

# Congress and Legislation

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**I**T is not easy, in 1928, to realise how little opportunity there was in 1868 for the British wage-earners to bring effectively to the minds of Ministers and Government Departments even the most serious of their grievances or the most urgent of their needs. There was, of course, no workman in Parliament, a body then composed exclusively of property owners, employers, and lawyers. There was no organisation that even claimed to speak for Labour. By the Reform Act of 1867, the Parliamentary Franchise had just been brought within reach of some of the better-paid wage-earners having durable residences in those parts of the Kingdom that happened to be within the boundaries of any Parliamentary Borough; but even here the complications and imperfections of the electoral registration long deprived most of them of a vote. No daily newspaper deigned to concern itself with industrial grievances. When, in April, 1868, the Manchester and Salford Trades Council invited the "Trades Councils, Federation of Trades, and Trade Societies generally" to send representatives to a Congress to discuss "the various subjects which at the present time affect the Trade Societies," they were, for the first time, equipping the British wage-earning class with a vocational organisation of national scope, which could not fail to have its effect on the legislative and executive government of the country. Those who to-day think the political activities of Trade Unionism a pernicious innovation of the present century may be reminded that it was the second Trades Union Congress in 1869 that appointed a Parliamentary Committee, and expressly directed it to promote legislation and to interview Cabinet Ministers.

But the political effect of the new organisation of labour was not at first manifest; and there were—as there always are—impatient workmen who declared that the Trades Union Congress and its Parliamentary Committee were useless and powerless.