

Trade Unions and the Archbishop

Phil Jump, chair of the Industrial Christian Fellowship and a former trade unionist in a context and era renowned for its militant influences, is well-placed to evaluate Archbishop Welby's address to the 150th anniversary meeting of the TUC. Amos 5.24 and Mary's song in the Magnificat were repeated refrains in the Archbishop's address.

May 1926 will long be remembered in the UK as the month of the General Strike, when an estimated 1.7 million workers withdrew their labour.

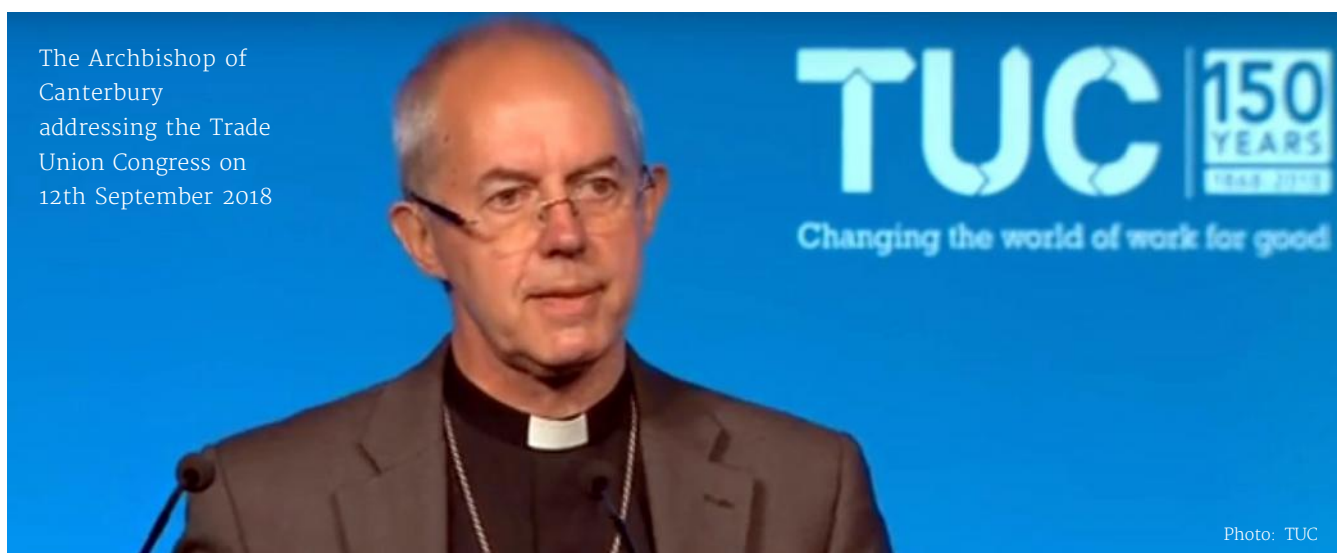
While opinion is divided about the validity and impact of this venture, no-one can deny that it remains a key milestone in the history of organised labour and industrial relations in Great Britain. A lesser known fact is that just a few days before it began, on April 25th, churches and congregations were urged to “to pray for guidance in settling all the difficulties and disagreements of industrial life in accordance with the spirit of Christianity”. This was part of an invitation for local congregations to support and promote the recently established Industrial Sunday.

An article in the Spectator, published a couple of weeks earlier, commended this initiative citing, among other things, a letter from Union activists expressing the conviction that “statesmanship will fail, and political programmes will prove futile as a solvent for social troubles, unless they embody the spirit and practice of Christ”. The article was written in support of the nascent Industrial Christian Fellowship which, in common with the growing Trade Union Congress, appears to have attracted a fair amount of enmity and disdain from many other elements of the British press.

What impact Industrial Sunday had on the initiation of the General Strike, or indeed the strike's abandonment after nine days,

remains a matter of speculation, but this is one of many instances where the core principles of Christianity and Trade Unionism appear to have sat comfortably with each other. Those who were powerful advocates of an emerging and influential organisation of mass labour often coincided with those who were no less enthusiastic in their desire to see Christian values and principles embraced in the world of industry and commerce.

From this perspective it would be no great surprise that amongst the invited speakers to this year's 150th Trade Union Congress was the current Archbishop of Canterbury. He was, we are told, the third incumbent of this office to address the congress, an organisation that



credits much of its early structure and organisation to the endeavours of nonconformist congregations. During its history the TUC has also sought the services of a Catholic cardinal² to act as arbiter in one of the nation's most bitter industrial disputes, so it can truly lay claim to ecumenical credentials.

For all these historical resonances, the Archbishop's address³ to a somewhat resurgent Trade Union movement appears to have ruffled feathers in a number of places, including the Tory benches. Charles Walker, MP for Broxbourne, suggested that Justin Welby should exchange his clerical collar for a Labour rosette, while many political commentators relayed the predictable and over-used refrain that "religion has no place in politics". But the sight of a recognised and respected church leader addressing what has to be acknowledged as a historically significant congress raises far more important questions, particularly at such a crucial moment in the United Kingdom's history.

Whatever our political view, no-one can deny that during those 150 years, the Trade Union movement has played a key role in achieving social reforms that were both necessary and an equally undeniable embodiment of the Christian principles of justice and righteousness. As someone who has taken a particular interest in the social history of my native North West, I still struggle to comprehend the appalling working conditions

that prevailed in previous centuries, or indeed the fact that many people of faith considered them acceptable. Even in my own lifetime, I recall how much of the impetus that led to the eventual collapse of the Communist bloc began within the shipyard unions of Poland. Change needed to come in our world, and while Trade Unions cannot claim all the credit, they have been an important contributor in that process.

It is perhaps coincidence that this historic milestone in the history of Trade Unionism comes at a time when the United Kingdom is again at a significant crossroads. As Brexit looms ever closer, we cannot help but recognise the need to re-identify not only the values and principles that will define us in the decades ahead, but what institutions and partnerships will become the guardians and advocates of those values. It seems that what the Church and the Trade Union movement have in common is both the potential to fulfil such roles, but also the reality that their place at the table can no longer be simply assumed. Both institutions face similar challenges, and neither can claim an entirely unblemished history as they seek to respond to them.

As part of its 150th anniversary commemorations, the TUC has published a forward-looking report⁴ that explores the nature and purpose of work in the decades ahead. It acknowledges many of the realities on the horizon including: artificial

Intelligence and other new technologies; the advent of zero-hours contracts and the gig economy; and the likelihood that the nature of work will change so rapidly that few people can assume a role or career "for life", or be certain that the job they will be doing in a generation's time even exists yet! The issues it raises are twofold – one is to re-articulate the ongoing need for Trade Unions within this emerging world, and the other is to consider how new technologies and opportunities can be harnessed to promote and generate union membership.

Yet the solutions it offers seem to fall somewhat short, and rather than re-imagining how organised labour might be defined in this uncertain new world, it seems rather to consider how institutions that were forged in a century now passed can be preserved in the one that is already approaching its twentieth year. The Archbishop was right to highlight that a pattern of working we have come to call the gig economy can, if abused, leave people open to exploitation and poverty. To this, the TUC adds new technologies and social media which can, in its view, subject employees to an unwelcome level of monitoring and control. Stories have certainly emerged of workers being forced into dehumanising conditions and behaviours for fear of the impact of electronic monitoring and surveillance, but to simply campaign for its suspension misses the very real positive potential of electronic



monitoring, particularly in respect of health and safety.

Overall, the TUC's response seems largely to perpetuate the confrontational approach that has defined the worst of industrial relations for over a century. Rather than exploring how new technologies and realities be harnessed to develop a greater sense of mutuality and common good for everyone within the world of work, their main concern seems to be how to swell their membership sufficiently to create the dominant power base in what they assume will forever be an arena of conflict. Not only does this misrepresent the realities of the past, but it clings to a generalised understanding of employer and employee that simply does not exist in many of the new and emerging sectors. Along with flexibilities in working times and practices, portability of work - made possible through laptops, smart devices and high speed coffee-shop wi-fi - is transforming how, when and where people do their jobs, who manages who, and how management happens.

These technologies and flexible working practices, along with a completely different socio-economic environment, blur the traditional distinctions that the unions seem so keen to perpetuate. Many of those who praise the Gig Economy do so on the basis that it offers a level of self-determination and decision-making that would simply not be open to them as a traditional "employee". Equally, it has been increasingly recognised that a fair measure of the economic burden of recent recessions has been borne by SME business owners who are struggling to survive and thrive. It is they, rather than


their employees, who often face the most personal cost.

The Unions would do well to heed the Archbishop's call to become an active presence amidst these realities, but they might also note that what he invites is a "new unionisation". One example of what that could mean was highlighted in his reference to pensions. The requirement to enrol employees in an effective pension scheme is now enshrined in law, yet rather than pitching employer against employee, this has locked both into an uneasy relationship with a sector where an excessive bonus culture will ensure that a fair amount of the potential benefits from their shared investment will end up in the pockets of city traders in the here and now, not in the pension pots of those who need it most in the future. This is just an example, but it highlights the danger of simply tracing traditional battle lines, rather than exploring the needs and concerns of ordinary working people as they are experienced today. The challenge for Trade Unions, I would argue, is to determine whether to become the genuine organisers and representatives of today's far more diverse workforce, or the promoters of an inherited set of political agendas and assumptions.

My own involvement as a trade union activist, some of which I chronicled in a recent article on the ICF website, was not motivated by any strong allegiance to the messages and narratives that emerged from the platforms and stages of the conference season, but by a commitment to the wellbeing of the workplace community of which I was a part. Even in the notoriously militant environment of a 1980s shipyard, the heart of trade unionism

was not to be found in the strikes and disputes that made the headlines, but in the day-to-day stuff of representing the needs of employees in an arena where all parties often shared an underlying commitment to do the right thing. Surely the future challenge for the Trade Union movement is to consider how such networks and relationships can be fostered and maintained in what is now a far more fluid and dynamic work environment.

It is at this point I am drawn back to that original initiative forged in the early years of Industrial Christian Fellowship, an organisation that it is now my privilege to chair. ICF was formed as a reincarnation of the Christian Socialist Movement to which the Archbishop also made reference in his TUC address. The underlying vision of those who founded it, in common with their trade union counterparts, was to see Christian values and principles embedded at the very heart of our understanding and practice of work. If an Archbishop seemed strangely out of place at its congress just under a century later, it is only because of what the Trade Union movement has since become, or perhaps is perceived to have become.

As we embrace the political, technological and social realities that now confront us, I would suggest that the last thing we should expect are church leaders who discard their symbols of office in favour of political rosettes. Our need is for those who will stand up in every arena of power and influence to articulate Christian values afresh. For some, I am sure that will prove no less uncomfortable than when similar rallying cries emerged a century or so ago. 

1 <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/TUC-campaign-plan-2017-18.pdf>

2 Cardinal Manning. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London_dock_strike_of_1889.

3 <https://www.tuc.org.uk/speeches/archbishop-canterbury-justin-welby-speech-tuc-congress-2018>



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