parochial relief and we see no grounds stated for thinking that they are illegal.'³⁴

Melbourne however had already replied to Bruce before he received this opinion. And as far as I can discover, not a word of the Law Officers' statement was ever transmitted to Merthyr. Instead, on the 7th, Melbourne wrote a reply to Bruce which took three drafts to get right.

First effort: 'With regard to the question of the right to parish relief in the circumstances which you have stated, it appears to me that from...'

(DELETED)

Second effort: 'The question of the right of the men to parish relief appears to be one of some doubt and difficulty and which it is impossible to determine without an exact knowledge of all the actual circumstances...'

(DELETED)

Final letter: 'You have (therefore deleted) exercised a sound discretion in calling for the assistance of as many of the Magistrates acting for the Hundred as can be procured and in submitting the case to a Solicitor of high character and great experience. The opinion which you and the other Magistrates in assistance will be able to form will I (do not doubt deleted) feel no doubt be conformable to the law and I have as little doubt that when you have formed it, you will act upon it with (that deleted) the firmness as well as (that deleted) the discretion which is required by the difficult nature of the circumstances in which you are placed.'³⁵

Which strikes me as a composition worthy of Mr. R.A. Butler on peak form.

The magistrates (should I say of course) refused poor relief and in November the union was broken. There was one last upsurge at the time of the terrible Bristol Riots in a threatened mass meeting. It was countered by a mass mobilisation of the inhabitants as special constables. This was in turn part of the national mobilisation of the middle class as Specials which marked this November crisis, the most serious of the Reform Bill crises, which together with the onset of the cholera epidemic constitutes I think the decisive turning point for the emergent working class movement. The Merthyr Specials clearly had God on their side for He provided a suitably intimidating thunderstorm. The meeting was a flop, the starved men dragged back to work, and the union collapsed. Both William Crawshay II and William Twiss seem to have played ambiguous roles in the final collapse. Merthyr which had in those devastating six months lost over a quarter of its population settled down to the cholera and the last strong pull for the Reform Bill.³⁶

About this brief but dramatic first intrusion of full trade unionism into Wales, I think three points need to be made.

1 Firstly, for the student of human society and social action, there is the intractable problem of the relationship between the rising of June and the trade unions which followed. In a sense, the unions can be conceived as a reaction against the archaism of the rising, which was a communal revolt of classic character recalling some episodes in the Reformation and even medieval times. Consider this paradox: within a couple of months the working population of Merthyr moved directly from one of the most archaic forms of social protest to what was then the most developed and sophisticated form of industrial action. What a year that was in Merthyr, 1831! It's difficult to think of a year like it. In a matter of months, no weeks, one seems to lurch abruptly from one century to another. If there is such a thing as a mutation of consciousness, surely here may be one example of it.

We know how difficult the amorphous and shapeless society of Merthyr district was to organise: 'inhabitants of the ironworks' the parish minute book calls the workers: Amalek prevailed, in the opinion of one minister. 'What was Samaria', said another. 'Samaria was their ashtip where they threw all their stecks and rubbish, a hotbed of paganism and heresy and everything. Samaria was the Merthyr Tydfil of the land of Canaan.' In more clinical language social historians talk of the absence of an industrial tradition, a fluctuating labour force with a high proportion of young bachelors, the fragmentation of craft and trade, the persistence of regional attitudes. This can be overdone. According to Wilkins, in the early days of the village's growth, only two men took newspapers, John Guest and Vaynor's blacksmith astronomer. They took the same paper, Benjamin Flower's *Cambridge Intelligencer*, which was a *Jacobin* journal. I have found in my own work a remarkable degree of continuity in a radical political tradition which was central before the advent of Chartism. David Jones has shown how unprimative rebels can be. But no-one would deny still, I think, that booming Merthyr was peculiarly difficult for a popular organiser to organise. Can it be, then, that it took the elemental passion of a traditionalist and archaic communal revolt to create that solidarity which made trade unionism possible?

If this is true, it surely has some significance for social analysis, for the study of social action, for Marxism, for the intelligent application of some Marxist ideas?

The difficulty lies in getting at the kind of evidence which would enable us to approach the problem. So much has been lost. Not that it will be easy to find. But if it could be found and we could understand fully the relationship between the Riots and the unions, we would surely take a giant step forward in social history.

This is probably asking the impossible. If we solved that problem, I suppose we'd have solved the central problem of human history as such. It is as reasonable to expect even a new Welsh Labour History Society to achieve that end as it is to expect a Labour Government to be Socialist. But as with the Labour Party, we must live in constantly deferred hope.

2 Secondly, for the student of trade unions and government response, there is an interesting chronological point. All the issues at stake in 1831, the oath, workers' control, the legality of unions, government pressure, all of these issues were of course central to the critical year 1834,

the year the government broke the Owenite trade union movement, the Grand National Consolidated; the year of the Tolpuddle martyrs. The Webbs say 'the document' was first used in Liverpool in 1833: GDH has a similar chronology.³⁷ The point seems academic; something like 'the document' must surely have been used earlier. But if we *are* to be academic, in fact 'the document' was used in Merthyr in 1831. All the other issues were raised there, too. In fact it is the measured purpose of Dowlais and Plymouth iron masters which is striking; their sounding of opinion in other affected areas, their close collaboration with Melbourne in the Home Office. It is almost as if Dowlais and Plymouth regarded themselves as the vanguard of the embattled masters and not only in South Wales. Merthyr in 1831, with the benefit of hindsight, looks like a dress rehearsal.

3 Thirdly and finally, a related issue: this, I think, for students of the human drama, or melodrama, the tragi-comedy that creeps in this petty place. During this campaign to break the unions in October 1831, the magistrates of Merthyr Tydfil appear to have been acting in direct contravention of the law with the connivance of the Home Secretary.

NOTES

1. This paper was delivered at the inaugural meeting of *Llafur*, the Welsh Labour History Society on the 25th September, 1971; some oral comments have been excised but I have, in essentials, kept to the lecture form.
2. Basic sources for what follows are the Lancashire letters in H.O. 40/27 and H.O. 52/13 and *United Trades' Co-operative Journal*.
3. See *A report of the Proceedings of a Delegate Meeting of the Operative Spinners of England, Ireland and Scotland, Isle of Man, Ramsay*, 5–9 December 1829 (Manchester 1829).
4. For this and what follows, see H.O. 40/27, H.O.52/13 (Lancashire in particular) and G.D.H. Cole, *Attempts at General Union* (1953).
5. See *United Trades' Co-operative Journal*, *passim*.
6. On the union see Tufnell, *Character, Objects and Effects of Trade Unions* (1834); Looker-On, *On the Oaths Taken in the Union Clubs* (1831); G.D.H. Cole, *op.cit.*
7. Evan Thomas—Melbourne 18 June 1831, H.O.52/16.
8. Bute—Melbourne, 3 July 1831. H.O.52/16.
9. W.W. Wynn—Melbourne, 8 June 1831, H.O.52/16.
10. For what follows, see Notes relative to the Colliers Union Society in the parish of Ruabon in Denbighshire, 29 June 1831, H.O.52/16.
11. See letters from Melbourne to county authorities, June 1831 in H.O.41/10; letters from Foster of Manchester to Melbourne, June-July 1831 in H.O.52/13.
12. For Petherick's report, see inquest report of 21 June 1831 in H.O.52/16.

13. See *United Trades' Co-operative Journal*, passim and S. Webb's notes towards his history of trade unionism, Webb Collection (L.S.E.) A/26/5 and 6.
14. J.J. Guest and A. Hill-Melbourne, 31 October 1831, H.O.52/16.
15. On these points, see, among other sources, the reports to Melbourne in June 1831 in H.O.52/16.
16. See correspondence in H.O.52/16, S. and B. Webb, *History of Trade Unionism* (1920).
17. See, for example, Mackworth-Col. Egerton, 30 July 1831 in H.O.52/16.
18. A. Hill-Melbourne, 1 August 1831, in H.O.52/16.
19. Petition, 1 August 1831, H.O.52/16.
20. See A. Hill-Melbourne, 1 August 1831, and affidavit of James Abbott, 16 August 1831, *ibid.*
21. W. Perkins-Melbourne, 1 August 1831, H.O.52/16.
22. See letters in *Iron in the Making, Dowlais Iron Company Letters 1782-1860*, ed. M. Elsas (1960) pp. 58ff.
23. *Iron in the Making*, p.60.
24. See, for example, William Crawshay I-W. Crawshay II, 27 August and 7 September 1831 and W. Routh – W. Crawshay II, 24 September 1831 in Crawshay Papers (NLW) Box II, nos. 585a, 587, 588.
25. The struggle is well documented in H.O.52/16 and the press.
26. See correspondence of the magistrate J.B. Bruce and petition of householders, October-November 1831 in H.O.52/16.
27. *Iron in the Making*, p.61.
28. T. Wilkins, *History of Merthyr Tydfil*, pp. 177-178.
29. *Iron in the Making*, pp.61-62.
30. Melbourne-Bute, 24 October 1831, H.O.52/16.
31. J.B. Bruce-Melbourne, 5 October 1831, in H.O.52/16 and copy in Law Reports, H.O.48/28.
32. G. Lamb-T. Denman, 10 October 1831 in H.O.49/7p.429.
33. T. Denman-G. Lamb, 10 October 1831 in H.O.48/28.
34. Opinion of Attorney-General and Solicitor-General, 11 October 1831 in H.O.48/28.
35. The letter, with the deleted drafts, is in Melbourne-Bruce, 7 October 1831, H.O.52/16.
36. See the vivid correspondence for November 1831 in H.O.52/16.
37. See S. and B. Webb, *History of trade unionism* (1920) p.130; G.D.H. Cole, *op. cit.*