

Sixty Years of Trade Unionism



THE foundation of the Trades Union Congress in 1868, marks the real beginning of the modern Trade Union Movement. Throughout the 60 years of its existence, the Congress has exercised a steadily increasing influence upon the development of Trade Unionism. Before its appearance, the organised movement possessed no central organ to direct its activities or to co-ordinate and unify the working-class organisation. Trade Unionism, partially liberated by the repeal of the Combination Laws in 1824—25, had been making considerable progress for more than 40 years before the Congress was founded. In practically every trade and industry of importance, unions had been established, and many of the small local trade societies, weak in numbers, isolated in action, had come to recognise the necessity of uniting to form national organisations. But few of the great national unions which dominate industry to-day were then in existence. There was no central authority, and no national leadership beyond that which was supplied by the little group of able men who served as secretaries of the four or five large unions in what were known as the "amalgamated trades."

From the beginning of its history, the Trades Union Congress assumed this function of leadership. There had been previous national conferences of the Trade Unions, and efforts had been made to establish a permanent organisation of the kind. The United Kingdom Alliance of Organised Trades, which was set up by the Sheffield unions, called three conferences in succession, in 1865, 1866, and 1867. The five Trade Union leaders known as the "Junta"—William Allan, Robert Applegarth, Daniel Guile, Edwin Coulson, and George Odger—formed in 1867, the "Conference of Amalgamated Trades." But these bodies were intended to serve a more limited purpose than the one which the organisers of the Trades Union Congress had in view. Although the Congress was called primarily for the purpose of meeting a special emergency, those who were responsible for