

The Early Trade Unions.

The early trade unions came into existence at a time which was, in some respects, very inopportune—the time of the French Revolution. In the prevailing alarm they were erroneously regarded as being political rather than economic in their objects; they were thought to be aiming at the subversion of the existing institutions of England and the establishment of a republic similar to that of the French. Since this was the case, it was not to be wondered at that they encountered the violent hostility of the government. In 1799 an act was passed which, under heavy penalties, prohibited all combinations of working men for any purpose whatever. This act remained in force for twenty-five years. Trade unions contrived to exist in spite of it, but were necessarily much handicapped in their attempts to negotiate with their employers, who could always make use of the law to coerce their refractory employees. Even after it was repealed in 1824, trade unions were still liable to prosecution under the common law and were frequently prosecuted as “combinations in restraint of trade.”

Thus the activities of the trade unions were restricted at a time when wages were at their lowest and food prices and taxation at their highest. The result was, perhaps, the most miserable period in the whole industrial history of England. So long as all production had been carried on under the domestic system, prices of commodities had to be sufficient to insure a living wage to the average worker; when the cheap machine product came into the market, the hand workers had to compete, and, as we have said, were practically starved out in the process.

The Resort to Political Action.

The more intelligent workers, goaded by their sufferings, threw themselves into political agitation, first for the Reform Bill of 1832, and later for the People's Charter. On the failure of the latter movement they resorted once more to purely economic action and organized in the various trades large national unions such as the Amalgamated