

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

