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1889 AND ALL THAT:
NEW VIEWS ON THE NEW UNIONISM*

SUMMARY: This article reviews the existing literature on the rise of the New Unionism and suggests some revisions of the nature of the phenomenon based on recent research. One finding is that as institutions the unions were not militant but from their inception favoured a moderate stance regarding relations with employers. The causes of the New Unionism and the strike wave of 1889–1890 are analysed within a framework of neoclassical economics and the major operator in the situation is identified as the dwindling supply of rural labour which increased the value and bargaining power of the unskilled toward the end of the nineteenth century.

The year 1889 ranks in the pantheon of British labour history alongside 1834 or 1926. Eric Hobsbawm has called it a year of explosive militancy when the working-class movement took a sharp turn to the left. It “marks a qualitative transformation of the British labour movement and its industrial relations” when “[a] new era of labour relations and class conflict was clearly opening”.¹ The year is always associated with the rise of the New Unionism, a term used at the time although it has now been debunked so often there might seem to be very little left of the concept. The Webbs, of course, initiated the academic historiography and there has been much subsequent revision. The purpose of this article, however, is to show, first, how the true nature of the New Unionism has still not been properly appreciated. Secondly, in analysing the causes of the rise of the New Unionism and the strike wave that accompanied it – within a model relying heavily on neoclassical economic theory – it will be suggested that hitherto a fundamental operator on industrial relations in the period has been ignored.

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¹ E. J. Hobsbawm, “The ‘New Unionism’ Reconsidered”, in W. J. Mommsen and H.-G. Husung (eds), *The Development of Trade Unionism in Great Britain and Germany, 1880–1914* (London, 1985), pp. 15 and 17.

The nature of the New Unionism

Interestingly, much of the reappraisal of the Webbs' treatment of the New Unionism often bears little relationship to what they actually wrote. For example, Duffy pointed out in 1961 that the difference between the old and the new unionism was not that great and narrowed with time, yet the Webbs had made this point.² Duffy also asserted that the London dock strike was not the first evidence of the New Unionism among the unskilled, which dated back to 1886.³ The Webbs were aware of this and noted that "the extension of Trade Unionism to the unskilled labourer" was not "an unprecedented innovation" in 1889.⁴ General unions, recruiting from a wide range of trades and industries, were also no new thing; the Owenite union of 1834 was an obvious example.

The long history of organization among the unskilled is, however, a point worth emphasising. Marsh and Ryan's history of the seamen's union reports organization among sailors dating back to the early nineteenth century; while Havelock Wilson's union of 1887 was merely a break-away from an existing union based in Sunderland.⁵ On the docks, Taplin notes a union in Liverpool in 1849, Lovell found one in Glasgow in 1853, some London dockers had a continuous history of organisation from 1872 to 1889, while Brown reports that the Hull dockers had a union throughout the 1880s.⁶ Short-lived unionism among the gasworkers in London goes back to 1834 and there was some organization there throughout the 1880s.⁷ The characteristic features of these early unions were, however, that they were localised, small and ineffectual; in major conflicts with employers they were

² A. E. P. Duffy, "New Unionism in Britain, 1889–90: a reappraisal", *Economic History Review*, 2nd. ser., 14 (1961–62), p. 306; D. W. Crowley, "The Origins of the Revolt of the British Labour Movement from Liberalism, 1875–1906" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1952), p. 349; H. A. Clegg, A. Fox, A. F. Thompson (eds), *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889, Vol. 1, 1889–1910* (Oxford, 1964), p. 96; E. H. Hunt, *British Labour History 1815–1914* (London, 1981), p. 307, and S. Pollard, "The New Unionism in Britain: its Economic Background", in Mommsen and Husung, *The Development of Trade Unionism*, p. 37, all make the same point. S. and B. Webb, *History of Trade Unionism* (London, 1920 ed.), pp. 389, 407–408, 420–421.

³ Duffy, "New Unionism in Britain", p. 309.

⁴ Webbs, *History of Trade Unionism*, p. 416. It was the socialist politics of the New Unionism that set it apart from earlier examples for the Webbs.

⁵ Arthur Marsh and Victoria Ryan, *The Seamen: a History of the National Union of Seamen, 1887–1987* (Oxford, 1989), p. 5.

⁶ E. L. Taplin, *Liverpool Dockers and Seamen, 1870–1890* (Hull, 1974), p. 17; J. Lovell, "Sail, Steam and Emergent Dockers' Unionism in Britain, 1850–1914", *International Review of Social History*, XXXII (1987), p. 233; J. Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers: A Study of Trade Unionism in the Port of London, 1870–1914* (London, 1969), p. 73, and R. Brown, *Waterfront Organisation in Hull, 1870–1900* (Hull, 1972), p. 32.

⁷ D. R. Matthews, "The London Gasworks: A Technical, Commercial and Labour History to 1914" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Hull, 1983), chs 7 and 8.

invariably beaten and as a result they were usually short-lived. The seamen's and dockers' strike record dates from the eighteenth century and includes strikes in London in 1853 and 1880.⁸ Gasworkers in London have a history of conflict going back to 1825 including sizable strikes in 1834, 1859 and 1872 all of which they lost.⁹

Another revision which does an injustice to the Webbs is the point made by Pelling and others that the craft unions, and an in-between category of industrial unions like the miners and cotton workers, also grew rapidly in this period and remained numerically the greater.¹⁰ In terms of membership the new unions were still in a minority – perhaps 20 per cent of all unions in 1890, 13 per cent in 1892 and less than 10 per cent by 1900.¹¹ Many writers have questioned how “general” the new unions were. Hobsbawm noted that the labourers involved were not a shiftless, undifferentiated mass of unskilled but, like the docker or gas stoker, had some skill and job stability and that this was part of their success.¹² Hobsbawm's point was an important step forward in grasping the nature of the New Unionism, but his division of its history into an early phase of growth, when socialists “discovered” or “invented” the device of the general union and the “theory” and “tactics” were to recruit all workers into one gigantic union, changing in 1892 to a period of decline, when policy became “cautious, limited [. . .] conservative [and] ‘sectional’”, was a step backward in our understanding and one followed by many writers.¹³

To talk at all of tactics or of a coherent policy for unions that grew, and indeed declined, like “Topsy” is probably a misconception. Moreover, Clegg, Fox and Thompson have pointed to the fact that some of the new unions, like the seamen, were never general; while Pelling has correctly maintained that others, like the dockers, were “somewhat exclusive” from the first.¹⁴ The gas stokers' union in London had excluded the dockers and

⁸ Marsh and Ryan, *The Seamen*, p. 5; Lovell, “Sail, Steam and Emergent Dockers' Unionism”, p. 232, and Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, p. 59; 1853 also saw a strike in Liverpool: Taplin, *Liverpool Dockers*, p. 1.

⁹ Matthews, “The London Gasworks”, ch. 7.

¹⁰ H. Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism* (London, 1976), 3rd ed., pp. 105, 120; Hunt, *British Labour History*, p. 299, and Pollard, “The New Unionism in Britain: its Economic Background”, p. 38.

¹¹ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, p. 97, and R. Hyman, “Mass Organization and Militancy in Britain”, in Mommsen and Husung, *The Development of Trade Unionism*, p. 251.

¹² E. J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men* (London, 1964), ch. 10. Throughout this article I refer to dockers and gas stokers as the “unskilled” where “semi-skilled” is possibly more accurate. Gas stoking could be learned in three weeks.

¹³ Hobsbawm's evidence for the initial policy of One Big Union prior to 1892 is in fact a statement by the gasworkers' union made in 1897; while in Hobsbawm's cautious period, in his own words: “the incentive to recruit widely remained”, *ibid.*, pp. 191–192, and Hobsbawm, “The ‘New Unionism’ Reconsidered”, pp. 19–21.

vice versa in the early days and it seems clear that both started as sectional, industrial unions with the rank and file attempting to impose closed shops.¹⁵ The London dockers and gasmen, however, soon lost power at their workplace and drifted out of the union, while it was always in the union officials' interests to widen the membership not because of socialist ideology but because their unions would not have survived without it. Clegg, Fox and Thompson's point must, therefore, be taken that those unions that became general did so because they found other groups "clamouring to join" and were actively recruited by officials who welcomed their subscriptions.¹⁶ Indeed, ruthless behaviour by the union bureaucracies to maximise membership numbers is evident from the way the dockers and seamen, for example, set about crushing and eliminating rival unions and poaching their members.¹⁷ Most new unions, then, were intended by the workers to be sectional unions but under pressure of circumstances and the influence of their officials became general – the reverse of the Hobsbawm model.

Clegg, Fox and Thompson use the seamen's union to show that not all the new unions were composed of the unskilled or low paid or were against friendly benefits and had low subscriptions – the seamen paid more than cotton weavers.¹⁸ And many writers, from the Webbs (who are again often treated unfairly in this respect) on, make the point that most new unions charged low subscriptions not because of socialist ideals but because their members could not or would not afford more.¹⁹ Clegg, Fox and Thompson also pointed out that not all the new unions were socialist and not all were militant – citing gasworkers unions started by Lib-Labs in Birmingham and the North-East.²⁰

But Clegg, Fox and Thompson, like most writers hitherto, believed that most of the new unions, particularly the dockers and gasworkers in London, used "militant and coercive tactics".²¹ Typical is the view of Cole that

¹⁴ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, p. 94; Pelling, *History of British Trade Unionism*, p. 102; Lovell attempts to fit the dockers' union into the Hobsbawm model while admitting that the London dockers were attempting to practice exclusive membership in the autumn of 1889, J. Lovell, "The Significance of the Great Dock Strike of 1889 in British Labour History" in Mommsen and Husung, *The Development of Trade Unionism*, pp. 105–109.

¹⁵ Lovell, "Sail, Steam and Emergent Dockers' Unionism", p. 248; Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, p. 99; Lovell, "The Significance of the Great Dock Strike of 1889 in British Labour History", pp. 105–107; Matthews, "The London Gasworks", pp. 323 and 440.

¹⁶ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, p. 92.

¹⁷ Crowley, "Origins of the Revolt", p. 389; Philip J. Leng, *The Welsh Dockers* (Ormskirk, 1981), p. 42; Marsh and Ryan, *The Seamen*, p. 23.

¹⁸ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, p. 94.

¹⁹ Webbs, *History of Trade Unionism*, p. 416; Pollard, "The New Unionism in Britain: its Economic Background", p. 37.

²⁰ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, p. 91.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

the new unions were committed to a “fighting policy based upon class solidarity and directed by implication at any rate against capitalism itself”.²² To Pelling, they “depended not on benefits but on aggressive strike tactics to win concessions from their employers and so keep their members happy”.²³ Hobsbawm talks of “the class-conscious militancy of the early leaders”.²⁴ A more recent view is that: “[t]his New Unionism was strongly socialist orientated and propagated strikes as a means of industrial conflict [. . .]”.²⁵ This unanimity among historians from both right and left of the political spectrum (with the notable exception of Crowley), in believing in the militancy of the new unions is surprising, and why this particular myth has survived so long is itself a mystery.²⁶ The problem probably stems from a failure to distinguish between the unions as institutions and the undoubtedly high number of strikes in the 1889–1890 period undertaken by workers who may or may not have been members of a union. Many writers have noted a growing moderation among the new unions after a few years, as a result of the employers’ counter-attack or the trade depression, while failing to notice that the new unions, their rules and their officers were on the side of moderation from their inception.²⁷

Historians seem to have accepted at face value the reputation for socialist inspired militancy given the New Unionism by the middle-class press of the time rather than listen to the union leaders themselves who took every opportunity to declare they were against strikes.²⁸ To take the gasworkers first: their general secretary, Will Thorne, was indeed a member of the Marxist Social Democratic Federation (SDF), but his actions were far from those of the revolutionary that Hobsbawm believes him to be. In 1890, eighteen months after the union began, Thorne plaintively maintained that

²² G. D. H. Cole, *A Short History of the British Working Class Movement* (London, 1948), p. 103.

²³ Pelling, *History of British Trade Unionism*, p. 101; see also, Duffy, “New Unionism in Britain”, p. 308, and Hunt, *British Labour History*, p. 305.

²⁴ Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, p. 189.

²⁵ F. Boll, “International Strike Waves: a Critical Assessment”, in Mommsen and Husung, *The Development of Trade Unionism*, p. 94. The myth of militancy continues to be perpetuated, see also Kenneth D. Brown, *The English Labour Movement, 1700–1951* (Dublin, 1982), p. 173, and M. Falkus, *Britain Transformed: An Economic and Social History, 1700–1914* (Ormskirk, 1987), p. 175.

²⁶ Sadly Crowley’s Ph.D. thesis was never published and, though much consulted, its findings were ignored.

²⁷ Duffy, “New Unionism in Britain”, p. 319; Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, p. 93; Hunt, *British Labour History*, p. 308; H. Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party, 1880–1900* (London, 1954), p. 84, and H. Browne, *The Rise of British Trade Unions, 1825–1914* (London, 1979), p. 66.

²⁸ For middle-class reaction see, John Saville, “Trade Unions and Free Labour: the Background to the Taff Vale Decision”, in Asa Briggs and John Saville (eds), *Essays in Labour History, Vol. 1* (London, 1967), pp. 321–323.

his union had not caused a single strike; and this was not just a statement for public consumption – he was telling the truth.²⁹ The London gasworkers did not win their eight-hour day without a struggle, as is the popular story; the concession was granted only after a trial of strength lasting several months.³⁰ The companies systematically victimised the leaders of the agitation, attempted to recruit blacklegs, and even when they conceded the eight-hour day bargained hard over the amount of work to be done in the time.³¹ Yet from the start, despite the provocation, the union leadership advised caution and were against strike action. Challenged by the South Metropolitan gas company at the end of the year the men finally struck, but Thorne was always against the strike and he did not do more to stop it because he was in Manchester trying to prevent the men coming out there.³²

Far from believing in direct action, as Crowley notes “advocacy of arbitration was to become rather more a characteristic of the ‘new’ unions than the old”.³³ According to the gasworkers’ first rule book, submitted in June 1889, it was “the duty of this Society to endeavour to form boards of conciliation and arbitration for the settlement of labour disputes [. . .]”.³⁴ Employers were to be approached for concessions by means of “respectfully worded requests”. In 1890, the union took an active part in an attempt to set up a conciliation and arbitration board in London.³⁵ Clegg, the historian of the union, is, therefore, not correct in suggesting a change of rules in 1891 to fit the Hobsbawm model of early militancy followed by moderation.³⁶ If a revolutionary Marxist, Thorne could be surprisingly supportive of an employers’ need to discipline his own union members. In negotiations with one gas company in 1890 he was concerned to point out that: “The work was neglected by the men more on account of drunkenness than anything else [. . .]” and the company “should take steps to prevent potmen taking beer onto the works. This was not allowed at the South Metropolitan.”³⁷ The latter was, of course, the company that had imposed a humiliating defeat on his union six months earlier.

The story with the dockers’ union is the same. The leaders seemed as

²⁹ Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, p. 191, and Matthews, “The London Gasworks”, p. 385.

³⁰ Pelling, *History of British Trade Unionism*, p. 97, and Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, p. 60.

³¹ For the struggle during this period see: Matthews, “The London Gasworks”, ch. 8.

³² Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, pp. 57, 67, and Matthews, “The London Gasworks”, pp. 328, 330, 332–333.

³³ Crowley, “Origins of the Revolt”, p. 11.

³⁴ *Rules of the National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers* (1889), p. 14. Held in the Webb Collection and quoted more fully in Matthews, “The London Gasworks”, p. 430.

³⁵ National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers, *Annual Report* (1891), p. 9.

³⁶ H. Clegg, *General Union* (Oxford, 1954), p. 20.

³⁷ Matthews, “The London Gasworks”, p. 385.

keen as Thorne to see their members working energetically for their employers and in 1890 several large meetings were held to exhort the men to do “a good day’s work”.³⁸ An objective of Tillet’s Tea Operatives union of 1887 had been to set up conciliation and arbitration boards with employers and this policy continued unchanged into the 1889 union. In June 1890, the Dockers were endeavouring to form an arbitration committee with employers, and at their first annual conference Tom Mann argued for conciliation and arbitration.³⁹ Tillet advocated the board of conciliation as:

the only means to bridge the gulf between capital and labour [. . .] [and assist] the strengthening of the bonds of good feeling and robustness, which must inevitably tend to the moral, social and industrial advancement of the individual and the nation alike.⁴⁰

The London dock strike was the spontaneous action of the dockers themselves and they struck before most of them had joined a union.⁴¹ A hesitant Tillet was surprised to find them clamouring for action.⁴² During the strike the leaders constantly urged caution, and Tillet and Burns seemed keen to take the first opportunity to reach a settlement.⁴³ Moreover, once the strike was won and the union was established the leadership immediately set about discouraging any further conflicts; disputes at the Hays Wharf, Southampton and Hull, were all prosecuted by the dockers against the union’s wishes.⁴⁴ In the words of one docker, the leaders “went amongst the men and passed the word, ‘Keep quiet, keep quiet’”.⁴⁵ “Respecting strikes, we are fully aware that they should ‘be avoided wherever possible, and only entered into after other efforts at a settlement have failed’” wrote Mann and Tillet in 1890, while the union was still strong and growing rapidly.⁴⁶

³⁸ Crowley, “Origins of the Revolt”, p. 383.

³⁹ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, p. 93; J. Schneer, *Ben Tillet: Portrait of a Labour Leader* (London, 1982), p. 52, and Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, p. 125.

⁴⁰ *Dockers’ Record*, September 1890, quoted in Crowley, “Origins of the Revolt”, p. 383.

⁴¹ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford, 1971), p. 347.

⁴² Pelling, *History of British Trade Unionism*, p. 98; Schneer, *Ben Tillet*, p. 40. This was also the pattern in 1872 and 1911, Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, pp. 66 and 173.

⁴³ H. Llewellyn Smith and V. Nash, *The Story of the Dockers’ Strike* (London, 1889), p. 145.

⁴⁴ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, pp. 70, 72; Saville, “Trade Unions and Free Labour”, pp. 325, n. 3, 325, 329; see also the testimony of an executive council member to the *Royal Commission on Labour*, P.P. (1892), XXXV, p. 44, Q. 1019.

⁴⁵ Evidence to *Royal Commission on Labour*, P.P. (1892), XXXIV, p. 127.

⁴⁶ Tom Mann and Ben Tillet, *The “New” Trades Unionism: a reply to Mr George Shipton* (London, 1890), p. 6.

The picture is the same in the provinces where Taplin reports that neither of the leaders of the Liverpool dockers “were keen to strike in 1889–1890. Both were dragged reluctantly into conflict by the pressure of the rank and file.”⁴⁷ The seamen’s union was also conciliatory – as early as July 1889 it was announcing that in Liverpool it had “no intention of permitting another strike [. . .] if it can possibly be staved off by arbitration or otherwise” – yet the guise of agitator could be forced even on Havelock Wilson by rank and file pressure.⁴⁸

Clearly then, strikes were never a “tactic” of the new unions; they were forced by the rank and file in an *ad hoc* fashion on a usually reluctant leadership.⁴⁹ The history of the New Unionism, therefore, gives evidence in support of the “rank and filers” among labour historians in the recent hotly contested debate.⁵⁰ A distinction does need to be made between the moderate union leadership and the frequently militant workers who could also, because of the crucial need to stop blacklegs in a strike, be violent.⁵¹ In the words of the contemporary, George Howell: “In 90 per cent of the strikes which take place, the men directly concerned are the instigators and promoters [. . .] the union is the brake on the wheel which prevents too great precipitation, and liability to consequent failure.”⁵²

Once started, Thorne and Tillet might take the lead in a strike and talk aggressively but this only served to obscure the origins of the militancy; more often union officials were looking for ways to call off strikes to preserve funds and safeguard their own livelihoods.⁵³ Williams, for example, reports with regard to the railway workers’ leader in Cardiff in 1890: “Confronted with an actual strike his first reaction was to end at once this drain upon the union’s wealth.”⁵⁴ The leadership had plenty of past evi-

⁴⁷ Taplin, *Liverpool Dockers*, p. 82.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 71–72; Marsh and Ryan, *The Seamen*, p. 224.

⁴⁹ Crowley, “Origins of the Revolt”, p. 423.

⁵⁰ See Jonathan Zeitlin, “Rank and Filism’ in British Labour History: a Critique”, *International Review of Social History*, XXXIV (1989), pp. 42–61; Richard Price, “What’s in a Name?” Workplace History and Rank and Filism”, *ibid.*, pp. 62–77; James E. Cronin, “The ‘Rank and Filism’ and the Social History of the Working Class”, *ibid.*, pp. 78–88, and Jonathan Zeitlin, “‘Rank and Filism’ and Labour History: A Rejoinder to Price and Cronin”, *ibid.*, pp. 89–102.

⁵¹ Brown, *The English Labour Movement*, p. 173.

⁵² Quoted by James E. Cronin, “Strikes and the Struggle for Union Organisation: Britain and Europe”, in Mommsen and Husung, *The Development of Trade Unionism*, p. 74.

⁵³ Like Thorne in the Leeds strike or Tillet in Cardiff and Swansea in 1890 and Bristol in 1892; Pelling, *History of British Trade Unionism*, p. 100; Schneer, *Ben Tillet*, pp. 54 and 80, and Leng, *The Welsh Dockers*, p. 16. Lovell tells of Thorne urging the dockers to strike in 1889 and it is true leaders were often happy to encourage workers in other unions to come out; Lovell, *Stevadores and Dockers*, p. 99.

⁵⁴ L. J. Williams, “The New Unionism in South Wales, 1889–92”, *Welsh History Review*, 1 (1960–63), p. 422.

dence that if the union collapsed they could easily end up back in the retorthouses or at the dock gates. To believe with Hobsbawm that the New Unionism was led by revolutionary Marxists in any meaningful sense would be difficult to sustain. Crowley's verdict is the more accurate: "The 'new' bodies [. . .] were much less militant, much less revolutionary in tone, and much less concerned with political methods than seems conventionally thought."⁵⁵

Indeed, the full story of the New Unionism, for some reason neglected, is somewhat unsavoury. Clegg, Fox and Thompson noted that one of the characteristic features of the new unions, in contrast to the old, was the high proportion of their funds that went on administration, due in the dockers' union to overstaffing.⁵⁶ In 1890, the seamen's union paid out £9,000 in benefit while the management of the union cost £32,000.⁵⁷ In the gasworkers' union strike pay accounted on average for only one third of the funds, most of the rest went on the salaries of the officials.⁵⁸ Moreover, the membership was not getting a great deal for its money. Administratively the new unions were a shambles, with records badly or not kept at all – as during the first two years of Havelock Wilson's union.⁵⁹ Although to Hobsbawm, Tom Mann was "incomparably the ablest of the radicals", Lovell is probably correct in saying that "neither Mann nor Tillett were good at routine administration"; and the same must be said of Thorne.⁶⁰ Many officials neglected their duties, some to pursue their political careers, but others were just idle. Favouritism and nepotism were rife and, as was to be expected perhaps with their labouring backgrounds, the leaders drank too much.⁶¹ His biographer reports that on one occasion Tillett had to be led to the rostrum of the TUC because he was too drunk to find it himself.⁶² The deputy general secretary of the gasworkers' union withstood years of complaints from members about his drinking before being sacked by Thorne.⁶³ Another gasworker's leader, and later an MP, Pete Curran, probably drank himself to death; while the first secretary of the Tyneside and National Labour Union was sacked for being "drunken and disobedient".⁶⁴

⁵⁵ Crowley, "Origins of the Revolt", p. 348.

⁵⁶ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, p. 95; see also Brown, *The English Labour Movement*, p. 174.

⁵⁷ Marsh and Ryan, *The Seamen*, p. 34.

⁵⁸ Matthews, "The London Gasworks", p. 435.

⁵⁹ Marsh and Ryan, *The Seamen*, p. 34.

⁶⁰ Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, p. 192; Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, p. 116, and Matthews, "The London Gasworks", p. 418.

⁶¹ For slacking and nepotism in the NUGGL see: Matthews, "The London Gasworks", pp. 417.

⁶² Schneer, *Ben Tillett*, p. 1.

⁶³ Matthews, "The London Gasworks", p. 422.

Financial probity was likewise not a strong point. There was gross mismanagement of the funds of the seamen's union, while the dockers were for years troubled with the personal debts of Tillett, and there were allegations of financial extravagance and the minor misappropriation of funds.⁶⁵ From its foundation to 1914, at least seven district secretaries of the gasworkers' union absconded with union funds including a former president of the union.⁶⁶ Sexton found the Liverpool dockers' union in "a most unholy mess" in 1893 and he gives a good description of the petty fraud that went on.⁶⁷ This malpractice also went down to branch level and Crowley found numerous defalcations among the branches of the dockers' union.⁶⁸

All this has to be set against the many hardworking and reliable union officials and activists; Will Thorne, for example, was both temperate and honest. However, it is important that alongside the usually heroic image of the new unions the other side of the story be remembered. It must also be borne in mind that it was extremely difficult for members to do anything about the unions' shortcomings because they were undemocratically run – with many leaders showing an open contempt for their membership. Tillett was adamant against the rank and file having any say in the union: "the tail must not be allowed to wag the head" he said.⁶⁹ The lack of participation by the rank and file might also be explained by the transient nature of the membership, which was also educationally unsuited for an active role in running the union and perhaps unwilling to give up their leisure time to the job.

Several other neglected points must also be made. The gradations of skill even among the nominally unskilled workers had a close bearing on the degree of bargaining power various groups had and this, in turn, determined the strength of the unions. Causation ran from increased bargaining power to union growth and it was the former which won the men their victories not membership of a union. More London gasworkers joined their union after the eight-hour day had been conceded than beforehand, and as

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 426; Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, pp. 79 and 89. The Tyneside secretary was replaced by a socialist in turn dismissed for "neglect of duty" in 1898.

⁶⁵ Marsh and Ryan, *The Seamen*, p. 34; Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, pp. 66, 89, and Schneer, *Ben Tillett*, pp. 107 and 111.

⁶⁶ Matthews, "The London Gasworks", pp. 416 and 421.

⁶⁷ Sir James Sexton, *Sir James Sexton Agitator: the Life of the Dockers' MP* (London, 1926), p. 109.

⁶⁸ Crowley, "Origins of the Revolt", p. 389, and Matthews, "The London Gasworks", pp. 416–417.

⁶⁹ Schneer, *Ben Tillett*, p. 61; for the undemocratic nature of the gasworkers' union right from its inception see, Matthews, "The London Gasworks", pp. 408–417. For the domination by the full-time officials of the Workers' Union, formed by Tom Mann in 1898, see R. Hyman, *The Workers' Union* (Oxford, 1971), p. 32.

Lovell notes: “the dockers’ capacity to engage in strike activity existed independently of formal union organisation”.⁷⁰ It was the dock strike itself which recruited the dockers, many possibly because the union controlled the relief funds.⁷¹

Turning to the subsequent decline in union membership, Clegg, Fox and Thompson criticised the Webbs for suggesting that the New Unionism lost out due to the ensuing trade depression; they argued that the employers’ counterattack started when the boom was at its height and that most setbacks came before the end of 1890.⁷² Yet this relies on the accepted wisdom that it was the counterattack that as Hobsbawm maintains: “wiped out most of the New Unionism”.⁷³ The Webbs were, however, probably right because, whereas the employers’ counterattack, if that is a suitable term, had begun by the end of 1889, as far as we know numbers in the new unions continued to rise throughout 1890 and did not begin to fall until 1891 when unemployment was rising.⁷⁴

Moreover, union membership did not drop principally because of a counterattack. There is no reason to believe with Hinton that: “The counter-attack smashed trade unionism in the docks in a series of confrontations [. . .]”.⁷⁵ True, Daunton reports that the Cardiff seamen and dockers’ unions were defeated by losing a strike in 1891, and Brown shows that the defeat of the Hull dockers in 1893 knocked out the union there.⁷⁶ Elsewhere, however, defeats were not terminal. The Liverpool dockers lost a strike in 1890 but Taplin notes that there was “nothing to suggest any immediate reduction in membership as a result of the conflict”.⁷⁷ The gasworkers’ union continued to grow rapidly in 1890 despite crushing defeats at the South Metropolitan and in Manchester at the beginning of the year. Most gasworkers suffered no major defeats but nonetheless left their

⁷⁰ Matthews, “The London Gasworks”, pp. 315–316 and 388–389; Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, pp. 75 and 106; Lovell, “Sail, Steam and Emergent Dockers’ Unionism”, p. 232, and Brown, *Waterfront Organisation in Hull*, p. 28.

⁷¹ Smith and Nash, *The Story of the Dockers’ Strike*, p. 161; Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, p. 347; Lovell, “The Significance of the Great Dock Strike of 1889 in British Labour History”, p. 102; likewise the Bristol dockers, Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, p. 64.

⁷² Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, pp. 77–78.

⁷³ Hobsbawm, “The ‘New Unionism’ Reconsidered”, p. 19.

⁷⁴ Stedman Jones believed that it was the onset of depression in 1891 which reduced union membership among the London dockers; Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, p. 347.

⁷⁵ James Hinton, *Labour and Socialism: A History of the British Labour Movement, 1867–1974* (Brighton, 1983), p. 50.

⁷⁶ M. J. Daunton, “Inter-Union Relations on the Waterfront: Cardiff 1888–1914”, *International Review of Social History*, XXII (1977), pp. 366–367; Daunton’s membership figures, however, are not detailed enough to prove his case. Brown, *Waterfront Organisation in Hull*, p. 90.

⁷⁷ Taplin, *Liverpool Dockers*, p. 77.

unions without being coerced. Indeed, victory in a strike, as with the famous Leeds gasworkers' strike in 1890, could be followed by the men leaving the union.⁷⁸

The decline in the membership of the New Unionism was a gradual not a violent process; in Lovell's words, "mass organisation gradually withered away after 1891".⁷⁹ Charles Booth believed the men left the dockers' union in London largely of their own accord; and this was probably, according to Stedman Jones, because they were unwilling to pay their dues.⁸⁰ The men seemed to realise that their bargaining power had been eroded by changing market conditions and they had nothing left to gain by union membership; in the words of two ship labourers, they left the union because it "did not pay".⁸¹

How then did the new unions survive? Why did membership not dwindle to extinction as it had in the past? The unions did not endure, as Hobsbawm has suggested, by retreating to strongholds, or relying on recognition from friendly employers.⁸² The workers who created the unions in 1889 had left them by the mid-1890s. For example, the London branches of the National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers (NUGGL) formed by the gasworkers were by the mid-1890s composed almost entirely of builders' labourers taking advantage of the building boom.⁸³ The new unions had no hard core; they survived by being able to offer their services, for the first time on a national scale, to shifting groups of workers in different trades and regions when and where they were needed.⁸⁴

This is shown by the high rate of turnover in districts, branches and membership in the New Unionism.⁸⁵ The gasworkers' union, for example, had sixteen different districts at one time or another between 1891 and 1914 but only six had a continuous existence throughout.⁸⁶ Similarly, to take one of these districts at random: Birmingham had 37 branches in its area in 1891 and 51 branches in 1913, but only fourteen survived throughout the period.

⁷⁸ Matthews, "The London Gasworks", pp. 401–402.

⁷⁹ Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, p. 150. See also Matthews, "The London Gasworks", pp. 386–388, and Sexton, *Sir James Sexton Agitator*, p. 103.

⁸⁰ C. Booth, *Life and Labour of the People of London* (1902 ed.), 2nd ser., Vol. 3, p. 403; Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, p. 344.

⁸¹ *R. C. on Labour*, P.P. (1892), XXXIV, p. 150.

⁸² Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, pp. 189–190. Hobsbawm was followed in this view by: Clegg, *General Union*, p. 5; Browne, *The Rise of British Trade Unions*, p. 67, and Hinton, *Labour and Socialism*, p. 50.

⁸³ Matthews, "The London Gasworks", p. 399.

⁸⁴ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, p. 84; Lovell notes this instability of membership in the early 1887 union, Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, p. 97.

⁸⁵ Noted by: Crowley, "Origins of the Revolt", p. 422, and Marsh and Ryan, *The Seamen*, p. 40.

⁸⁶ Matthews, "The London Gasworks", p. 396, taken from the annual reports of the NUGGL.

The turnover of membership was even greater. In 1897 the union was growing rapidly and increased membership by 10,308, but in order to achieve this it had to recruit 21,889 new members since it had lost 11,581.⁸⁷ Measuring turnover by the number of leavers as a percentage of membership at the beginning of the year it was 38.5 per cent in both 1898 and 1899; on average members stayed in the union less than three years. In terms of membership, therefore, except for a few permanent officials the gasworkers' union was a different union by the mid-1890s to the one started in 1889.

The most extreme debunking of the New Unionism has come from Pollard who maintained that the dockers were worse off after the 1889 strike than before:

little had changed in principle since the 1870s. Even the newness of the New Unionism seems to have been something of a myth [. . .]. Instead there was a general trade union boom among all types of trade unions, such as occurred twenty years earlier and twenty years later, and of which the New Unionism formed but one aspect.⁸⁸

But the New Unionism was not a myth. Pollard is incorrect in saying that the workers were no better off as a result; real wages did not fall in the 1890s as he suggests, the dockers did not lose their "tanner", a 20 per cent pay increase, nor did the gasworkers surrender their eight-hour day.⁸⁹ Nor can it be accepted, as Hunt believes, that unionism was little different in 1900 than the mid-1880s if only because far more workers and especially the unskilled were union members by the latter date.⁹⁰

Something happened in 1889 that needs explaining, and there are two novel features:

- (1) For the first time relatively unskilled workers were able to take on and beat their employers in major confrontations and extract significant and lasting improvements in their wages and conditions.
- (2) Two unions were formed by unskilled workers which became national in scope and proved to be permanent.

⁸⁷ Matthews, "The London Gasworks", p. 398.

⁸⁸ Pollard, "The New Unionism in Britain: its Economic Background", p. 39.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45. For real wages in the 1890s see: Hunt, *British Labour History*, p. 75; for real wages in the London gasworks see: Matthews, "The London Gasworks", Table 18, p. 257; see also Crowley, "Origins of the Revolt", p. 104.

⁹⁰ Hunt, *British Labour History*, p. 313; Lovell is somewhat unclear on this issue maintaining at once that: "there is no good reason why the movement of the early 1870s should be regarded as merely ephemeral and 1889 taken instead to mark the real starting-point for union development"; while "1889 marked the beginning of a new era [. . .] the triumph of a new kind of mass unionism", Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, pp. 73 and 120.

Although the strike wave and the foundation of new unions are usually lumped together it is analytically essential to distinguish these two separate though related phenomena. It is to the latter that we turn first.

Causes of the New Unionism

The sheer number of causes on offer is testimony to the fact that labour historians have been unable to come up with a satisfactory explanation for what Hobsbawm has called: “this remarkable and extreme example of the rise of trade unionism”.⁹¹ Clegg, Fox and Thompson concede that it stands out as one of the most “baffling phenomena of British trade union history”.⁹² This section will review previous explanations of the rise of the New Unionism.

The Webbs, followed by many writers, relied heavily on the rise of socialism; it was the agitating efforts of the socialists that brought “the vast hordes of unskilled workmen in the Metropolis into some kind of organisation”.⁹³ However, Clegg, Fox and Thompson have satisfactorily made the case that socialism was “not a major cause” of the rise of the New Unionism, although even to them it was “important”.⁹⁴ They noted that not all the new unions were started by socialists; as mentioned earlier, many, like the Tyneside and National Labour Union and the Birmingham gasworkers, were started by “Lib-Labs”.⁹⁵ Neither the seamen’s leader, Have-lock Wilson, nor the leaders of the dockers in Glasgow and Liverpool were socialists.⁹⁶ Indeed, those in the latter port were “strongly opposed to socialism”, and Tamplin concludes: “there is no evidence to suggest that socialist ideology played any role, at any level, in Merseyside during this period”.⁹⁷

Socialists were prominent among the new unions’ leaders in London, and their struggles within the Trades Union Congress, particularly over legislation for the eight-hours day and independent labour representation in Parliament, did much to enhance their reputation for militancy. As mentioned earlier, Will Thorne, was a member of the SDF, and Pollard probably has Tom Mann and John Burns in mind when he writes that “the London dockers, to be sure, owed their organisation to convinced socialists”.⁹⁸ The general secretary of the London dockers’ union, however, was

⁹¹ Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, p. 158.

⁹² Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, p. 55.

⁹³ Webb, *History of Trade Unionism*, pp. 376 and 402.

⁹⁴ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, pp. 89–91.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91; also noted by Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, p. 182.

⁹⁶ Crowley, “Origins of the Revolt”, p. 402.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 399; Taplin, *Liverpool Dockers*, p. 85.

Ben Tillet and while even Clegg, Fox and Thompson suggest Tillet was a socialist and Brown says that he was a member of the SDF, in fact the biography by Schneer reveals that Tillet was a “Lib-Lab” and throughout 1889 “held himself aloof from the socialist movement”.⁹⁹ “I wish to deny that this movement has anything to do with socialism [. . .]. The socialists only joined in when the movement was in full swing”, he said at the time of the dock strike.¹⁰⁰ There was little reference to socialism in the speeches by the leadership during the strike, and H. H. Champion, a middle-class socialist actively involved admitted:

There is no doubt whatever that those Socialists who took part in the strike were welcomed not because of their Socialism, but in spite of it; not on account of their speculative opinions, but for the sake of their personal ability to help.¹⁰¹

Indeed, those socialist leaders that were involved in the New Unionism were not always a great help. For example, the socialist Tom Maguire is perhaps due a little less of the homage accorded him by E. P. Thompson since in organising the Leeds gasworkers one of his converts to socialism mismanaged the union as district secretary and absconded with the takings in 1894.¹⁰²

If many of the leaders of the new unions were not socialists this was even more the case with the rank and file. There would seem to be no justification for the Webbs’ assertion that “[b]y 1888 the socialists had [. . .] secured the allegiance of large sections of the unskilled labourers in London and some other towns”.¹⁰³ Throughout the 1890s, Thorne and Curran were constantly defending their socialist politics, over which they were clearly in a minority, against attacks from the membership of the gasworkers’ union.¹⁰⁴ And Pelling is probably right to remind us that the working class as a whole was not socialist, however loosely defined, even by 1900; indeed he found that many of the dockside constituencies in London returned Tory MPs from 1885–1900.¹⁰⁵ It is difficult, therefore, to see socialism as a cause

⁹⁸ Pollard, “The New Unionism in Britain: its Economic Background”, p. 37.

⁹⁹ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, pp. 56–57; Brown, *The English Labour Movement*, p. 175, and Schneer, *Ben Tillet*, p. 58.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁰¹ Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, p. 316. Champion reported by Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, p. 90; the same words are used with respect to John Burns by his biographer; Kenneth D. Brown, *John Burns* (London, 1977), p. 51.

¹⁰² E. P. Thompson, “Homage to Tom Maguire”, in Briggs and Saville, *Essays in Labour History*, p. 300; Matthews, “The London Gasworks”, p. 438.

¹⁰³ Webbs, *History of Trade Unionism*, p. 389.

¹⁰⁴ Matthews, “The London Gasworks”, pp. 424–425 and 440–441.

¹⁰⁵ H. Pelling, *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (London, 1968), pp. 1–18, and H. Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections, 1885–1910* (London, 1967), p. 44.

of the New Unionism when only a minority of its leaders and members were socialists.

Other proffered causes appear equally unconvincing. To Clegg, Fox and Thompson, the raising of public awareness of the plight of the unskilled created the public support that helped the dockers.¹⁰⁶ However, it will be argued later that the dockers did not win primarily through favourable public opinion and it did nothing for the gasworkers' victory. To the Webbs, too, the publicity given to the extent of poverty in Britain by the investigations of Mearns, Booth and others gave credibility to the socialists who in turn inspired the New Unionism.¹⁰⁷ This clearly does not follow, however, if we dismiss the importance of socialism; nor does the Webbs' view that the depression of the 1880s radicalised the workers and was a further factor in the rise of socialism.

The depression of the 1880s is often put forward as a factor by other historians. To Hobsbawm it meant that discontent was bottled up ready to explode; while for Cronin it led to a "transformation in outlook of many workers".¹⁰⁸ Yet we know that the mass of the working class, certainly those dockers and gasworkers in jobs, were better off in the eighties than ever before, while unemployment was probably no worse then than some periods before or since.¹⁰⁹ Hobsbawm has suggested that relativities between skilled and unskilled workers widened causing a revolt from below – in line with notions of a "labour aristocracy". But, as has been noted, the old unions grew rapidly in this period too and there is no evidence that wage relativities widened significantly.¹¹⁰ Many historians attempt to employ changes in consciousness as an element in causation without ever making it satisfactorily ride the switchback of the rise and fall of unionism in line with the trade cycle.¹¹¹ Pollard has asserted that: "There was evidently a powerful psychological element in the outburst of the New Unionism" which can hardly be refuted but is perhaps the last refuge of the floundering historian.¹¹²

Some historians have seen the New Unionism as a result of an improvement in the workers' lot. Pelling has pointed to improvements in education

¹⁰⁶ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, p. 90.

¹⁰⁷ Webbs, *History of Trade Unionism*, pp. 381–382.

¹⁰⁸ Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, p. 17; J. Cronin, *Industrial Conflict in Modern Britain* (London, 1979), p. 58.

¹⁰⁹ Pollard, "The New Unionism in Britain: its Economic Background", p. 45; indeed Pollard makes the opposite argument that increasing real wages lead to rising expectations and therefore unionization, *ibid.*, p. 40.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46; differentials seem to have moved slightly in favour of the skilled up to 1880 and equally modestly in the reverse direction down to 1914; Hunt, *British Labour History*, p. 100.

¹¹¹ Cronin, *Industrial Conflict*, p. 32.

¹¹² Pollard, "The New Unionism in Britain: its Economic Background", p. 48.

and to the men gaining the vote, but although the former must have helped it can hardly have been crucial, while it is difficult to see a role for the latter since parliamentary politics had little to do with what were essentially industrial struggles.¹¹³ Pollard has suggested a role for the upward movement in the legal and social status of unions, but again trade-union law seemed irrelevant to the establishment of the dockers' union, while in fact the gasworkers were disadvantaged by the 1875 Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act which severely curtailed their right to strike.¹¹⁴ Both Pelling and Cronin have argued that the increased size of working-class districts meant that workers were assisted by a supportive working-class culture, while settled communities were more likely to strike.¹¹⁵ There is no evidence, however, that workers won in 1889 because of support from their neighbourhoods.

The encouraging example of the London dock strike is also a popular factor. The Webbs believed that the "revivalist fervour" of the dock strike "changed the whole face of the Trade Union world".¹¹⁶ Pollard mentions the powerful effect elsewhere in the country of the "histrionics and the razzmatazz" of the London dock strike; to Hunt a "single dramatic victory can play a catalytic role".¹¹⁷ Lovell believes that strikes lead to union growth generally and this was true of the dock strike; while Hobsbawm talks of the "snowball effect" from the dockers' victory.¹¹⁸ Yet an obvious problem with this is – when did the snowball start rolling? The gasworkers' victory predates the dockers' movement and is often said to have encouraged it, while the match girls' success predates them both.¹¹⁹ As already noted, there are many instances of unions being formed prior to 1889, while that year saw spontaneous action and unionisation all over the country of which events in London were only a part.¹²⁰ We clearly then need a causal factor or factors that are common to the whole country.

¹¹³ Pelling, *History of British Trade Unionism*, p. 90; Hunt, *British Labour History*, p. 305, and Pollard, "The New Unionism in Britain: its Economic Background", p. 41.

¹¹⁴ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, p. 45, and Pollard, "The New Unionism in Britain: its Economic Background", p. 40.

¹¹⁵ Cronin, "Strikes and the Struggle for Union Organisation", p. 60.

¹¹⁶ Webbs, *History of Trade Unionism*, pp. 401 and 407.

¹¹⁷ Hunt, *British Labour History*, p. 304; Pollard, "The New Unionism in Britain: its Economic Background", p. 48.

¹¹⁸ Lovell, "The Significance of the Great Dock Strike of 1889 in British Labour History", pp. 101–102; Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, p. 18. Crowley also believes this; "Origins of the Revolt", p. 365. Brown thinks that the London strike had an influence in Hull but offers no real evidence of it; Brown, *Waterfront Organisation in Hull*, p. 43.

¹¹⁹ Schneer, *Ben Tillet*, p. 41.

¹²⁰ Crowley, "Origins of the Revolt", p. 392. Daunton, "Inter-Union Relations on the Waterfront", p. 355, reports that the Cardiff coal trimmers formed their union in 1888, and Williams that the National Amalgamated Labourers' Union was formed in Cardiff prior to the London Dock Strike; Williams, "The New Unionism in South Wales", p. 417.

Recently there has been an attempt to explain the events of 1889 by what might be called the labour process model. There are, however, strong objections to this on both theoretical and empirical grounds. According to Richard Price, the leading exponent of this approach, “the tendency of the labour process to shift the status of labour from formal to real subordination produced New Unionism as both a structural result and a political response”.¹²¹ A major *a priori* weakness with this is that Price, dismissing Marx’s definition in favour of his own, equates formal subordination with job control by workers when it would be hard to envisage a more absolute control than dock and gas companies had over their workforce prior to any late nineteenth-century change in the labour process.¹²² Moreover, the mechanism by which alterations in the labour process brought about unionisation is nowhere made explicit. At the core of the proposition is the implausible notion that if impoverished dockers ask for a 20 per cent pay rise, or gas stokers (made old men at the age of forty by their grinding labour) demand four hours extra leisure per day, they do not actually mean it – what they really want is control of the labour process. “Economist” demands for better wages and hours are in fact struggles for power, although no evidence is offered in support of this, nor is it made clear what workers would do with this power if they got it.¹²³

Price’s evidence of the restructuring of the labour process prior to the rise of New Unionism is also unsatisfactory. To Marx and latterly to Braverman the determinant of change in the labour process was primarily technological, but here Price’s evidence is often inaccurate, sketchy or contradictory. With regard to technical change in the gas industry, to Price there was no “dramatic intervention” and mechanical stoking inspired “no reaction from the men” while at the same time “new kinds of retorts [. . .] had decisively modified the rhythm and intensity of stoking work”.¹²⁴ Manchester gasworks had abolished manual work and “completely mechanised stoking in 1886”, yet in 1890 blacklegs were unused to the scoops (the tool of manual stoking) employed there.¹²⁵ In fact, there was almost no technical change in gas stoking prior to the rise of the New Unionism; the job in 1889 was almost exactly the same as it had been in 1829.¹²⁶ Indeed, although Price

¹²¹ R. Price, “The New Unionism and the Labour Process”, in Mommsen and Husung, *The Development of Trade Unionism*, p. 147.

¹²² R. Price, “Structures of subordination in nineteenth-century British industry”, in P. Thane, Geoffrey Crossick and R. Floud (eds), *The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 120; Matthews, “The London Gasworks”, ch. 6, and Lovell, “Sail, Steam and Emergent Dockers’ Unionism”, p. 247.

¹²³ See for example, Cronin, “Strikes and the Struggle for Union Organisation”, p. 66.

¹²⁴ Price, “The New Unionism and the Labour Process”, p. 139.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 142–143.

¹²⁶ For an attempt at analysing technical change in gas stoking see, Derek Matthews,

does not mention it, this lack of technical change prior to 1889 is at the heart of Hobsbawm's explanation of the New Unionism in the London gasworks. There was even less change on the waterfront where Hobsbawm notes that "[t]echnically speaking, docking was amazingly primitive in 1889 [. . .] there was with the exception of quays, cranes, winches and dockside railways, virtually no mechanical equipment at all".¹²⁷ Indeed, Pollard finds no significant technical change in a wide range of industries.¹²⁸

In the absence of any technical transformation Price adds the possibility of organisational change and "the new style of managerial assertiveness", which effectively seems to mean "speed-up".¹²⁹ Price, using evidence from Lovell's research, has pointed to an intensification of work based on the reorganisation of the London docks in the early 1870s, and on the pressure on profits leading to an increase in subcontracting and problems with piece-rate payments.¹³⁰ Hobsbawm, again using Lovell's evidence, also saw the explosion in the London docks as due to "rapidly growing traffic, essentially loaded and unloaded by speeding up labour that operated by primitive manual methods, with pressure on the dock companies' profits which made them attempt actually to cut labour costs".¹³¹ Lovell himself points to the innovation of steam shipping which being more valuable had to be turned around at the greatest possible speed.¹³² Schneer also cites speed-up in the pace of dock work due to steam shipping and the "intensification of international and domestic economic competition".¹³³

The problem with these arguments is that there is no quantitative evidence that dockers worked harder in 1889 than they had ten or twenty years before. Moreover, the growing, prosperous down-stream docks used by the steam ships seemed to have a different reason for intensifying labour than the declining unprofitable up-stream docks, which still relied on sailing vessels. This diversity of experience, it must be argued, led coincidentally to the same result – the dockers in the whole port simultaneously striking for a pay increase and joining a union. This hardly seems credible especially when the coincidence of causes has to be stretched to most other ports in the country.¹³⁴

"The Technical Transformation of the Late Nineteenth Century Gas industry", *Journal of Economic History*, XLVII (1987), pp. 967–980.

¹²⁷ Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, p. 207; see also Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, p. 40.

¹²⁸ Pollard, "The New Unionism in Britain: its Economic Background", pp. 41–44.

¹²⁹ Price, "The New Unionism and the Labour Process", pp. 136.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹³¹ Hobsbawm, "The 'New Unionism' Reconsidered", p. 17.

¹³² Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, pp. 22, 26–27, 38. The argument is confused by Lovell's recent view that the coming of steam shipping retarded the growth of unionism because of the increased economic power of the larger steamship companies; Lovell, "Sail, Steam and Emergent Dockers' Unionism", p. 242.

¹³³ Schneer, *Ben Tillett*, p. 20; see also Crowley, "Origins of the Revolt", p. 155.

Reliance on contingency is pushed even further if speed-up is to be used to explain why other groups of workers joined the New Unionism in 1889, but this is indeed the proposition adhered to by Hobsbawm in explaining the rise of unionism in the London gasworks. To Hobsbawm, the London gas stokers also experienced speed-up in the 1880s evidenced by the fact that unit wage costs fell in the absence of technical change implying “extra muscular exertion”; the men complained of the intensification of work, which was also indicated by their demanding shorter hours.¹³⁵ But Hobsbawm’s evidence does not stand up. The gasworkers had demanded shorter hours as early as 1859, and as Figure 1 shows there was no drop in wage costs in the 1880s at the Gas Light and Coke company, where the union started in London, nor in Manchester where another branch of the union was spontaneously formed.¹³⁶

There is also the question as to why speed-up in the gasworks and docks should be a problem peculiar to the 1880s. Hobsbawm’s explanation in the gas industry is that it is “what we would expect to find in an industry which continues to expand for 17 years without making any changes in technique or works organization”.¹³⁷ But as we have seen, for 17 years he might have substituted 77 years and be no closer to explaining the events of 1889. Lovell states that the dockers’ grievances were also of long standing.¹³⁸ It would be intuitively more satisfying (as well as theoretically more justifiable) therefore to assume that a dock, gas or any company will constantly attempt to maximise the work extracted from their workforce and there is no empirical evidence (nor theoretical reason) for the 1880s being any different in this respect.

In short then, there was no identifiable change in the labour process in either gasworks or docks sufficient to account for the rise of the New Unionism. The explanatory power of the labour process model in this case is zero, and it is time perhaps to ask whether this “emperor” among recent theories of labour history has any “clothes” at all.

The supply and demand for the new unions’ services

Since unions of the unskilled had been formed before, any explanation of the New Unionism really has to answer the question: Why unlike their predecessors did the unions of 1889 survive? We have seen that they did so

¹³⁴ Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, p. 93.

¹³⁵ Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, p. 163, and Hobsbawm, “The ‘New Unionism’ Reconsidered”, p. 17.

¹³⁶ Matthews, “The London Gasworks”, p. 268.

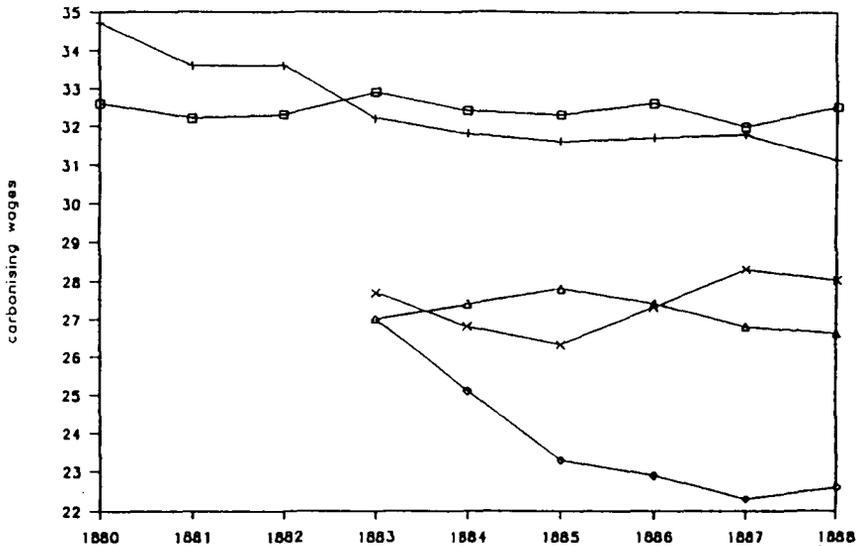
¹³⁷ Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, p. 163.

¹³⁸ Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, p. 94.

by attracting a constant turnover of members from different industries and areas. But why is it that before 1889 national permanent unions of the unskilled do not seem to have been viable when after that date they do?

The best way of analysing this question is by looking at the demand for and supply of the unions' services.¹³⁹ On the supply side, by the late nineteenth century transport and communications had improved and become cheaper and this made the national organisation of unions easier.¹⁴⁰ The size of employment units had increased facilitating the recruitment of members and the running of a union; Bain and Elsheikh have recently demonstrated that plant size is an important factor in the level of unionism.¹⁴¹ For example, Beckton, the cradle of the New Unionism in London, was built in the 1870s and expanded in the 1880s to dwarf previous gasworks in size.¹⁴² Union growth brought the economies of scale, a fall in the unit costs of organising a union which enabled unions to charge low subscrip-

Figure 1. Gas wages (pence per ton of coal).



□ = Gas, light and coke; + = South Metropolitan; ◇ = Birmingham; △ = Manchester; × = Newcastle.

Source: *Field's Analysis of Gas Companies*.

¹³⁹ For a recent introduction to this way of analysing union growth see, Barry T. Hirsch and John T. Addison, *The Economic Analysis of Unions: New Approaches and Evidence* (Boston, MA, 1986), pp. 29–38.

¹⁴⁰ Pelling, *History of British Trade Unionism*, p. 89.

¹⁴¹ G. Bain and F. Elsheikh, "An Inter-Industry Analysis of Unionisation in Britain", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 17 (1979), pp. 137–157.

¹⁴² Matthews, "The London Gasworks", p. 106.

tions. Again, the unions for the first time won their initial battles which meant they survived to be able to offer their services to succeeding groups of workers.

Although the importance of each variable is impossible to quantify, it was probably more on the demand side that the new unions owed their survival. First, as Clegg, Fox and Thompson and others have noticed, the market for an unskilled workers' union was larger by 1889 because there were simply more gasworkers, dockers, building workers and so on to recruit from, making any union potentially more financially viable.¹⁴³ Second, the growth in the size of employment units also increased the bargaining power of the workers since an employer had to find larger lumps of replacement labour in a conflict. Third, by the late 1880s the men seemed to risk less by openly belonging to a union; employers appeared to have to accept unionisation where they had not done before and workers had a greater prospect of victory in any battle that might occur.

Lastly, the unskilled were better off at the end of the 1880s than they ever had been. Bowley and Wood's estimates show increases in working class living standards between 1850–1900 of 70 to 80 per cent; more specifically the real wages of gas stokers in London probably increased by over 50 per cent between the early 1870s and the 1890s.¹⁴⁴ As a result unskilled workers were better able to withstand the cost of industrial action, but more importantly they must have been more able and prepared to pay union subscriptions – a mundane factor somewhat undervalued in explanations of union growth in this period. As Crowley has said: "The 'new' unions were always tremendously handicapped by the inability of their members to contribute adequate subscriptions".¹⁴⁵ This is reinforced by the debates within the unions when increased dues were proposed; discussion usually hinged on how much this would discourage membership – or what amounted to estimates of the price elasticity of demand for the union's services.¹⁴⁶ Yet if workers were reluctant to pay their dues at the end of the century this must have been even more the case in the earlier years.

But most of the above points relate to a more fundamental factor. Why the unskilled were better off, why they won some victories and why they needed a union from time to time even in the down-swings of the cycle, all reduce to the increased value of unskilled labour in this period determined by a growth in demand for such labour in comparison with its supply. This in turn manifested itself in the increased bargaining power of the men. Taking

¹⁴³ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, p. 88; Pelling, *History of British Trade Unionism*, p. 89; Hunt, *British Labour History*, p. 305, and Cronin, "Strikes and the Struggle for Union Organisation", p. 60.

¹⁴⁴ Hunt, *British Labour History*, p. 73; Matthews, "The London Gasworks", p. 257.

¹⁴⁵ Crowley, "Origins of the Revolt", p. 422.

¹⁴⁶ Matthews, "The London Gasworks", p. 440.

first the long-run supply of unskilled labour: the major source of new labour for the docks, the gas works and indeed coal mines, railways, steel works, building and many other industries was, as is well known, agricultural labourers – the latent element in Marx’s reserve army of labour.¹⁴⁷ But the significance of this for the London docks has been obscured hitherto by the belief of Lovell, following Booth’s survey, that although most heavy manual jobs in London were taken by rural labour this was not true of the waterfront. Booth found from the 1891 census that 66 per cent of dock labourers were born in London and that at West India Dock, 70 per cent were Londoners.¹⁴⁸ Smith and Nash (the first of whom worked for Booth on the survey of dock labour), in their history of the 1889 dock strike went out of their way to make the point that:

Casual dock labour is chiefly recruited from London itself. This fact may do something to reassure those who imagine that the docks have always acted as a magnet to attract an influx of country labour, and that an improvement in the dockers’ position would only make the magnet stronger.¹⁴⁹

According to Lovell, London born Irishmen predominated among London dockers because of the stigma that countrymen felt attached to dock work.¹⁵⁰

Yet even at first sight this seems unlikely. There is evidence that rural areas were a major source of labour in the Glasgow and Liverpool docks, while most witnesses to the *Royal Commission on Labour* in the early 1890s mentioned rural labour as a problem for the dockers’ organisation in London.¹⁵¹ One stevedore witness summed up the situation thus: “As regards the dockers, their position will not be better until agricultural labourers and others are kept away from the docks. They come now in droves and snatch the work from the bona fide docker [. . .].”¹⁵² This fact has been overlooked hitherto because Booth’s survey included only the metropolitan district and thus excluded the new, expanding docks in Essex – the Victoria and Albert and Tilbury. Booth’s team, therefore, drew their

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 218; P. W. Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen* (London, 1970), p. 2; James Hinton, “The Rise of a Mass Labour Movement”, in C. Wrigley (ed.), *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1875–1914* (Brighton, 1982), p. 22; Crowley, “Origins of the Revolt”, p. 146, and Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, p. 131.

¹⁴⁸ Booth, *Life and Labour*, 1st ser., vol. 3, p. 90 and vol. 4, p. 32; 2nd ser., vol. 5, p. 29.

¹⁴⁹ Smith and Nash, *The Story of the Dockers’ Strike*, p. 26.

¹⁵⁰ Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, p. 57.

¹⁵¹ J. H. Treble, “The Market for Unskilled Male Labour in Glasgow, 1891–1914”, in Ian MacDougall (ed.), *Essays in Scottish Labour History* (Edinburgh, 1978), p. 122; Taplin, *Liverpool Dockers*, p. 4; Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, p. 146.

¹⁵² *R. C. on Labour*, P.P. (1892), XXXIV, pp. 119, 121, 127; XXXV, pp. 31, 32, 63, 67, and 146.

data from the old upstream docks where port trade was declining (indeed the total population of areas like Limehouse was falling) and one would expect to find few new entrants into the labour market, and then wrongly extrapolated these findings to the London docks generally.

The inaccuracies of a number of Lovell's assumptions about the source of dock labour can in fact be shown by looking at the place of birth of dockers given in the enumerators returns from the population census of 1881. From a small though random sample of a hundred dock and wharf labourers living in Wapping and Stepney around the old upper docks, we find that 18 per cent came from Ireland, while 60 per cent were born in London (confirming Booth's figures), most of them in the same area that they then lived.¹⁵³ Since eleven of these had Irish names this indicates a fair representation of either first- or second-generation Irish but not the dominance of which Lovell talks. Of the rest, three were what might be called erratics: that is, one from Liverpool, one from Swansea and another from Sweden. However, 19 per cent were from rural areas; seven from nearby rural Essex, villages like Chadwell and Chipping Ongar, and the rest from, for example, Walsingham in Norfolk and Robertsbridge in Sussex. Therefore, although in a minority, even in the upper docks and wharfs a fair proportion of English rural labour was being used.

However, this is even more evident downstream. Of a random sample of one hundred dockers living in Canning Town and West Ham adjacent to the Victoria dock opened in 1851 and the Albert dock opened the year before the 1881 census, half came from rural areas.¹⁵⁴ Twenty-four of the dockers had moved out from London and only one was from Ireland; twelve were born where they then lived and twelve were erratics (two from Germany, one from Sunderland, one from Bath, etc.).¹⁵⁵ Fifty-one per cent of the sample were from the countryside – seven from Essex villages, but five each from Suffolk and Norfolk and four each from Cambridge and Hertfordshire. Almost all were from the mainly arable southern and eastern counties, although two hailed from as far west as Pembrokeshire and one from Devon. Therefore, since Booth reported that the dockers at the Millwall and Surrey docks were country born it would seem to be a safe assumption that rural labour was the major source of additional workers in the London docks up to and during the 1880s.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ *Census Returns* (1881), RG11, 461, 467, 578.

¹⁵⁴ *Census of England and Wales, 1881*, P.P. (1883), LXXX, p. 191. There were 1,903 dockers enumerated in West Ham (the area covered by the sample) in 1881.

¹⁵⁵ *Census Returns* (1881), RG11, 1711, 1715, 1724B.

¹⁵⁶ Smith and Nash, *The Story of the Dockers' Strike*, p. 26. Booth estimated the maximum employment in the London Docks in 1891–1892 as follows:

Victoria and Albert	3500
East and West India	2000

Can the importance of the rural labour supply explain why things were moving in favour of the unskilled? One source, Irish immigrants, was clearly on a downward trend, with the post-famine immigration into England and Wales having peaked in 1860.¹⁵⁷ The evidence also shows a secular decline in migration from the English countryside from the mid-nineteenth into the twentieth century.¹⁵⁸ However, it is probably true to say that the magnitude and significance of this long-run movement has also not hitherto been fully appreciated.¹⁵⁹ This is perhaps because, taking the census data for males employed in agriculture as the measure of rural labour supply (given in Table 1, columns 3 and 4), while there is a significant drop in their relative importance there is only an insignificant absolute fall in rural numbers. This must, however, understate the extent of the shake-out from the rural areas because the censuses, being only a decennial snapshot, do not measure the autonomous rural population growth. We know that the labour leaving the countryside was mostly between the ages of 15 and 25, many of whom may never have found employment in agriculture and would therefore have grown up and left home without showing up in the occupational census.¹⁶⁰ Column 6 offers a counterfactual estimate of the size of the agricultural labour pool from one decade to another assuming a rate of growth equal to the population as a whole (column 5). In fact, this is probably an underestimate since, because of a higher birth rate, population growth was greater in the rural counties.¹⁶¹ Column 7 gives the resulting

London and St. Kath's.	4000
North wharves	5000
South wharves	4000
Millwall	1200
Surrey	<u>1800</u>
Total (ex Tilbury)	21500

¹⁵⁷ Again this was obscured for London by the calculations of Shannon, based on implied death rates, which show Irish immigration peaking in the 1880s at almost three times the level of the 1860s; H. A. Shannon, "Migration and the Growth of London, 1841–1891", *Economic History Review* (1935), pp. 85. He was followed by Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, p. 147. More reliable figures and evidence are found in: J. A. Jackson, *The Irish in Britain* (1963), p. xiv; L. H. Lees, *Exiles of Erin: Irish Migration in Victorian London* (Manchester, 1979), p. 46, and Treble, "The Market for Unskilled Male Labour in Glasgow", p. 121. Irish immigrants were also mainly rural in origin; for this reason Lovell's statement: "Countrymen avoided the waterside [. . .]. It was thus the Irish who took over" is a non sequitur; Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, p. 57.

¹⁵⁸ J. Saville, *Rural Depopulation in England and Wales, 1851–1951* (London, 1957), p. 48; D. Baines, *Migration in a mature economy: Emigration and internal migration in England and Wales, 1861–1900* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 240.

¹⁵⁹ The view that there was no secular trend in rural migration, into London at least, seems also to stem from Shannon, "Migration and the Growth of London", p. 84.

¹⁶⁰ Baines, *Migration in a mature economy*, p. 101.

¹⁶¹ Significantly, rural labour tended not to go abroad. Baines estimates that of the 63.1 per cent of male 15–24 year olds who left rural counties, 16 per cent went abroad but 47.1

implied shake-out and reveals the true magnitude of the migration while column 10 shows this as a percentage of the actual decennial increase in the non-agricultural labour force (column 9). This will also understate the importance of country areas as a source of labour for the unskilled occupations since column 2 also contains the skilled and white-collar jobs for which the rural labour was usually unsuited. Clearly then there was a dramatic and consistent relative (and from the 1880s absolute) decline in the supply of rural labour to unskilled occupations in the latter part of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.

The demand for this dwindling supply was conversely on the increase because the industries and occupations absorbing the rural labour were growing faster than the average in this period and this is shown in Table 2. To take the example of the gas industry: for every gas worker in 1871 there were 91 agricultural labourers for an employer to recruit from. If he were looking for an additional worker in 1911 he had only 17 possible rural candidates. The argument is, therefore, that the reduced supply and increased demand for the unskilled in the late nineteenth century led to both an increase in the value of their labour, indicated by the growth in real wages noted earlier, and as the reverse side of the same phenomenon – to a fundamental long-run increase in their bargaining power. Thus the unskilled had a greater need for and ability to afford the services of a trade union which explains their establishment and the long-run increase in their membership in this period.

Super-imposed on the long-run trend is the short-run trade cycle. The improved bargaining position of the unskilled, and the consequent need for a union, manifested itself most during periods of high employment, and almost all writers put the boom in trade as a major cause of the timing of the New Unionism.¹⁶² The justice of this view is borne out by the subsequent history of membership of the new unions. Figure 2 shows the clear inverse relationship between unemployment and membership in the NUGGL in the period 1892–1914.¹⁶³ If we take just the period 1892–1910, eliminating the explosive growth prior to the First World War, the statistical relation-

per cent moved to other counties. This was even more the case nearer London; from Hertfordshire only 5 per cent emigrated, 55.7 per cent went to other counties. Baines, *Migration in a mature economy*, pp. 230–231.

¹⁶² Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, p. 89; Lovell, *British Trade Unions, 1875–1933* (London, 1977), p. 21; Hunt, *British Labour History*, p. 304; Hinton, *Labour and Socialism*, p. 47; Pollard, “The New Unionism in Britain: its Economic Background”, p. 45; Cronin, *Industrial Conflict*, pp. 18–21, and Cronin, “Strikes and the Struggle for Union Organisation”, p. 61. Cronin makes a not very satisfactory attempt to shoe-horn the strike waves of the 1870s, 1889–1890 and 1911–1913 into the Kondratieff cycle; Cronin, *Industrial Conflict*, pp. 37–38.

¹⁶³ Found also by A. G. Hines, “Trade Unions and Wage Inflation in the United Kingdom, 1893–1961”, *Review of Economic Studies*, XXXI (1964), pp. 121–152.

TABLE 1
 An estimate of the significance of "shake-out" of labour from the agricultural sector to the growth in non-agricultural employment in England and Wales 1871-1911

Census year	Column 1	Column 2	Column 3	Column 4	Column 5	Column 6	Column 7	Column 8	Column 9	Column 10
	Population of England and Wales ('000)	Occupied males	Agricultural occupied males	Column 3 as percentage of column 2	Decennial increase in column 1	Estimate of column 3 assuming column 5 minus column 3)	Implied "shake-out" (i.e. column 6 minus column 3)	Non-agricultural occupied males (i.e. column 2 minus column 3)	Decennial increase in column 8	Column 7 as percentage of column 9
1871	22712	8220	1634	19.8	14.4	1869	298	6586	695	42.8
1881	25974	8852	1571	17.7	11.7	1754	332	7281	1307	25.4
1891	29002	10010	1422	14.2	12.1	1595	256	8588	1621	15.8
1901	32527	11548	1339	11.5	10.9	1485	49	10209	1282	3.8
1911	36070	12927	1436	11.1				11491		

Source: B. R. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (1962), pp. 12 and 60.

ship between membership of the gasworkers' union and unemployment (lagged one year) is strong, with an $R^2 = 0.64$.¹⁶⁴ This is in line with the results of Bain and Elsheikh who in their econometric study from 1893–1970 found the rate of change of unemployment, lagged one period, had “the most significant impact upon the rate of change of union membership”.¹⁶⁵ Therefore, the timing of the inception of the new unions and two-thirds of subsequent short-run movements in their membership can be explained by unemployment. Changes in unemployment, however, played no part in accounting for the secular increase in union membership, explained above, because, as far as we know, the average level of unemployment showed no downward trend over the period.¹⁶⁶

In passing, further confirmation of the importance of the size of the agricultural sector to the degree of unionisation would seem to come from an international comparison of union densities. It is clear, as in Britain before the 1880s, that in 1911 only the skilled workers could form permanent unions in France and Germany.¹⁶⁷ There is certainly not a perfect correlation between unionisation and the relative size of the agricultural workforce but the broad outline is suggestive particularly as in the odd-man-out – America – the workers had the additional factor undermining their bargaining power in mass immigration.

Strikes and the New Unionism

We are now in a position to relate the strike wave of the period 1889–1890 to the growth of unionism in the same period since as we have said they are associated though separate phenomena. Theoretically, disputes can also be analysed using broadly neo-classical tools.¹⁶⁸ We have noted that strikes

¹⁶⁴ The full equation is:

$$N_t = 5.04 - 0.32U_{t-1} \quad R^2 = 0.64 \\ (0.28) \quad (0.05) \quad D.W. = 1.15$$

where N_t is membership of the NUGGL in one year and U_{t-1} is the level of unemployment in the previous year. Standard errors in parenthesis. Over the whole period, 1892–1914, the correlation disappears; full equation:

$$N_t = 8.38 - 0.84U_{t-1} \quad R^2 = 0.27 \\ (1.32) \quad (0.28) \quad D.W. = 0.34$$

¹⁶⁵ G. S. Bain and F. Elsheikh, *Union Growth and the Business Cycle: An Econometric Analysis* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 84–85.

¹⁶⁶ B. R. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1962), pp. 64–65.

¹⁶⁷ Cronin, “Strikes and the Struggle for Union Organisation”.

¹⁶⁸ For a useful summary of the economics of collective bargaining see: Charles Mulvey, *The Economic Analysis of Trade Unions* (Oxford, 1978).

were instigated by workers in employment (in contrast to union officials) fighting for an improvement in (indeed to maximise) their wages and conditions. Strikes over other than “economistic” issues, for example union recognition, can be treated as part of a movement for further material gains if we make the reasonable assumption that union membership is not valued for its own sake. Strikes then can be viewed as tests of the value of labour and therefore of the relative bargaining strength between capital and labour, and will occur when both parties feel they have judged their strength accurately and have more to gain by a strike than by conceding to the other’s position. This implies a miscalculation of their power by one or both parties but this is understandable since perfect knowledge of the market is not possible. Strikes are, therefore, most likely to occur when the price of labour or the bargaining strength between employers and workers is called into doubt – usually in the nineteenth century at the peaks in the trade cycle.¹⁶⁹ Even then, the relative strengths or weakness of either side are usually clear; for example, the London gas companies could see that given the shortage of labour their profit-maximising course was to concede the eight-hour day in 1889 and so no strike occurred. In other circumstances both sides think they can win so a strike takes place – as was the case in the London docks in 1889. In some bargaining situations then strikes will happen and in others not, but either way workers will usually find the services of a union useful, which is why booms in the cycle are normally associated with short-run union growth.

TABLE 2

Agricultural employment in relation to other selected occupations (ratios in parenthesis)¹

Year	Column 1	Column 2	Column 3	Column 4
	Agricultural employment ('000)	Gas, water, electricity ('000)	Mining ('000)	Railways ('000)
1871	1634	18 (91)	517 (3.2)	654 (2.5)
1881	1517	24 (63)	604 (2.5)	870 (1.7)
1891	1422	38 (37)	751 (2.0)	1104 (1.3)
1901	1339	62 (22)	931 (1.4)	1409 (0.9)
1911	1436	86 (17)	1202 (1.2)	1571 (0.9)

¹ Ratios imply e.g. in 1871 there were 91 agricultural workers for every one in gas, water and electricity.

Source: B. R. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (1962), pp. 12 and 60.

¹⁶⁹ For a more detailed discussion of this issue see, Matthews, “The London Gasworks”, pp. 452–463.

It is important to note that what determines the relative bargaining power of both sides in a strike is the same as the long-run determinants of the value of labour outlined above. A strike tests or proves this value. Basically, the only bargaining tool the unskilled had in the nineteenth century was the collective withdrawal of their labour. They did not have to learn this as Hobsbawm maintains – as we have noted, dockers and seamen were striking in the eighteenth century and gas stokers as far back as 1825 – but until 1889 they had usually been beaten.¹⁷⁰ How? By being blacklegged – the crucial factor in the situation. As the labour correspondent of the Board of Trade explained in 1888:

Perhaps the most common of all features in strikes is that when the workmen are out the employers endeavour to obtain other men to fill their places. If efficient men in sufficient numbers can be obtained to replace the strikers it is obvious that the dispute must come to a speedy termination in favour of the employers. It is therefore the object of those on strike to prevent other workmen taking their places.¹⁷¹

And as Hobsbawm has put it:

The waterside industry was constantly haunted by the spectre of the backleg – the unskilled farm labourer flooding the docks, the spare seaman or docker from the pool of casual labour which existed elsewhere, transported by the masters to a striking port to replace the striking unionist.¹⁷²

It was, therefore, usually a company's ability to blackleg a strike (or how the cost of doing so related to the cost of conceding the men's demands) which decided the men's success or failure.¹⁷³ What determined this? The first factor was again the level of unemployment; as Hobsbawm says, blacklegs were partly recruited from the casual labour attached to most trades and from the usually large pool of the unemployed generally. But in the booms of the trade cycle this pool evaporated to some extent and this gave the workers an indication of their bargaining power. The second source of blacklegs during a conflict was, of course, the countryside – much

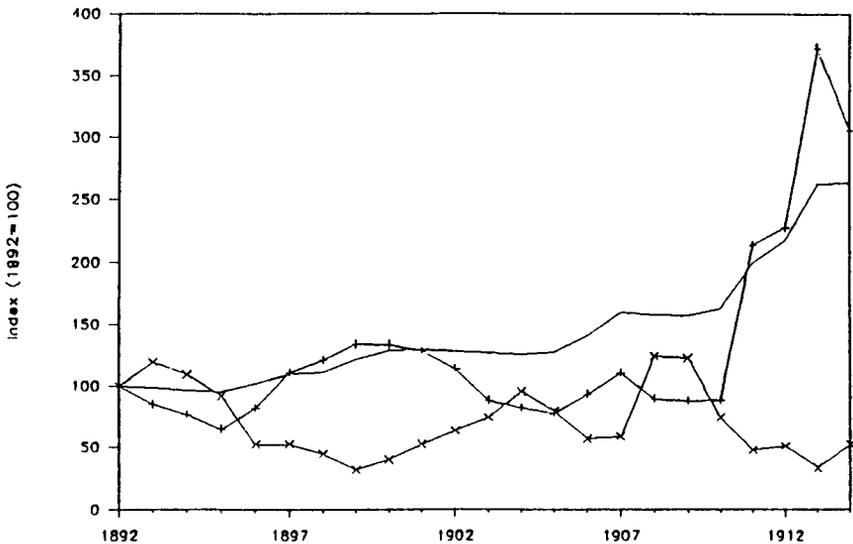
¹⁷⁰ Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, p. 144, and E. J. Hobsbawm, "Custom, Wages, and Work-Load in Nineteenth-Century", in Briggs and Saville, *Essays in Labour History*, pp. 113–139. The idea that workers have to go through a learning process is unjustifiably popular, see Cronin, *Industrial Conflict*, p. 39, and Cronin, "Strikes and the Struggle for Union Organisation", p. 61.

¹⁷¹ *Report on the Strikes and Lock-outs of 1888 by the Labour Correspondent of the Board of Trade*, P.P. (1889), LXX, p. 711.

¹⁷² Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, p. 217.

¹⁷³ To give one example among many: in Cardiff the railwaymen won their strike in 1890 because they could not be replaced; the Cardiff dockers lost their strike in 1891 because they were. Williams, "The New Unionism in South Wales", pp. 422–425.

Figure 2. Union membership and unemployment.



— = Great Britain; + = National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers; x = unemployment.

Source: D. R. Matthews, "The London Gasworks: A Technical, Commercial and Labour History to 1914" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Hull, 1983).

more difficult if not impossible for either side to judge accurately. All the new unions were acutely conscious of their vulnerability to rural blacklegging. Agricultural labour was the traditional source of blacklegs in the gasworks, being used in London in 1859, 1972 and by the South Metropolitan during their strike in 1889.¹⁷⁴ The Shipping Federation, the shipowners' strike-breaking organisation, also used rural labour to replace coal porters in 1890–1891, and was said by Havelock Wilson to have "deliberately gone into the agricultural districts and even to the Continent in search of men".¹⁷⁵ According to Lovell: "The rural counties were seen as the major source of strike-breaking labour on the waterfront" and this led the dockers' union into a campaign to recruit agricultural labourers in 1890.¹⁷⁶ Rural labourers

¹⁷⁴ Matthews, "The London Gasworks", pp. 262, 286, and 331.

¹⁷⁵ Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, p. 139; *R.C. on Labour*, P.P. (1892), XXXIV, p. 147. Foreign labourers were also used and Tillett was anti-immigration for this reason; but probably because of the expense and language problems this source never had major significance. See *R.C. on Labour*, P.P. (1892), XXXV, p. 79, Q. 2212; also Arthur J. McIver, "Employers' Organisation and Strike Breaking in Britain, 1880–1914", *International Review of Social History*, XXIX (1984), p. 7.

¹⁷⁶ Lovell, "The Significance of the Great Dock Strike of 1889 in British Labour History", pp. 105–106. See also Schneer, *Ben Tillett*, p. 48, and Crowley, "Origins of the Revolt", p. 385.

blacklegged a strike at Millwall docks in 1876, also the strike led by Tillett at Tilbury in 1888, and they were used in the 1889 strike which we may take as an exemplar of the model.¹⁷⁷

The great dock strike still wants for a detailed history to replace Smith and Nash's admirable early effort. However, it seems clear that, despite the attention given to the organising ability of the socialists or the funds sent from Australia, the main factor in the men's victory was that for the first time, and despite strenuous efforts, the companies were unable to find sufficient blacklegs to keep the port going.¹⁷⁸ The picketing by the dockers seems to have been relatively ineffective. The key element was booming trade and full employment – the Board of Trade estimated unemployment amongst trade unionists in August 1889 at 1.7 per cent – so that for once there was no army of casuals clamouring at the dock gates for a job.¹⁷⁹ Turning, as in the past, to the Essex and Kent countryside and further afield for replacements the dock companies found the response disappointing, probably compounded by the fact that it was harvest time. The companies needed 20,000 men and they found only "several thousand", many of whom were shortly induced to leave. Thus, when the dockers showed they could hold out for some time, which was where the relief donations were important, victory was theirs.¹⁸⁰

The model would thus explain the dock strike as follows: in 1889 based on the shortage of labour at the dock gates the London dockers believed their labour was worth more. Going on very good past evidence the dock companies disagreed and accepted the challenge of a strike. They attempted to replace their men with new ones at the old wage and failed. The men, therefore, won their strike and got their pay increase because they had correctly estimated what determined both the value of their labour and the employers' ability to replace them – the supply of alternative labour in relation to its demand. The formation of the union was a by-product of this conflict.

Further evidence that the bargaining power of unskilled workers, although for the most part still not great, grew through the period comes from the increase in the cost of strikes for employers, noted by McIver.¹⁸¹ The

¹⁷⁷ Ben Tillett, *Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Workers' Union: A Brief History of the Dockers' Union* (London, 1910), p. 20; Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, p. 75; Schmeer, *Ben Tillett*, p. 35, and Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, pp. 144 and 149.

¹⁷⁸ Smith and Nash, *The Story of the Dockers' Strike*, p. 102. Hinton also asserts that "it was the leadership and organising ability of the Socialists that ensured the victory" in the dock strike, Hinton, *Labour and Socialism*, p. 47.

¹⁷⁹ Smith and Nash, *The Story of the Dockers' Strike*, p. 106; Brown, *Waterfront Organisation in Hull*, p. 38; *Report on the Strikes and Lock-outs of 1889 by the Labour Correspondent of the Board of Trade*, P.P. (1890), LXVIII, p. 447.

¹⁸⁰ Smith and Nash, *The Story of the Dockers' Strike*, p. 106.

¹⁸¹ McIver, "Employers' Organisation and Strike Breaking", p. 5.

growth of employers' strike-breaking organisations, previously unnecessary, is simple evidence of this. The Shipping Federation, for example, had to bring blacklegs to London in 1900 from as far away as Rotterdam.¹⁸² In the gas industry it cost the Gas Light and Coke Company £15,000 to defeat the famous strike of 1,000 gas stokers in 1872; in 1889, it cost the South Metropolitan £100,000 to blackleg its strike of 2,000 men.¹⁸³ The reducing supply of alternative labour was certainly the major factor here. Using a broad brush the picture would seem to be as follows: up to the 1880s employers of unskilled labour could replace their men with effortless ease and little expense. Between the 1880s and the First World War the matter was in doubt especially during the peaks of the trade cycle. A sea change in industrial relations then took place about the time of the First World War when employers in general lost the ability to mass blackleg strikes. McIver reports that workers were partially or wholly replaced in 14.8 per cent of strikes in 1891–1899, 12.9 per cent of strikes in 1900–1909 but only 4.8 per cent by 1910–1919.¹⁸⁴

Summary and conclusions

The events of 1889 must be fitted into the rest of British labour history but at the same time their significance must be reaffirmed. The nature of the New Unionism is important to an understanding of its causes. The unions were formed or joined by unskilled or semi-skilled workers, most of whom remained at their jobs, to help bargain with employers to maximise their material gains. These workers, never had, or lost control of the unions largely because of the short-term nature of their membership. In consequence, the new unions, which should be seen as institutions which offered services to their members in return for subscriptions, were undemocratic in character and controlled by salaried officials with motives somewhat different from the rank and file. The unions, therefore, had a number of features some of which were unsavoury and one of which was a distinct lack of militancy right from their foundation; strikes threatened the finances of the union and therefore the officials' jobs. What the officials wanted was more members and stronger finances, which in part explains why the initially sectional unions became general. Indeed, the unions only survived by catering for an increased, though still severely limited, demand for their services among a transient membership from a variety of occupations and industries.

¹⁸² Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, p. 123.

¹⁸³ Matthews, "The London Gasworks", p. 359.

¹⁸⁴ McIver, "Employers' Organisation and Strike Breaking", p. 12. The corresponding figures for the number of workers involved was 3.1. per cent, 2.4 per cent and 0.3 per cent.

The advent of the New Unionism owed little or nothing to the rise of socialism or to changes in the labour process or to a range of factors hitherto suggested. The unskilled had a long history of organisation prior to 1889 but this had usually been local, short lived and ineffective. They also had a considerable record of strikes but these had usually been unsuccessful. What was novel in 1889 was that the new unions became national in scope and were permanent, while the strikes of 1889–1890 were often successful. Both the unionisation and the strike wave, distinct though related phenomena, can best be analysed by models derived from neoclassical price theory. To explain successful unionisation: on the supply side there were improvements in communications, larger employment units assisted recruitment and the workers won their early battles with employers so that unions were not quashed at birth as they often had been in the past. On the demand side the unskilled had by 1889 become better off and more able and willing to pay union subscriptions. By 1889, the market for an unskilled workers union was larger because there were simply more jobs in the industries and services concerned which brought down the unit cost of the unions.

But the fundamental reason for the growth in demand for the new unions was the increased bargaining power of the unskilled and the related increase in the value of their labour. This is to be seen principally as a function of the long-run decline in the supply of labour from the countryside, along with an increased demand for labour in the unskilled occupations. This meant that by the late nineteenth century even in the downturn of the cycle some groups had enough bargaining strength to warrant the services of a union. Thus union membership increased in the long run, falling back in the downswing but never as far as before the previous boom. The short-run situation was determined by the trade cycle; the level of unemployment accounts in large part for the date of foundation of the new unions in the boom of 1889–1890 and for the subsequent decline in membership, which had less to do with an employers' counterattack than is popularly believed.

The strike wave of 1889–1890 can be explained because although the value of labour was increasing in this period usually only during the peaks of the trade cycle was this called into question and tested in a withdrawal of labour. Workers needed to mobilise their bargaining power which led to the formation and growth of unions to organise this collective action, although in fact it was almost invariably the rank and file who instigated the strikes often against the wishes of the union officials. Some improvements, like the gasworkers' eight-hour day were won without a strike because the workers' bargaining strength was clear. Other gains like those of the dockers needed to be won by proving to employers that the value of unskilled labour had indeed increased. The dockers and others won major conflicts for the first time because as a result of the decline in the relative size of the pool of rural labour in the long-term, and full employment in the short-term, they

correctly judged their enhanced market value. This was tested and proved by the inability of the companies to replace strikers with blacklegs at a profit – the same factor, note, that had increased the value of labour. The explosions of militancy in 1872, 1889 and 1911–1913, each moderately more violent than the last, can be fitted into this pattern.

One puzzle remains – why were there no equivalent developments in the booms of the early 1880s and the late 1890s? One possibility is that they were of more limited nature; in either period unemployment probably never touched the low of 1.4 per cent that it did in March 1890.¹⁸⁵ A more intriguing possibility is that they coincided with bad harvests and depression in the countryside, thereby making our model complete. This, however, is a subject for further investigation.

¹⁸⁵ *Report on the Strikes and Lock-Outs of 1889 by the Labour Correspondent of the Board of Trade*, P.P. (1890), LXVIII, p. 447.