

"the working people, in the management of their colossal Trade Societies" also prove themselves "fit for administrative and political work."⁵³ This applies not only to the training of union officials—who sometimes become fit only to administer a labor market—but, in a larger sense, to the growth in organizational and administrative know-how that permeates far down into the ranks of a union with an actively participating membership.

There is still another consequence of trade-unionism that goes beyond any of the above points. While we will consider the conscious participation of trade unions in politics in the next chapter, Marx had occasion to point out that the mere existence of a trade-union movement had a meaning with relation to the state. This was particularly evident in the case of an authoritarian regime like Bismarck's, and Marx took care to point it out precisely to the Lassallean socialists, the representatives of "Royal Prussian Government socialism." When he publicly broke with this group, he lectured its chieftain Schweitzer that

Combinations, together with the "trades unions"⁰ growing out of them, are of the utmost importance not only as a means of organization of the working class for struggle against the bourgeoisie—this importance being shown by the fact, *inter alia*, that even the workers in the United States cannot do without them despite voting rights and the republic—but in addition, in Prussia and Germany generally, the right to organize is a breach in police rule and bureaucracy ... in short, it is a measure to make "subjects" come of age ...

The reference to Bismarck's Prussia was a little fuller in another letter around the same time: the government would not concede the complete abolition of the anti-trade-union laws "because that would involve making a breach in the bureaucracy, would make the workers legally of age," and would weaken the Junkers' control over agricultural labor—"which Bismarck could never allow and which was altogether incompatible with the Prussian *bureaucratic* state."⁵⁵

In liberalized states and under favorable economic conditions, the tension between trade-union movement and state could be eased, as long as the system could afford it, but it always posed a problem. A quarter century later, Engels still found it necessary to lecture the German party that "Nowhere more than in Germany does the right of combination need to be made secure as against the *state* too," and not only as against the capitalist class.⁵⁶

LIMITATIONS OF TRADE-UNIONISM

The historical problem in the socialist movement was seeing the positive[^]side of trade-unionism; there was never any lack of denunciation of the limitations, deficiencies, and faults of trade unions. The socialist orthodoxy that Marx overturned leaned exclusively on the latter. This pressure ensured that Marx and Engels scarcely ever took up the question without adequate reminders that the trade-union movement was not the end of the road for the working class.

To reflect this side of their views, we select three passages of special interest.

The first is a draft resolution on "Trade Unions—Their Past, Present and Future" which Marx drew up for the 1866 congress of the International. At first blush it seems to be a very inclusive statement, for it contains the positive side too; but in fact Marx had to pull this punch. It was the first formal challenge in the International as a whole to the old anti-trade-union prejudices that were still rife, especially in the French section controlled by the Proudhonists. When Marx had drafted the Inaugural Address of the International two years before, any mention of trade unions had been a touchy point. Progress had been made, but now mention of strikes was the sore point.* This document is therefore not a statement that fully reflects where Marx's thinking was by 1866; it included only as much as Marx thought could be adopted at this juncture by the International congress.

With this reservation, it is worth citing almost complete, for it is the first international statement that effectively linked trade-unionism with socialism as part of a revolutionary program.

°°TRADES' UNIONS THEIR PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

(Marx's draft) (a)

Their past.

Capital is concentrated social force, while the workman has only to dispose of his working force [labor power]. The *contract*

* Only two years later, at the Brussels congress of 1868, after Proudhonist influence had waned, it became possible to adopt a resolution entitled "Trades' Unions and Strikes," in which it was "Resolved-1. That strikes are not a means to the complete emancipation of the working classes, but are frequently a necessity in the actual situation of the struggle between labour and capital."⁵⁷ By this time, there were other problems, as we shall see.

between capital and labour can therefore never be struck on equitable terms, equitable even in the sense of a society which places the ownership of the material means of life and labour on one side and the vital productive energies on the opposite side. The only social power of the workmen is their number. The force of numbers, however, is broken by disunion. The disunion of the workmen is created and perpetuated by their *unavoidable competition amongst themselves*.

Trades' Unions originally sprung up from the *spontaneous* attempts of workmen at removing or at least checking that competition, in order to conquer such terms of contract as might raise them at least above the condition of mere slaves. The immediate object of Trades' Unions was therefore confined to everyday necessities, to expediences for the obstruction of the incessant encroachments of capital, in one word, to questions of wages and time of labour. This activity of the Trades' Unions is not only legitimate, it is necessary. It cannot be dispensed with so long as the present system of production lasts. On the contrary, it must be generalised by the formation and the combination of Trades' Unions throughout all countries. On the other hand, unconsciously to themselves, the Trades' Unions were forming *centres of organisation* of the working class, as the mediaeval municipalities and communes did for the middle class. If the Trades' Unions are required for the guerilla fights between capital and labour, they are still more important as *organised agencies for superseding the very system of wages labour and capital rule*.

(b) Their present.

Too exclusively bent upon the local and immediate struggles with capital, the Trades' Unions have not yet fully understood their power of acting against the system of wages slavery itself. They therefore kept too much aloof from general social and political movements. Of late, however, they seem to awaken to some sense of their great historical mission ... [English and U.S. examples are then cited.]

(c) Their future.

Apart from their original purposes, they must now learn to act deliberately as organising centres of the working class in the broad interest of its *complete emancipation*. They must aid every social and political movement tending in that direction. Considering themselves and acting as the champions and representatives of the whole working class, they cannot fail to enlist the non-society men into their ranks. They must look carefully after the interests

of the worst paid trades, such as the agricultural labourers, rendered powerless by exceptional circumstances. They must convince the world at large that their efforts, far from being narrow and selfish, aim at the emancipation of the downtrodden millions.⁵⁸

A year before this, Marx had included a stronger statement on the limitations of trade unions at the close of his presentation on "Wages, Price and Profit":

At the same time, and quite apart from the general servitude involved in the wages system, the working class ought not to exaggerate to themselves the ultimate working of these everyday struggles. They ought not to forget that they are fighting with effects, but not with the causes of those effects; that they are retarding the downward movement, but not changing its direction; that they are applying palliatives, not curing the malady. They ought, therefore, not to be exclusively absorbed in these unavoidable guerilla fights incessantly springing up from the never-ceasing encroachments of capital or changes of the market. They ought to understand that, with all the miseries it imposes upon them, the present system simultaneously engenders the *material conditions* and the *social forms* necessary for an economical reconstruction of society. Instead of the *conservative* motto, "A fair day's wage for a fair day's work!" they ought to inscribe on their banner the *revolutionary* watchword, "Abolition of the wages system!"

... Trades Unions work well as centres of resistance against the encroachments of capital. They fail generally from limiting themselves to a guerilla war against the effects of the existing system, instead of simultaneously trying to change it, instead of using their organised forces as a lever for the final emancipation of the working class, that is to say, the ultimate abolition of the wages system.

Engels began his aforementioned series of popular articles for English workers⁶⁰ with a critique of the "Fair Day's Wage" watchword, and included discussion of trade-unionism's limits. But a less known passage on the same subject may be of interest here. The question came up as a side issue in a polemic with the German economist Lujo Brentano in 1891, that is, after bourgeois economics had been convinced that there *was* a positive point to trade-unionism after all. Since the workers had not heeded their wise counsel to eschew union organi-

zation as a waste of time and substance, the economists had now turned around to use the reform-minded unions as a dead cat with which to belabor the socialists' insistence on fundamental change. Whereas once socialists had had to explain that there was a point to workers' unionization, now Engels had to explain that trade unions could not solve all of the workers' problems.

Herr Brentano's continually repeated statement that workers' protective legislation and trade-union organization lend themselves to the improvement of the condition of the working class is not in the least his own discovery. From *The Condition of the Working Class in England* and *The Poverty of Philosophy* to *Capital* and to my most recent writings, Marx and I have said this a hundred times, but with very considerable qualifications. Firstly, the favorable effects especially of workers' resistance organizations are limited to times of average and brisk trade; in periods of stagnation and crisis they regularly bog down. Herr Brentano's assertion that they "are able to paralyze the disastrous effects of the reserve army" is ridiculous bombast. And secondly — aside from other, less important qualifications—neither the protection given by legislation nor the resistance of the unions abolishes the main thing that has to be eliminated: the capital-labor relationship, which the antagonism between the capitalist class and the wage-working class always generates anew. The mass of wage-workers remain condemned to life-long wage-labor, the gulf between them and the capitalists becomes ever deeper and wider, the more modern large-scale industry takes over all branches of production. But since Herr Brentano would like to make the wage-slaves into *contented* wage-slaves, he has to enormously overstate the advantageous effects of labor protective laws, trade-union resistance, social-patchwork legislation, etc.; and since we are so misguided as to confront this overstatement with simple facts—hence his wrath.⁶¹

These and similar explanations are pitched in terms of any trade union, any resistance organization limited to economic issues, therefore even the best unions, even the best possible ones. But precisely because Marx took a positive stand for trade-unionism, it became necessary to differentiate between better and worse, unlike the sectarians who needed only to damn them all. Marx had to concern himself with the issues of policy and program inside the trade-union movement, like any other supporter.

We shall be concerned here with the large-scale issues in this area,

and in particular with the largest one: the kind of trade-unionism that tends to a tunnel vision focused only on narrow and short-sighted goals, hence self-sterilizing in the long run, versus the kind of trade-unionism that Best facilitates the movement's contribution to the long-term advancement of the class.

7. BUSINESS UNIONISM

The kind of trade-unionism that Marx opposed had been strongly enough criticized in the International resolution of 1866: the kind that systematically kept its efforts "narrow and selfish" in the interest of specially favored sectors and enclaves of the working class; the kind that remained "too exclusively bent upon the local and immediate struggles with capital," and increasingly detested struggles of any sort; above all, the kind that rejected political involvement and repudiated any program of "complete emancipation" as being an interference with its own pursuit of narrow privileges. This kind of unionism has been given various labels, such as "pure-and-simple unionism." Its central characteristic is that it regards the trade union as merely a haggler over the sale of labor power within the high walls of the capitalist system, a merchant of labor. From this point of view, business unionism is an apt description, though its use postdates Marx. (Engels often called it simply "conservative" unionism, as we shall see.)⁶²

By the mid-1870s, the International dead, the English trade unions were in full flight to the most philistine forms of business unionism. "For a number of years past," Engels wrote to his German comrades in 1879, "the English working-class movement has been hopelessly describing a narrow circle of strikes for higher wages and shorter hours, not, however, as an expedient or means of propaganda and organization but as the ultimate aim." It is divided into Tories and Liberals. "One can speak here of a labor movement only insofar as strikes take place here which, whether they are won or not, do not get the movement one step further." He advised the party press: "No attempt should be made to conceal the fact that at present no real labor movement in the Continental sense exists here ..,"⁶³ A labor movement "in the Continental sense" meant a movement that took itself seriously as a representative of the organized class—not a mere job trust or corporative guild.

Engels linked this difference to the "sense of theory" traditional to German workers:

What an incalculable advantage this is may be seen . . . from the indifference to theory which is one of the main reasons why the English working-class movement crawls along so slowly in spite of the splendid organization of the individual trades . . .

Business unionism needed little theory; bourgeois political economy provided more than enough for its purposes. It existed entirely within the confine of the ruling ideas of the ruling class. As a bourgeois enterprise, it took on the same shortsighted, blinkered concentration on considerations of immediate advantage that historically distinguished its masters.⁶⁵

One of the self-defeating forms of business unionism was the guild-like job trust. Many unions were shackled not only by bourgeois traditions but also by "(w)orkingmen's traditions, inherited from their first tentative efforts at independent action, such as the exclusion, from ever so many old Trade Unions, of all applicants who have not gone through a regular apprenticeship; which means the breeding, by every such union, of its own blacklegs [scabs] .^{>>66} The London dockers bred their own blacklegs by closing their lists to all new members; in addition they refused essential cooperation with another union; and "Then the dockers are raising an outcry against the immigration of foreign paupers (Russian Jews)."⁶⁷ The result of these reactionary policies was that another old-line union rapidly lost its base. In Manchester, another striking, union was handcuffing itself by restrictive guild practices: "they still plainly have some old trade-union traditions in their heads, that they will work only on this or that machine and only in a certain customary way; but they will soon drop this crap."⁶⁸

In a country with such an old political and labor movement there is always a colossal heap of traditionally transmitted rubbish which has to be got rid of by degrees. There are the prejudices of the skilled unions . . . the petty jealousies of the various trades, which become accentuated in the hands and heads of leaders into outright hostility and battles behind the scenes; there are the clashing ambitions and intrigues of the leaders (and so on] . . .⁶⁹

In the 1880s Engels trusted that the coming depression would "make an end of the old trade unions here, let us hope," for the "cr

character which stuck to them from the first . . . is becoming more unbearable every day."

The fools want to reform society to suit themselves but not to reform themselves to suit the development of society. They cling to their traditional superstition, which does them nothing but harm, instead of getting quit of the rubbish and thus doubling their numbers and their power and really becoming again what at present they daily become less—associations of all the workers in a trade against the capitalists. This, I think, will explain many things to you in the behavior of these privileged workers."⁷⁰

8. THE LABOR ARISTOCRACY

Engels' reference to "privileged workers" reflects a long-standing problem occupying the attention of socialists concerned with the trade-union movement. The guild-like and job-trust aspects and forms of conservative trade-unionism did indeed suggest the pattern of privileged enclaves of better-off workers inside the bourgeois order; and this had fed the lively suspicion of the early socialists that trade-unionism was an evil to be fought.

Among the many internal divisions of the working class, one of the most visible—touched on in Chapter 3 above⁷¹—was the stratification of low-paid and high-paid workers in whole trades and sectors of the class. This gave rise to terms like *aristocracy of labor*, no doubt first as a metaphor.⁷²

There was a mutually reinforcing tendency for the skilled trades to be more easily organized, and for the unionized trades to enforce higher wages. Therefore there was a tendency for trade-unionist narrowness and trade-union successes to be linked by critics of the movement, themselves taking a narrow view. Thus, in a key article opposing trade unions per se, Ernest Jones, in the name of the revolutionary wing of Chartism, also denounced the "aristocracy of labor":

K; ... it is said I am setting the laborers against the skilled mechanics—the low-paid trades against the high-paid.

Do we fight against class-government? Well, then? there is class-government in our own ranks, and we ought to fight against it too. Do we fight against aristocratic privilege? Well then—there

is aristocratic privilege of the vilest die among the high-paid trades, and we ought to fight against it too. Truth is the best policy. THE ARISTOCRACY OF LABOR MUST BE BROKEN DOWN, the same as any other aristocracies. *If you don't, when you have established democracy, these men will cany the Reaction.*

In the Continental movement, similar reproaches and fears were directed at the cooperatives, the trade unions being still underdeveloped.* In England, Jones also directed his shafts at the cooperatives, which "increased the numbers of the most dangerous class—the aristocrats among their own body."⁷⁵

While Marx disagreed with Jones's blanket opposition to trade-unionism, it was in this period of the early 1850s that he regarded Jones, for all his defects, as the best representative of left Chartism. Marx's first use of the "aristocracy" figure comes along in 1850 in the context of a passage on Chartism. Reviewing the past period, he notes that the Chartist organization is declining:

The petty-bourgeois who still belong to the party, allied with the aristocracy of the workers, form a purely democratic wing whose program is limited to the People's Charter and some other petty-bourgeois reforms. The mass of workers living under really proletarian conditions belong to the revolutionary wing of the Chartists.⁷⁶

The term is used here much as the left Chartists were using it, as a descriptive analogue. It occurs in the same way in *Capital*. There the passing reference is simply to the effects of crises on "the best-paid part of the working class, its aristocracy," without coloration.⁷⁷ But as the

* This talk came to a head at the Lausanne (1867) congress of the International, which was dominated by the French and Belgian Proudhonists. A formal report and full-length discussion dealt with the proposition that the existing workers' associations, specifically the cooperative movement, tended to produce a "fourth estate" (a higher-paid stratum of workers) at the expense of the formation of a "fifth estate" (depressed low-paid workers) whose conditions were so much the worse. (This danger had been suggested to the International from a rightward standpoint by the bourgeois-democratic radical philosopher Ludwig Buchner.) The reporter, C. de Paepe, counterposed "mutualist" (Proudhonist) associations to cooperatives which operated simply as profit-making enterprises within the present system. If the latter spread, it would mean "the creation of a new class composed of cooperative members who share these profits," a sort of middle class intermediate between the bourgeoisie (third estate) and the depressed proletariat (new fifth estate).¹⁷⁴

higher-paid and trade-unionized sectors of the English working class fossilized into business unionism and adopted the self-protective devices of the job trust, deepening the gulf between themselves and underpaid unskilled labor, the descriptive figure took on more importance. From the early 1870s on, the conception plays a more important role, in historical fact and in Marx's and Engels' writings about the fact.

At the London Conference of the International in 1871, in the course of a discussion to which we will return,⁷⁸ the minutes report Marx's opinion on the state of the trade unions:

... in England, the trade unions have existed for a half century, and the great majority of the workers are outside of the trade unions, [which] are an aristocratic minority. The poorest workers do not belong to them; the great mass of workers whom economic development daily drives out of the countryside into the cities remain outside the trade unions for a long time and the wretchedest [part of the! mass never gets into them.... The same goes for the workers born in the East End of London: one out of ten belongs to the trade unions. Peasants and day-laborers never join these [trade-union] societies.⁷⁹

During the preparations for the conference, Engels had written to an Italian comrade along the same lines. In England—

The trade-union movement, among all the big, strong and rich trade unions, has become more an obstacle to the general movement than an instrument of its progress; and outside of the trade unions there are an immense mass of workers in London who have kept quite a distance away from the political movement for several years, and as a result are very ignorant. But on the other hand they are also free of the many traditional prejudices of the trade unions and the other old sects, and therefore form excellent material with which one can work.⁸⁰

There soon followed a public falling-out with the trade-union leaders collaborating with Marx in the International, as we shall see. For the next two decades Marx and Engels repeatedly pointed to "aristocratic" stratification inside the proletariat as part of the explanation for the fossilization of the trade-union structure, until the "New Unionism" shook that structure.

In the middle of the 1880s Engels stressed that there had been a permanent improvement in conditions "for two 'protected' sections

only of the working class." One was the factory hands; the other was "the great Trades Unions" organizing male adults only or mainly.

They form an aristocracy among the working class; they have succeeded in enforcing for themselves a relatively comfortable position, and they accept it as final. They are the model working men of Messrs. Leone Levi and Giffen [bourgeois economists], and they are very nice people indeed nowadays to deal with, for any sensible capitalist in particular and for the whole capitalist class in general.

But, added Engels, "the great mass of the working people" are as poor as ever and the East End is still a pool of misery.

Visiting America in 1888, Engels replied to an interview question about English socialism in the same spirit, emphasizing the contrast between "the proletarian consciousness of the *masses*" and the workers' organizations which, "like the aristocracy of the workers in general, go along with Gladstone and the liberal bourgeoisie." He added that "The official workers' organizations, the Trade-Unions,⁰ which here and there are threatening to become reactionary," are hobbling behind in the rearguard.⁸²

When the "New Unionism" erupted not long afterwards, the contrast which Engels had steadfastly pointed to amidst the apparent wasteland turned out to be the key to the new development. And Engels continued to use the "labor aristocracy" concept in the new period.

9. COOPTATION OF TRADE-UNIONISM

Another development accompanied the growing importance of the labor aristocracy, and reinforced its influence.

It is the pattern in all countries that, as soon as the bourgeoisie reconciles itself to the fact that trade-unionism is here to stay, it ceases to denounce the institution as a subversive evil that has to be rooted out with fire and sword in order to defend God, country, and motherhood, and turns instead to the next line of defense: domesticating the unions, housebreaking them, and fitting them into the national family as one of the tame cats.

In an essay comparing conditions in 1885 with the old days of 1845,

Engels pointed to this change. The manufacturers were maturer and wiser about unions, and also aware of how badly their "great Liberal Party" needed workingmen's votes.

Trades Unions, lately considered inventions of the devil himself, were now petted and patronised as perfectly legitimate institutions and as useful means of spreading sound economical doctrines amongst the workers. Even strikes, than which nothing had been more nefarious up to 1848, were now gradually found out to be occasionally very useful, especially when provoked by the masters themselves, at their own time.⁸³

In fact, by this time the manufacturers had virtually taken over the program of the Chartists. What, in a different social context, had been the program of revolutionaries was now not only respectable but a necessity for bourgeois advance.

A factor making this possible (as Engels pointed out in an 1892 preface to his old book of 1845) was the great advance in industrial development and profits. The *scale* of profits had changed. The really big capitalists no longer found it worthwhile to practice "petty thefts upon the workpeople" in order to eke out their takings, and so became "apparently moralized." It was only the petty tradesmen who had to pick up a penny here and there in that way. Thus a number of reforms became possible, including the Ten Hours Bill.

But these very reforms—which seemed to be concessions to the working class, and were so in part—were tied to another process taking place in the capitalist structure. Their effect operated "in favor of the giant capitalist in his competition with his less favored brother." The big capitalists even began

to discover in strikes—at opportune times—a powerful means to serve their own ends. The largest manufacturers, formerly the leaders of the war against the working class, were now the foremost to preach peace and harmony. And for a very good reason. The fact is that all these concessions to justice and philanthropy were nothing else but means to accelerate the concentration of capital in the hands of the few, for whom the niggardly extra extortions of former years had lost all importance and had become actual nuisances; and to crush all the quicker and all the safer their smaller competitors, who could not make both ends meet without such perquisites.⁸⁴

The bigger the enterprise, the greater was the loss and inconvenience of

labor conflicts, hence the greater the desire to avoid "unnecessary squabbles." All this explains why a huge corporation can often exhibit an apparently more enlightened labor policy than a twopenny capitalist scrabbling for a living in a sweatshop; but the other side of this meant that, when conflict does break out, it tends more rapidly to assume the proportions of civil war.

This relationship could go on most smoothly when big capital was dealing with relatively limited sections of privileged workers, and so the pattern reinforced tendencies toward "aristocratic" stratification in the proletariat—as long as capital could afford it.

10. BREAKTHROUGH: THE "NEW UNIONISM"

By the 1880s the English union movement was covered over with a bureaucratic crust that looked invincible, even though—or because—only some ten percent of the working class were organized. Engels' interest lay in looking beyond this encrustation, toward the forces that would break through it; above all, he did not identify the crust with the class, nor the leaders with the labor movement as such, nor its bourgeoisified bureaucrats with the proletariat. He had long been pointing to the potentialities of the unorganized mass, who "form excellent material" precisely because they are free of the prejudices that had grown on the established movement like fungi.⁸⁵

On the eve of the first breakthrough, he was writing to a comrade that

here (in England) an instinctive socialism, which fortunately resists any definite formulation according to the dogma of one or another socialist organization and hence will accept it all the more easily from a decisive event, is getting more and more of a hold on the masses. It need only start somewhere or other and the bourgeois will marvel at the latent socialism that will break out and be manifest then.⁸⁶

In another letter written the same day, he thought he saw the working class being ever "more penetrated by the Socialist leaven."⁸⁷ The point is not to exhibit Engels' prescience—he was ever sanguine—but rather to stress the direction in which he kept looking. In particular, he kept reminding that, in all periods of encrustation, a molecular movement,

went on underneath, eventually precipitating the outburst which others would greet as sudden and startling, precisely because it came from the invisible lower depths.

In this case, the "light jostle needed for the entire avalanche to move"⁸⁸ came in July 1888 from the workingwomen of a match factory, stimulated to organization by socialists. Then the gasworkers, another sector of presumably unorganizable underpaid workers, were organized by socialists, including Eleanor Marx, and won a resounding victory. Eleanor Marx became one of the leaders of the resultant Gas Workers and General Laborers Union, which was in the vanguard of the "New Unionism." The Dockworkers Union was the next and decisive step; and a new era of unionism opened up. (It may be compared to the later rise of the CIO in the United States.)

In short, anyone who sees only the surface would say it was all confusion and personal squabbles. But *under* the surface the movement is going on; it is seizing ever broader strata, and for the most part precisely among the hitherto stagnant *lowest* masses; and the day is no longer far off when this mass will suddenly *find itself*, when it dawns upon it that it is this colossal self-moving mass; and when that day comes short work will be made of all the rascality and squabbling.⁸⁹

The new movement was "utterly different from that of the *old* trade unions: the skilled laborers, the labor aristocracy." The new people "are drawing far greater masses into the struggle, shaking up society far more profoundly, and putting forward much more far-reaching demands. . ."⁹⁰

These new Trades Unions of unskilled men and women are totally different from the old organisations of the working-class aristocracy and cannot fall into the same conservative ways; they are too poor, too shaky and too much composed of unstable elements, for anyone of these unskilled people may change his trade any day. And they are organised under quite different circumstances—all the leading men and women are Socialists, and socialist agitators too. In them I see the *real* beginning of the movement here.⁹¹

The new impulse came out of London's "stagnant pool of misery," [the East End—"mostly small, *unskilled* Unions and therefore despised by the haughty Trades Council of the aristocracy of labour . . . *It is the*

East End which now commands the movement and these fresh elements, unspoiled by the 'Great Liberal Party,' show an intelligence" similar to that of "the equally unspoiled German workmen." They insist on socialists as their leaders.⁹²

. . . the movement spreads and seizes one layer of the workers after another. It has now shaken out of their torpor the unskilled laborers of the East End of London, and we all know what a splendid impulse these fresh forces have given it in return.⁹³

The East End, shaking off misery and despair, "has returned to life, and has become the home of what is called the 'New Unionism,' that is to say, of the organization of the great mass of 'unskilled' workers." This unionism is essentially different, for it does not take the wage system as fixed and given, and its leaders are socialists.

. . . the masses, whose adhesion gave them strength, were rough, neglected, looked down upon by the working-class aristocracy; but they had this immense advantage, that *their minds were virgin soil*, entirely free from the inherited "respectable" bourgeois prejudices which hampered the brains of the better situated "old" Unionists. And thus we see now these new Unions taking the lead of the working-class movement generally, and more and more taking in tow the rich and proud "old" Unions.⁹⁴

This upheaval was important to Engels not because it meant that the revolution was around the corner—he was not *that* sanguine—but because it showed the irrepressible class forces at work. In fact, the modern labor and socialist movement dates from this development. It was a question of the direction of the movement:

. . . the masses are on the move, and there is no holding them back any more. The longer the stream is dammed up, the more powerful will be the breakthrough when it comes. And these unskilled are very different chaps from the fossilized brothers of the old trade unions; not a trace of the old pettifogging spirit, of the craft exclusiveness of the engineers, for instance; on the contrary, a general cry for the organization of *all* trade unions into *one* brotherhood and for direct struggle against capital.⁹⁵

In an article for the German press on the 1890 May Day celebration in London, Engels went over many of the ideas we have been quoting

from his correspondence; in addition there was special emphasis on the new unions' rejection of the old guild attitudes:

The old ones [trade unions], which admit none but "skilled" workers, are exclusive; they bar all workers who have not been trained according to the statutes of the guild concerned, and thereby even expose themselves to competition from those not in the guild; they are rich, but the richer they become, the more they degenerate into mere sick-funds and burial clubs-, they are conservative and they steer clear above all of that ". . ." socialism, as far and as long as they can. The new "unskilled" unions, on the other hand, admit *every* fellow-worker; they are essentially, and the Gas Workers even exclusively, strike unions and strike funds.⁹⁶

All layers of the working class would be affected, up to the old labor aristocracy and down to the borders of the lumpenproletariat:

I am happy I have lived to see this day. If *this* stratum can be organized, that is a big fact. . . the lowest stratum of East End workers enters the movement and then the upper strata must follow their example . . .

Furthermore: for lack of organization and because of the passive vegetative existence of the real workers in the East End, the lumpenproletariat* has had the main say there so far; it behaved like *and was considered* the very type and representative of the million of starving East Enders. That will now cease. The peddler and those like him will be forced into the background, the East End worker will be able to develop his own type and make it count by means of organization; and this is of enormous value for the movement. . . a new section enters the movement, new troops . . . Hurrah!⁹⁸

* In this passing reference to the lumpenproletariat, it is not altogether clear what East End elements are meant. The example of the peddler which is immediately given points to marginal and itinerant elements outside the proletariat, in accordance with the analysis below, in Chapter 15. But this has nothing to do with Engels' emphasis elsewhere on the success of the New Unionism in organizing the most depressed layers of the working class; in fact, here Engels counterposes the lumpenproletariat to "the East End worker." Similarly, in a letter to a union organizer (perhaps Eleanor Marx) Engels wrote:

If these poor downtrodden men, the dregs of the proletariat, these odds and ends of all trades, fighting every morning at the dock gates for an engagement, if *they* can combine, and terrify by their resolution the

The upheaval had a "stunning effect" on the bourgeoisie and the general public, commented Engels in the same letter. No doubt it especially stunned authorities on the labor movement. It was not only the socialist sectarians who were incapable of grasping the main feature of the trade-union movement, namely, the fact that here in the elementary class organization of the proletariat was an irrepressible reservoir of elemental class struggle.

...

mighty Dock Companies, truly then we need not despair of any section of the working class. This is the beginning of real life in the East End, and if successful will transform the whole character of the East End. There—for want of self-confidence, and of organisation among the poor devils groveling in stagnant misery—*lasciate ogni speranza* ... If the dockers get organised, all other sections will follow . . ."

The transformation to the dockworkers of today—a revolutionization of human kind on a partial scale—was achieved by class struggle, not welfarism.