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THE NATIONAL FREE LABOUR ASSOCIATION

A CASE-STUDY OF ORGANISED STRIKE-BREAKING IN THE LATE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES*

*There is only one thing worth fighting for, talking for
or writing for – & that is Freedom.¹*

The origins of the British Labour Party are many and complex. They have formed the subject of innumerable works of historical scholarship and of journalism, for it is possible to tell the story equally forcefully in terms either of political theory or of personalities. But no matter how much weight may be given to the role of political ideas, and no matter how much importance one may attach to the appearance of the “right” men and women at the “right” time, the crucial part played by the trade-union movement cannot be denied. It was the growing support derived from the trade unions which breathed life into the Labour Representation Committee after 1900, and this in spite of strongly-entrenched hostility from within the trade unions to socialism and all its works. The stages by which the unions became reconciled to, and then enthusiastic supporters of, the Labour Party are well known.² Self-interest, not socialism, prompted the unions to support separate labour representation in Parliament. Until January 1901 only 29 per cent of those unions affiliated to the Trades Union Congress had decided to back the Labour Representation Committee. In the space of two years that proportion rose to over 56 per cent.³

* I am grateful to the following for permission to consult private papers in their possession: the Public Record Office (British Transport Historical Records); the Scottish Record Office (Wemyss Manuscripts); the British Shipping Federation Ltd (records of the Shipping Federation). I wish also to acknowledge the help of the Research Fund of the University of London, for making available to me a grant in connection with the research undertaken for this paper.

¹ Manuscript dedication by William Collison at the front of a copy of his autobiography, *The Apostle of Free Labour* (London, 1913), presented to Sir William Dunn and now in my possession.

² H. A. Clegg, A. Fox and A. F. Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889*, I: 1889-1910 (Oxford, 1964); R. Gregory, *The Miners and British Politics 1906-1914* (Oxford, 1968).

³ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 375.

The decisive events of the intervening period were, of course, the final judgment of the House of Lords in the Taff Vale case, July 1901, and the consequent successful action brought by the Taff Vale Railway Company against the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants in December 1902. From that action the premier railway union emerged £42,000 the poorer.¹ Spectacular though this judgment was in itself, however, its impact upon the trade-union movement was even greater because it came as the climax of a decade of bitter conflict with the employers.² Within the space of a few years the employers had succeeded not merely in depriving the unions of immunity at law for their industrial actions; they appeared to have succeeded also in erecting a formidable alternative to the entire trade-union movement. Firstly, through a series of legal victories in the 1890's, the employers had made serious inroads on the right of peaceful picketing and (though expert legal opinion was confused on this point) had possibly dealt a fatal blow to the strike weapon within the then existing legal code.³ Secondly, a number of organisations had been created specifically to do battle with trade unionism. The aim of these organisations was to provide employers with an alternative source of "free" or "blackleg" labour, and so beat the trade unions at their own game. The history of "yellow" unionism in Great Britain has still to be written. It will be the aim here to examine the origin and workings of the most famous such organisation, the National Free Labour Association, and to evaluate its impact upon the troubled history of collective bargaining in the quarter-century preceding the First World War.

In essence, the idea of defeating strikes by importing non-union labour was certainly not novel in the 1890's. Before that period, however, it had been carried out on an informal basis and, as on the railways, for instance, was successful mainly because of the pathetic weakness of trade-union organisation.⁴ The advent of "new unionism", symbolised in the dock strike of 1889, gave an entirely new twist to the meaning of collective bargaining, for it represented a challenge not only to employers, but also to the more traditionally-minded trade-union leaders. These men, liberal in spirit and often in political conviction, found the socialist views of Ben Tillett, Tom Mann and their supporters unbearable enough; they found the tactics of the new unionism impossible to accept – "an aggressive, militant unionism",

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

² *Chronicle* *ibid.*, pp. 55-96, 126-78.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 304-12.

⁴ P. W. Kingsford, "Labour Relations on the Railways, 1835-75", in: *Journal of Transport History*, I (1953-54), pp. 66-69.

George Howell called it, "which said, not *let them* all come, but *you must* all come, into the union".¹ Tillet and Mann were quite open in their desire to enforce the closed shop, and so make the strike weapon omnipotent.² George Shipton, secretary of the London Trades Council, warned in June 1890: "If the men support an appeal to force, to compel their fellows to belong to a union, the employers are equally justified in appealing to force to prevent men from joining a union."³ This was exactly what the employers were about to do.

The employers' offensive began, appropriately enough, in the shipping industry. An emotional meeting of shipowners in London on 19 August 1890 witnessed a series of angry tirades against the new unionism and against the government for failing to protect non-union labour.⁴ Out of this meeting grew the Shipping Federation. Formally constituted on 2 September, the aim of the Federation was, in the words of its chairman, Thomas Devitt, to protect shipowners "against the tyrrany [sic] of these labour unions".⁵ It did this by establishing registry offices in the major ports and issuing "tickets" to seamen who pledged themselves to carry out their agreements whether or not the remainder of the crew were union men.⁶ Holders of the tickets were to receive preference in employment. The Federation, whose principal target was Havelock Wilson's National Amalgamated Sailors' and Firemen's Union, enjoyed a fair amount of success. Strikes, like that in London in the winter of 1890-91 and at Hull in 1893, were defeated without difficulty, and the ticket system, having proved itself so successfully, did not disappear till 1912.⁷

But there were circumstances peculiar to the conditions of work in the shipping industry which made the seamen's union uniquely vulnerable to this sort of attack. A ship was a self-contained community, shut off perhaps for many weeks from contact with the outside world. It was possible to change a ship's crew without going into port,

¹ G. Howell, *Labour Relations Labour Movements and Labour Leaders* (London, 1902), p. 449.

² Tom Mann and Ben Tillet, *The "New" Trades Unionism* (London, 1890), p. 6.

³ G. Shipton, "Trade Unionism, New and Old", in: *Murray's Magazine*, VII (1890), p. 728.

⁴ Shipping Federation, *Minutes of Proceedings, 1890-91*.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Minutes of meeting of 2 September 1890; and see *The Times*, 30 August 1890, p. 11; 3 September, p. 5.

⁶ *The Times*, 21 October 1890, p. 8; 16 February 1891, p. 7; *Nautical Magazine*, LX (1891), pp. 426-28.

⁷ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-75; L. H. Powell, *The Shipping Federation. A History of the First Sixty Years 1890-1950* (London, 1950); pp. 7-8; J. Lovell, *Stevadores and Dockers. A Study of Trade Unionism in the Port of London, 1870-1914* (London, 1969), pp. 123-46.

certainly without going into a British port. Getting rid of trouble-makers was easy, and introducing "free labour" onto a ship relatively simple. Where land-based industries were concerned, the employers' struggle with the protagonists of new unionism was of an altogether different magnitude. Employers were quick to realise that they had to promote some alternative to trade unionism, an alternative which would, moreover, gain respectability by being associated with trade unionists of the old school.

The idea of putting forward free-labour organisations as an alternative to trade unions dated at least from the 1860's. A Free Labour Registration Society existed in London between 1867 and 1869. It boasted of having enrolled 17,000 men and of having broken 26 strikes. In 1870 the Conservative peer Lord Egerton of Tatton formed a Free Labour Society to service the Manchester building industry; it had a short undistinguished career.¹ One of the inherent weaknesses of these organisations was that they originated in the political beliefs and class sentiments of the Victorian upper classes. More particularly, their appearance coincided with the first signs of revolt by businessmen, landlords, Whigs, Tories and individualist radicals against the march of democracy and all that that implied for the future of property and privilege in the country. This revolt, fired by the hostility to Lord John Russell's Reform Bill of 1866, gathered momentum during the following decade and resulted, in 1882, in the foundation of the Liberty and Property Defence League, whose chairman, the Earl of Wemyss, had (as Lord Elcho) led the Liberal revolt in the House of Commons to the bill of 1866.²

But though Wemyss undoubtedly had much money of his own, and access to even more through his business connections, the Liberty and Property Defence League was hardly the sort of body to which working men would turn to escape the tyrannies of new unionism. For though it was anti-socialist, its parliamentary methods were frankly obstructionist, and the number of business firms and employers' associations federated with it was alone enough to give the game away. Of the 35 MPs who joined the League after 1882, only one was a Liberal and another a Liberal Unionist.³ The League did not become a major

¹ Free Labour Registration Society (Rules) (London, 1868); Free Labour Gazette, 7 November 1894, p. 2; E. J. Bristow, "The Defence of Liberty and Property in Britain, 1880-1914" (unpublished Yale University Ph.D. thesis, 1970), p. 232.

² The history of the League is treated in N. Soldon, "*Laissez-Faire* as Dogma: The Liberty and Property Defence League, 1882-1914", in: *Essays in Anti-Labour History*, ed. by K. D. Brown (London, 1974), pp. 208-33, and Bristow, *op. cit.*

³ Bristow, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

belligerent in the war against new unionism. It did not even provide employers with a weapon with which to counter the activities of the Trades Union Congress: in November 1898 an Employers' Parliamentary Council had to be constituted precisely for this purpose.¹ New unionism could, in truth, only be fought at grass-roots level, on the factory floor. It could only be fought by working men prepared to turn their backs on the "closed-shop" mentality of the 1890's.

Fortunately for the employers, the rift between the exponents of new unionism and the more traditionally-minded trade unionists had thrown up a number of experienced but bitter union men, who were looking for opportunities to undermine the bases of new-union tactics. Foremost among these men was William Collison, the "King of Black-legs", "Prince of Scabs", and founder of what became the foremost strike-breaking organisation in Great Britain, the National Free Labour Association. Collison was born on 22 June 1865 in London's East End, the son of a Metropolitan policeman.² After two years in the Army in the early 1880's he became a bricklayers' labourer and joined the Amalgamated Labourers' Union in 1884. Then he took a succession of casual waterfront jobs, and in 1886 was elected a delegate for the Mansion House Unemployed Relief Committee. The experience of relief work in the East End, under the watchful eye of Cardinal Manning, proved a turning point in Collison's life. Not only was he brought into contact with poverty in the raw; he also had first-hand experience of the way in which (as it seemed to him) socialists were exploiting London's unemployed for their own ends. He became an omnibus driver, and in 1889 helped form the London and County Tramway and Omnibus Employees' Trade Union.³ For a time he was actually a paid official of this union. But he could stomach neither its middle-class president, Thomas Sutherst, nor its headstrong militancy. He left the union, and omnibus work, in 1890, tried to find casual work in the docks, but was refused employment "because I could not show my Trade Union ticket":

"I thought furiously and fiercely. I felt that I was being pursued and dominated by a tyranny that seemed to be spreading like a blight over the whole surface of the industrial world. [...] I was a pariah among workmen, because I did not belong to a certain Union of which I knew nothing and cared less. [...] It flitted into my mind at that time that there must be thousands of other men as capable as myself [...] who shared my state of rejection. I

¹ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *op. cit.*, pp. 174-75; and see below, p. 331.

² See Collison, *The Apostle of Free Labour*, *op. cit.*

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-29; *Pall Mall Gazette*, 5 October 1889, p. 2.

thought then that were it possible for us to meet and hold council together we might well arrive at some common grounds of defence and retaliation. This was my first vague thought towards Free Labour."¹

Collison did not merely think a great deal about the problems of capital and labour; he read in that subject as well. If his own testimony is to be believed, it was after reading Charles Reade's novel *Put Yourself In His Place* that Collison determined "that the best retreat from Trade Unionism lies in attack".² He took up the struggle in the firm belief that "the partial conversion of the Unions to Socialism, with its destructive and confiscatory tendencies, transformed them into a despotism for the enforcement of [...] false and subversive doctrines". But it was not merely socialism to which Collison objected; he abhorred equally the *modus operandi* of new unionism – "strikes, intimidation, boycotting, and unlawful picketing", examples of which he claimed to have found in abundance in the London riverside unions created by John Burns, Ben Tillett and Tom Mann.³ Nor was Collison the only trade unionist to have reached such conclusions about new unionism. John Chandler, one of the founders (in 1883) of the Amalgamated Riverside Labourers' Union, had actually joined in the 1889 dock strike. Joseph Penrose was founder and first president of the Dock Foremen and Permanent Coopers' Trade Union.⁴ In these men Collison found like-minded individualists prepared to join him in challenging new unionism on a basic industrial front. With their help, on 16 May 1893, he called a "General Conference of men interested in Free Labour" at "Ye Olde Roebuck", Aldgate. At this meeting the National Free Labour Association was born.⁵

What was the true nature of this curious organisation, which had a continuous if chequered history of 35 years? Much scorn was poured on it at its inception, and in its early years many attempts were made to discredit it and its leaders. Some of the allegations made were undoubtedly true. Yet the successes of the National Free Labour Association, even if circumscribed, were too real for it to be dismissed merely as a harmless collection of cranks. On the other hand, try as

¹ Collison, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44. The novel (3 vols; 1870) is a colourful story of trade-union tyranny based heavily on the saga of the "Sheffield outrages" which led to the appointment of the Royal Commission of 1867.

³ Collison, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89, 91-93.

⁴ On Chandler and Penrose, see J.C.M. [J. C. Manning], *The National Free Labour Association: Its Foundation, History, and Work* (London, 1898), pp. 88-91.

⁵ Collison, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-95.

Collison might to give it the appearance of total independence, there is no doubt that it was not the master of its own destiny. Powerful people pulled the strings which alone gave it life and vitality.

The work of the National Free Labour Association fell into three distinct parts: propaganda on behalf of "free labour" and against new unionism; electioneering and parliamentary work; and, most important of all, strike-breaking. The association was methodically organised. It had a printed constitution which stated its objects, the first of which was declared to be "to maintain Freedom of Labour, based on the right possessed by every man to pursue his Trade or Employment without dictation, molestation, or obstruction". Financial members, who originally paid 2/6d a year, were entitled to take part in the elective and, if elected to office, the administrative work of the organisation. Non-financial members – the free labourers – merely registered with the association to obtain employment, and could take no part in the direction of the association unless they paid an annual subscription.¹ Chandler was the first president of the association, but real power lay with Collison. He was both general secretary and manager, and since his resignation could only be obtained at an extraordinary general meeting, at which only subscribers, and not the bulk of the registered free labourers, were represented, his position was well-nigh impregnable. The constitution of 1902 gave him a salary of £300 *per annum* plus expenses, and there is no record of his ever having been requested, let alone required, to relinquish office.² He continued to guide the fortunes of the association until its final demise at the end of the 1920's.

The association had an executive committee but, more important from the point of view of credibility, it boasted an annual congress, open to the press and lavishly advertised. The first such congress was held at the Foresters' Hall, Clerkenwell Road, on 31 October and 1 November 1893. Attended by 160 delegates said to come from all parts of the country, the meeting heard messages of support from politicians and other public figures, and was actually addressed by W. E. M. Tomlinson, Conservative MP for Preston. A resolution was passed against "the recent senseless and abortive strikes which [...] have had a most disastrous effect upon the living of the wage-earning classes", and unlawful picketing was condemned.³ Congresses such as these marked the high points of the association's work each year. The conscious aim was to ape the methods of the Trades Union Congress.

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

² Rules of the National Free Labour Association (London [1902]), p. 12.

³ *Morning Post*, 31 October 1893, p. 4; 1 November, p. 5; *Evening Standard*, 2 November 1893, p. 4; J. M. Ludlow, "The National Free Labour Association", in: *Economic Review*, V (1895), p. 112.

By the time of the third congress, held at Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1895, socialists had become sufficiently alarmed to feel the need to send Ben Tillett, and other like-minded trade unionists, northward to denounce Collison and his association.

This was a double mistake. It gave the congress much more publicity than it would otherwise have obtained. And it helped Collison in his task of presenting his association as a force to be reckoned with in the world of labour relations. The challenge issued by the association to the Newcastle Trades Council, to debate with them questions of collective bargaining, was not taken up.¹ Tillett and his friends had already suffered a reverse at the Cardiff Trades Union Congress, where new procedures had been adopted designed to deplete socialist representation at future congresses.² Tillett's further discomfiture at Newcastle added fuel to Collison's anti-socialist campaign. Tillett had publicly branded the National Free Labour Association as "a set of gaol-birds and blackguards", while one of his associates avowed that the delegates to the "Free Labour Congresses" were "men gathered from the streets and paid with two shillings a day and a pot of beer".³ Whether true or not, these accusations were now discredited and forgotten.

Collison celebrated his triumph by publishing a deliberate libel on Havelock Wilson, alleging financial misdeeds on the part of the sailors' leader, and branding him as a "Shameless Charlatan".⁴ Wilson's career was full of incidents embarrassing enough to give Collison a sound basis for at least some of his accusations, and he freely admitted that his only fear was that Wilson would take no notice of the libel. He need not have worried. Wilson sued him, but when the trial took place, on 13 and 14 March 1896, he refused to go into the witness box on his own behalf and tried instead to have the matter buried in a parliamentary inquiry. At the end of the affair he obtained one farthing damages, without costs.⁵ This precipitate action on Wilson's part provided Collison with nation-wide publicity. The National Free Labour Association had been tested in the law courts, and had emerged triumphant.

This clean bill of health was all the more welcome because the accusations which Tillett and others had made against the association also contained basic truths. Exactly how the "delegates" to the free-labour congresses were appointed no one knew. In 1895 the *Musée*

¹ Collison, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

² Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

³ Sunderland Herald, 12 October 1895, p. 2.

⁴ Free Labour Gazette, January 1895, *passim*; National Free Labour Association, J. "Havelock" Wilson, M.P. Daylight on his Career (London [1895]), p. 13.

⁵ Collison, *op. cit.*, pp. 123-38; Free Labour Gazette, April 1896, *passim*.

Social of Paris sent over a group of observers to study British trade unionism. One of their number, Paul de Rousiers, was present at the Newcastle congress and actually addressed it. Two years later he revealed that decisions at the congress, even though they had been opposed, had been declared unanimous, that the delegates had in fact represented non-existent groups, or towns they had been told to represent, and he strongly hinted that the whole charade had been stage-managed by Collison himself.¹

This damning indictment was subsequently reinforced by two pieces of evidence from Collison's former colleagues. John Sennett, in a series of newspaper revelations, gave details of the preparations that had attended the second free labour congress in October 1894:

"About 100 [men] were hired: some from Fenchurch-street Station, others from Fleet-street, about forty of the old united workmen's mob, and a dozen of Jimmy Wall's eyeball busters' brigade from Deptford. A few of the most intelligent were told off to represent the outports, such as Liverpool, Hull, Cardiff, Bristol, & C, and remuneration ranged from 2s. to 10s. per head."²

The delegates, thus "chosen", were rotated so as to represent different localities each year.³ This system evidently continued, for in April 1905 William Ellis, formerly an employee of the London & North Western Railway Insurance Society, and who had until March 1904 been an official of the National Free Labour Association in the North of England, revealed to the Royal Commission on Trade Disputes:

"There are no *bona-fide* congresses of properly accredited delegates, these being mostly out-of-works, at 5s. per day, and are [...] encouraged by Mr. Collison to [...] make a show."⁴

These were charges Collison never refuted. He did admit, however, that some "brandy-shifters and moochers" had wormed their way into the organisation and had later to be thrown out of it. Nor is there any doubt that the association, at least in its early years, contained a criminal or near-criminal element.⁵ In the long run, of course, such

¹ P. de Rousiers, *Le Trade-Unionisme en Angleterre* (Paris, 1897), p. 353; *The Times*, 9 October 1895, p. 11; 10 October, p. 8.

² *The Critic*, 2 July 1898, p. 22. On Sennett, see below, pp. 327-28.

³ *The Critic*, 2 July 1898, pp. 23-24. And see P. Mantoux and M. Alfassa, *La Crise du Trade-Unionisme* (Paris, 1903), pp. 208-09.

⁴ Royal Commission on Trade Disputes [*Parliamentary Papers*, 1906, LVI, Cd 2826], q. 5443.

⁵ Collison, *op. cit.*, p. 96; Ludlow, *loc. cit.*, p. 116; *Free Labour*, 15 November 1898, p. 6. Sennett certainly had a police record, see *The Critic*, 23 July 1898, p. 18; *Free Labour Gazette*, July 1895, p. 8.

revelations discredited the association. At the time, however, the free-labour congresses, however packed, were indispensable advertisements for an organisation which, as will be seen, was making solid and undeniable progress on the industrial front. Furthermore, even if the national newspapers did not send their own reporters to the congresses, full reports were carried in the association's own newspaper, which appeared, under several changes of title, between 7 November 1894 and 27 April 1907.¹ As with many other ventures undertaken by the National Free Labour Association, the question of finance for the *Free Labour Gazette* is crucial, and will be examined later. Here it may be noted that the newspaper was the only aspect of the association's work which was not under Collison's sole charge. Collison was named as the printer and publisher of the paper, but only till April 1896. Thence forward the editor and proprietor was John Charles Manning, an experienced journalist and later private secretary to the millionaire coal owner, Lord Joicey.² Manning's illness and death in the spring of 1907 led to the demise of the free-labour organ, for Collison had neither the journalistic expertise nor the money to run it himself.

Thus equipped with the semblance of a democratic organisation and the reality of its own newspaper, the National Free Labour Association commenced its struggle against new unionism. This, of course, involved Collison in much more than mere strike-breaking. There was, to begin with, a propaganda war to be fought. Socialist organisations were vigorously attacked, and attempts by the Independent Labour Party and other bodies to secure the eight-hour day were condemned as "tyrannical".³ Character assassinations of socialist leaders were frequently indulged in.⁴ The entire trade-union movement was slated for not giving "value for money" and for engaging in "immoral" if not actually illegal activities.⁵ Towards the end of 1906 Collison, alarmed at the extent to which the new Liberal government was pandering to trade-union demands, formed and became secretary of a Citizens' Industrial Alliance to combat these alarming tendencies.⁶ The alliance was modelled frankly on the Citizens' Industrial Association of America, the annual convention of which Collison attended in Chicago in

¹ The original title, *Free Labour Gazette*, was changed to *Free Labour* in 1896, and to *Free Labour Press* in 1899.

² Collison, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-07. Joicey started his political career as a Liberal, but joined the Conservatives in 1931.

³ *Free Labour Gazette*, February 1895, p. 5; July, p. 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, April, p. 4 (against John Burns); May, pp. 4-6 (against Tillet).

⁵ *Free Labour Press*, 8 December 1900, pp. 7-8; 29 December, pp. 5-6.

⁶ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 10 October 1906, p. 7; 11 October, p. 7.

December.¹ The importance of the alliance lay less in what it did (which was, in fact, very little) than as a reflection of the temper of Collison and his supporters once the compact between the Liberal and Labour parties had overthrown the system of industrial relations sanctioned by the Taff Vale case. In 1908 Winston Churchill's proposal for arbitration boards to fix rates of pay was denounced by Collison as unwarranted government interference in trade disputes.² The Eight Hours Act for miners was of course condemned root and branch, as was the government's scheme setting up labour exchanges.³ In 1911 the congress of the National Free Labour Association pointed with alarm to the growing tendency of employers to enter into closed-shop agreements with trade unions.⁴

It was but a short step from propaganda of this sort to work of a parliamentary and political nature. In fact there is only one instance of the National Free Labour Association ever having acted as a parliamentary pressure group, and this may well have been more by accident than by design. In 1894, when only a few months old, it organised a campaign against the prohibition of contracting-out in Asquith's Employers' Liability bill. This campaign coincided with one of far greater intensity mounted by the London & North Western Railway, whose experience of lobby work was certainly wider than that possessed by Collison. Years later there were accusations that the railway company had actually contributed to National Free Labour Association funds in 1893.⁵ Though there is no documentary record of such a contribution, it is clear that William Ellis, of the company's insurance society, was connected with the association from its first congress in the autumn of 1893.⁶ Ellis may have been the means by which company money was transferred to the association, and the association's support

¹ Free Labour Press, 13 October 1906, p. 1; 3 November, pp. 4-5; 17 November, pp. 5-6, 8; The Times, 15 November 1906, p. 13.

² The Times, 17 September 1908, p. 10; 28 October, p. 16. Churchill refused to meet a deputation from the Imperial Industries Club to discuss the matter when he discovered that Collison would be present.

³ *Ibid.*, 16 September 1909, p. 12; 26 October, p. 10; 8 February 1910, p. 6; 14 November, p. 8. The condemnation of labour exchanges was prompted by the news that they were to be run by the Board of Trade's Labour Department, which many employers regarded as monopolised by ex-trade-union officials, *ibid.*, 29 October 1913, p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 31 October 1911, p. 10.

⁵ G. Alderman, *The Railway Interest* (Leicester, 1973), pp. 158, 168, 315.

⁶ J. Saville, "Trade Unions and Free Labour: The Background to the Taff Vale Decision", in: *Essays in Labour History*, ed. by A. Briggs and J. Saville (London, 1960), p. 338; Royal Commission on Trade Disputes, *ibid.*; The Times, 1 November 1894, p. 8.

for contracting out may have been conceived as an acknowledgment of the fact. Whatever the truth of the case, the association never again undertook parliamentary work, not even against the reversal of the Taff Vale decision. It was a fighting organisation, not a pressure group. In any case, by the mid-1890's most large employers of labour had national representative organisations to carry out parliamentary duties.¹ The growth of chambers of commerce, and the formation of the Employers' Parliamentary Council, gave all employers a chance to make their voices heard at Westminster.

But elections were a different matter. Writing in 1913, Collison proclaimed that he had "always refused to stand for either Parliamentary or Municipal honours" and had "for eighteen years [...] consistently set [his] face against the National Free Labour Association taking any share in politics".² Neither of these statements was true. The association had its roots in the working-class districts of London. In the 1890's it was by no means certain that the battle to create an army of working-class Tories had been lost. The temptation to use the machinery of the association to campaign on behalf of the Unionist coalition proved irresistible. The avenue of attack was the problem of alien immigration, especially in London's East End.³ During the general election of 1895 the association launched a campaign in the capital against those parliamentary candidates whose views on this subject were suspect. Four of the candidates were defeated.⁴ Emboldened by this apparent success, the association campaigned on behalf of the Tory candidate, Louis Sinclair, in the Romford by-election of January 1897.⁵ The following year Collison himself entered the political arena. He stood as the Property-owners' Association and Ratepayers' Association candidate for the Leyton Urban District Council. But in spite of having been "loyally assisted by members of the local Conservative clubs" he came bottom of the poll.⁶ The following year he once more tried to gain election to the council, but with no better success.⁷

Thereafter the electoral voice of the association, at national and local levels, was somewhat muted. Its activities in the Khaki election

¹ Alderman, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

² Collison, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

³ Collison's autobiography is littered with anti-Jewish sentiments.

⁴ *Free Labour Gazette*, August 1895, pp. 1 and 6; the four were J. W. Benn (St George's-in-the-East), W. H. Dickinson (Stepney), W. C. Steadman (Hammer-smith) and W. M. Thompson (Limehouse).

⁵ *Free Labour*, 15 February 1897, p. 59. Sinclair won.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15 April 1898, p. 6; *Leytonstone Express*, 9 April 1898, p. 3.

⁷ *Free Labour*, 15 March 1899, p. 5; *Leytonstone Express*, 1 April 1899, p. 2.

of 1900 were confined to circularising all parliamentary candidates on the evils of peaceful picketing, and urging them to support amendment of the Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act of 1875.¹ The Tariff Reform controversy undoubtedly weakened the political appeal of the association. The October 1903 free-labour congress carried a tariff-reform resolution, but evidently Collison was not anxious to advertise the fact too widely.² By now, moreover, it was clear that the Labour Representation Committee, by means of which the trade unions hoped to secure direct representation in Parliament, could not be laughed away.³ By October 1904 the association had changed its mind about an amendment of the act of 1875, whilst a tariff-reform resolution was defeated by 24 votes to 22.⁴ The tortuous twists of Unionist policy during the last months of Balfour's government created much confusion in free-labour ranks. In October 1905 the free-labour congress changed its mind once more on the subject of tariff reform, and this time backed Joseph Chamberlain to the hilt.⁵

The Liberal landslide of January 1906 brought this period of confusion to an end. After 1906 the political targets of the National Free Labour Association were beyond doubt: they were, in the long run, the entire apparatus of the compact between the Liberal and Labour parties and, in the short run, the "preposterous piece of class legislation" embodied in the Trade Disputes Act of 1906.⁶ The trouble was that the association, by itself, was not in a position to do very much about either of these two "evils". It had, of course, a number of friends and admirers on the right wing of the Unionist coalition.⁷ But these people did not need the association to fight their political battles for them. Pious resolutions could be passed against the act of 1906 and in favour of tariff reform.⁸ Socialism could be denounced as "avowed atheism".⁹ The allegedly "offensive weapons" of trade unionism might be displayed for all to see.¹⁰ None of these stratagems had the slightest

¹ Free Labour Press, 31 October 1903, pp. 5-8.

² *Ibid.*

³ The Times, 21 October 1902, p. 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 25 October 1904, p. 10; 26 October, p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 31 October 1905, p. 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 16 October 1906, p. 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 30 October, p. 14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10 October 1908, p. 4; 27 October, p. 8; 13 September 1910, p. 8; 29 October 1912, p. 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 27 October 1909, p. 20

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 29 October 1907, p. 14. Collison had made a collection of various pieces of ironmongery and stones which, he claimed, trade unions used as methods of "peaceful persuasion"; Ellis denounced this "museum" as a fraud. Royal Commission on Trade Disputes, *ibid.*

effect on the political situation. In 1910, however, Collison attempted to launch the association once more into politics. He was emboldened to do this by the reverses suffered by the Liberal party in the election of January 1910, and by the conviction that the Osborne judgment had crippled the political arm of the trade-union movement. The association set up a special electoral committee which authorised the printing of a giant manifesto appealing to working men to vote Conservative. Two hundred "experienced non-Union working men" were selected to tour the industrial centres, taking care to "keep off Tariff Reform". Subsequently Collison claimed that many of the reverses suffered by socialists in the December 1910 election were due to his efforts.

This is clearly an absurd exaggeration. There were many social and constitutional issues involved in the second election of 1910, but "Free Labour *v.* Trade Unionism" was certainly not one of them. Asquith returned to Downing Street and the political posturings of the National Free Labour Association were quickly forgotten.¹ As with parliamentary work, so with electoral campaigning, there were many organisations of the political right far better equipped than the association to hold the banner high. Collison's venture into the political arena was indeed an empty gesture. It was, moreover, unnecessary, for in the field of industrial relations he had a record of successes which was, as the trade-union movement knew to its cost, beyond dispute.

Collison knew enough about new unionism to realise that there were a number of trade unionists who, like himself, opposed its creed of militancy, and that there were many more working men who wished for nothing better than to get on with the task of earning a livelihood without having to bother about unions, collective bargaining, closed shops or picketing.² He knew too that, especially in dockland areas, there was always an army of unemployed waiting desperately for the chance of a job, and willing to do almost anything to earn a few shillings. The Shipping Federation had proved that strikes at sea could be broken. Collison's prime aim in founding the National Free Labour Association was to show that strikes on land could be broken with equal effect.

The human material for this operation already existed. All that was needed was organisation. This organisation was provided by means of a network of "Free Labour Exchanges" set up in London and the

¹ Collison, dealt with the political actions of 1910 in his autobiography, *op. cit.*, pp. 278-87.

² *The Times*, 13 October 1897, p. 12.

major provincial centres.¹ Their purpose was to keep a register of men with a note of their skills (if any), so that free labour could be supplied quickly and, if necessary, transported from one part of the country to another. An employer who wished to call upon the services of the association was obliged to enter into a contract specifying the daily rate of pay for each man's services for the duration of the strike. No man could be registered as a free labourer unless he signed a pledge, agreeing "to work in harmony with any other man engaged, whether he is a member of a trade union or not".²

The men Collison chose to take charge of the free labour exchanges had above all to be reliable and disciplined, able to supply him with workers, preferably of previous good character, who were able to do the jobs asked of them. Each district office of the association was therefore put in charge of a registrar for the sole purpose of examining workmen and obtaining their credentials. At the other end of the process, Collison's free labourers had to be transported safely to their destination and housed, often in near-siege conditions, in relative safety. Here too he needed reliable and disciplined subordinates to undertake protection duties. In general it is clear that Collison preferred using retired policemen for this sort of work, particularly the duties of registrars.³ But problems of organisation persisted even after the purges of the early days. Collison was not a man who delegated responsibilities easily. He was also vain enough to hug the limelight. A reorganisation of 1903 gave the London office, over which he presided, a much greater share of the association's work.⁴ In 1904 he undertook a visitation of the Glasgow office and removed persons "who could only get notoriety through insubordination".⁵ In 1905 the Lancashire District Office, at Manchester, was similarly dealt with.⁶ These developments resulted in the loss of some valuable personnel, including George Ritson, a former Methodist minister who had been the association's secretary at Manchester, and William Ellis, who promptly set up his own Free Labour Association at Glasgow and then hurried south to provide the Royal Commission on Trade Disputes,

¹ Collison, *op. cit.*, pp. 95, 99-101.

² *The Times*, 2 November 1893, p. 6; 22 November, p. 3.

³ Collison, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-02. Collison's father was part of the organisation and no doubt helped to enroll other ex-policemen, *Free Labour*, 15 September 1897, pp. 117-18. Ex-police officers were evidently much in demand at this time for the supervision of strike-breaking activities: Earl of Wemyss and March, *Memories 1818-1912* (2 vols; Edinburgh, 1912), II, p. 224. Ex-army men were especially suited for protection duties, *Free Labour Press*, 20 May 1895, p. 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 11 April 1903, p. 7; *The Times*, 9 April 1903, p. 4.

⁵ *Free Labour Press*, 7 May 1904, p. 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2 September 1905, p. 6.

on the last day it heard evidence with information about the National Free Labour Association so damaging that Collison never even attempted a rejoinder.¹

But, however imperfect and top-heavy, there is no doubt that the organisation worked. Estimates of its success varied greatly. Collison boasted that between 1893 and 1913 the National Free Labour Association had “fought and been successful in no less than six hundred and eighty-two pitched battles with aggressive Trade Unions in different parts of the United Kingdom”, and that during that time 850,000 workmen had been registered.² If these figures are accurate, it is certain that the bulk of the disputes in which the association was involved were small-scale affairs, mainly involving unskilled or semi-skilled workers in dockland.³ At Barry Dock, for example, in 1897, several hundred Norfolk labourers were imported to replace striking navvies.⁴ Here and there minor coal disputes were settled by Collison’s men.⁵ In 1894 the London Master Printers used the services of the National Free Labour Association to fight the Printers’ Labourers’ Union, which they were refusing to recognise. Collison’s value to the craft industries was, however, very limited. The use of his men by engineering firms during the great lock-out of 1897 had a minimal impact on the dispute.⁶ In the summer of 1901 the association was called in to break the Bristol tramways strike, which it did.⁷ The following year it intervened in a strike at the Mond Nickel Works at Clydach.⁸

But Collison’s greatest success was on the railways. In 1900 he had been asked to organise a supply of railwaymen for a strike anticipated by the directors of the Great Eastern Railway. Then the Taff Vale dispute began, and the free labourers were transferred to South Wales instead.⁹ Collison had made certain that every man sent to the Taff Vale company had signed a contract to enter into its service. The company was thus able to sue the Amalgamated Society of Railway

¹ *Ibid.*, 21 October, p. 8. J.C.M., *op. cit.*, p. 96; Royal Commission, *ibid.*

² Collison, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

³ Free Labour, 15 March 1897, p. 70; Free Labour Press, 7 July 1900, p. 6; The Times, 11 August 1896, p. 10.

⁴ Free Labour, 15 October 1897, p. 125; 15 November, p. 139.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15 November 1898, p. 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15 July 1897, p. 104. The Times, 9 August 1897, p. 6; 13 September, p. 10; 17 November, p. 6; Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

⁷ Free Labour Press, 10 August 1901, p. 7; 17 August, pp. 6-7; Collison, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-90.

⁸ Free Labour Press, 4 October 1902, p. 7; 6 December, pp. 6-7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7 April 1906, p. 4; Railway Times, 1 September 1900, pp. 250-51; Collison, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-57; Alderman, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

Servants for inducing breaches of contract.¹ The momentous legal judgment consequent upon that dispute, and the victory of the company in obtaining damages in December 1902, were triumphs upon which Collison was quick to capitalise.² Yet though most of the railway companies subscribed small amounts to the National Free Labour Association, they did not give it any prominence in their labour policies, and Collison's plan to establish branches of the association at railway centres was never taken up.

In fact, the Taff Vale judgment proved to be something of an anticlimax, at least so far as the association was concerned. There is no evidence that Collison's organisation was busier after 1902 than before. In January of that year the association had boasted that "upwards of 500 senseless Strikes" had been defeated.³ If Collison's figure, quoted earlier, of a total of 682 strikes defeated between 1893 and 1913, is believed, then clearly the bulk of his victories came roughly in the nine years before the Taff Vale dispute. The truth was that Collison could never hope to supply railwaymen, or any other category of skilled or semi-skilled workmen, in numbers large enough to defeat strikes outright. And, as the most recent historians of the trade-union movement have shown, the period of relative industrial peace under Taff Vale was due less to the impact of the judgment than to the fact that the majority of employers preferred collective bargaining to industrial warfare.⁴

Collison therefore found himself once more reduced to intervening in minor disputes.⁵ His last success of any magnitude was in April 1905, when he was called upon to intervene in the shipsmiths' strike at Sunderland.⁶ Then came the downfall of the Balfour government, the advent of a Liberal ministry, and the Trade Disputes Act. Collison's industrial world fell about him. He was deserted even by his traditional customers. During the railway crisis of 1907 his offer of "20,000 ex-railwaymen and others" was brushed aside by the companies; nor did he play any part in the 1911 national railway strike.⁷ He clearly still hoped for some successes where unskilled workers were concerned, and in the summer of 1912 National Free Labour Association blacklegs

¹ House of Commons Debates, Fourth Series, CLIV, cc. 1337-40, speech by Richard Bell, 28 March 1906.

² Free Labour Press, 13 December 1902, p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 4 January 1902, p. 8.

⁴ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *op. cit.*, pp. 326-63.

⁵ Free Labour Press, 28 November 1903, p. 5; 29 December, pp. 6-7; 5 March 1904, p. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1 April 1905, p. 6; 8 April, p. 7; 17 June, p. 7. The strike collapsed.

⁷ Alderman, *op. cit.*, pp. 199, 327.

helped defeat the London dock strike.¹ In all probability, though, the defeat of that strike was due less to Collison's organisation than to the activities of the Shipping Federation.² But the Federation was itself having second thoughts about settling strikes by strong-arm methods. For one thing, governments dependant on working-class support were not willing to give blacklegs unconditional protection, or even to appear to do so.³ In 1912 the Federation's ticket system disappeared.⁴

Organised free labour thus ended where it had practically began, in the shipping industry. Collison, however, continued to exaggerate the importance of the National Free Labour Association, and the figures he gave at various times of the number of workers enrolled, and of strikes defeated, are a mass of contradictions and ambiguities. The system of registration of workers left plenty of room for duplication, and Collison never defined exactly what he meant by the "defeat" of a strike.⁵ Ellis, in his evidence to the Royal Commission in 1905, claimed that Collison's boasts were "greatly exaggerated and fictitious".⁶ Even allowing for personal animosity on the part of Collison's ex-colleague, this claim was basically just.

Collison published his autobiography, *The Apostle of Free Labour*, in 1913. It was not written as an advertisement for the National Free Labour Association, but as an apology for his part in the anti-socialist and anti-new-unionist movements. It reads less like an exercise in promotion than as an essay in self-justification. But Collison was always noticeably silent about one point: who were the financial backers who enabled him to keep the movement going? This question inevitably leads to another, perhaps more basic: what part did Collison and his association play in the evident counter-attack made by employers against the trade-union movement at this time?

To answer these questions it is necessary to investigate the origins of the association. For though Collison's account of its foundation in May 1893 was basically truthful, it was by no means the whole truth. Since the mid-1880's there had existed in London's dockland a number of groups of men willing to hire out their services for political demonstrations, strike-breaking, or more general "protection" duties. Some of these men had been expelled from *bona fide* trade unions; all were eager to undermine trade unionism by establishing "front" organi-

¹ Collison, *op. cit.*, pp. 288-93; Daily Graphic, 30 May 1912, p. 4; 31 May, p. 5.

² Bristow, *op. cit.*, p. 258.

³ House of Commons Debates, Fifth Series, XXXIX, cc. 872-986, 12 June 1912.

⁴ Powell, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.

⁵ The Critic, 25 June 1898, pp. 21-22.

⁶ Royal Commission, *ibid.*

sations, allegedly working-class but actually financed by Conservative politicians. They appeared at the head of an organisation known as the East End Fair Trade League, which they falsely claimed had the backing of the Trades Union Congress, and they engaged in the physical disruption of meetings sponsored by trade unions or held under the auspices of the Liberal party.¹ Inevitably they came to the attention of shipowners and the Shipping Federation.² For a time the Federation preferred not to be seen in an overtly strike-breaking guise. Captain R. H. Armitt, the Federation's labour master in the Albert Docks, was in October 1890 made general secretary of a "General Labour Union" which the Federation financed. George Alexander Laws, the Federation's general manager, set about organising free-labour associations up and down the country early the following year.³ It was in this way that John Sennett, a stevedore in the service of the Federation, came to be put in charge of a Free Labour Association in London, at a salary of £3 a week plus expenses.⁴ That was in the summer of 1892. A general election was pending. It was therefore suggested to Sennett that the venture be given a political flavour. So a body called the Free Labour Electoral Association was invented to campaign on behalf of the Tory party. Both organisations (which were in reality the same people under a different name) were financed largely by the Shipping Federation and ship and dock owners. But there is no doubt that the Tory party, and individual Tory MPs and candidates, subscribed substantial amounts to it.⁵

Thus constituted, the Free Labour Association enjoyed a brief and undistinguished existence. Once the election was over its political activities ceased, and doubtless so did the lavish Tory donations to it. Then there were problems with Sennett. Sennett not only had a criminal record, but had brought with him other members of the criminal fraternity, some of them, such as Thomas Kelly (expelled from

¹ *Morning Post*, 19 July 1881, p. 3; *The Times*, 9 February 1886, p. 6; 9 September 1887, p. 12; *The Star*, 6 May 1889, p. 3; B. H. Brown, *The Tariff Reform Movement in Great Britain 1881-1895* (New York, 1943), pp. 31-39; J. Saville, *loc. cit.*, pp. 332-34.

² Evidence before the Royal Commission on Labour [Parliamentary Papers, 1892, XXXV, C. 6708 V], qq. 8915, 9272-76, 9291-92.

³ *The Critic*, 9 July 1898, p. 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 23 July, p. 18.

⁵ *The Sun*, 17 September 1894, p. 3; 19 September, p. 2. *Reynolds's Newspaper* (13 May 1894, p. 1; 27 May, p. 1; 3 June, p. 3; 17 June, p. 1) printed lists of subscribers, from which it appears that a total of over £850 was donated. The largest single contribution came from the Central Conservative Association, which, through the party's Chief Agent, Captain Middleton, gave £150. The Shipping Federation's cash contribution was £123.

the Bristol Trades Council), having graduated from the “front” organisations of the 1880’s. Such men as these were not likely to lead a genuine revolt against new unionism, for their true origins were too well known. So, though Sennett was secretary of the Free Labour Association, the Shipping Federation had installed as its chairman a young man of hitherto unblemished trade union record: William Collison. In this manner had Collison been introduced to the shadowy world of free labour.¹

As late as 12 May 1893, four days before the establishment of the National Free Labour Association, Collison’s name appeared next to that of Sennett on Free Labour Association documents.² Then the Free Labour Association disappeared. Exactly how remains a mystery. It is clear that even by the end of 1892 the Shipping Federation felt less embarrassed about being seen to be doing its own dirty work. And it was obviously winning the battle of the waterfront. Then came the great Hull dock strike of April and May 1893, ending in the abject surrender of the men to the dictates of the Federation.³ New unionism, at least as far as the shipping industry was concerned, seemed to be at the point of extinction. So the Free Labour Association was wound up. This did not apparently worry Sennett, who soon resumed his life of crime.⁴ But Collison’s reaction was quite different. His anti-socialist idealism was too genuine, and his personal ambition too strongly aroused, for him to accept anonymity without a fight. Within a few days he had organised his own *national* free-labour association.⁵

It is evident, therefore, that, whatever else it was, the National Free Labour Association was not “the creature of the Shipping Federation”.⁶ Nor did the railway companies act as its “puppet-master”.⁷ Collison was naturally reticent about the sources of his income. A report issued by the association in June 1894 referred to the urgent need of funds.⁸ When Havelock Wilson brought his libel action against Collison in 1895, Collison was forced to send begging letters to employers asking for donations to his defence fund.⁹ Yet in just over six months the

¹ The Critic, 2 July 1898, p. 24.

² The Sun, 27 September 1894, p. 2; The Times, 26 March 1907, p. 15.

³ Saville, loc. cit., pp. 326-30; Clegg, Fox and Thompson, op. cit., pp. 80-81.

⁴ The Critic, 23 July 1898, p. 18.

⁵ The Sun, 21 September 1894, p. 2; 25 September, p. 2.

⁶ As asserted by Saville, loc. cit., p. 339.

⁷ Alderman, op. cit., pp. 168-69.

⁸ Ludlow, loc. cit., p. 114.

⁹ Manchester, Sheffield & Lincolnshire Railway, Proceedings of the Board of Directors, MSL 1/28, minute 16011, 31 May 1895; Taff Vale Railway Directors’ Minute Book, TV 1/10, minute 1547, 28 May 1895, British Transport Historical Records, Public Record Office, London.

financial position was alleged to have improved dramatically. In October 1895 Collison declared that the total income of the association for the period August 1893 to September 1895 inclusive amounted to £5,221 1/-.¹ Of this, he alleged that £466 12/- was derived from the sale of the *Free Labour Gazette*, which then appeared monthly price one penny; this works out at an average monthly sale of about 10,100 copies, a credible circulation figure. Collison further revealed that £3,241 19/- was income by way of subscriptions from registered men. A difficulty here is that no one knew what the annual subscription really was. At various times during 1893, 1894 and 1895 Collison gave the subscription as 1/-, 1/1d, 2/- and even 2/6d per annum.² A figure of 1/- *per annum* would mean that the income from subscriptions may have represented as many as 60,000 enrolled members; it could hardly have reflected a membership of 127,000, which was what Collison was claiming in December 1895.³ The rest of the income for 1893-95 Collison alleged came from donations from sympathisers and employers of labour. This figure, £1,512 10/-, is in fact the least suspicious. Collison steadfastly refused to name these public benefactors. The list which *The Critic* published in 1898 is clearly misleading, for it dates from June 1892 and is merely a reprint of earlier lists published by *Reynolds's Newspaper* with reference to Sennett's Free Labour Association. That Collison had contacts in the Conservative party is beyond doubt. That they gave him large sums of money is less certain.⁴

Only Collison's private papers would reveal the identities of his backers. These papers no longer exist.⁵ In their absence there is only fragmentary evidence of an admittedly unsatisfactory nature. The shipping and dock interests contributed to their own strike-breaking organisation. The railway companies gave on average less than £150 a year, which would hardly have covered Collison's overheads, let alone his own salary.⁶ Though it is true that the National Free Labour Association helped out in engineering, shipbuilding and iron and steel industries, there is no evidence that the employers involved did more than pay for services rendered at a particular time.⁷ Sir George Livesey, chairman of the South Metropolitan Gas Company, was, according to

¹ Daily Chronicle, 2 November 1895, p. 9.

² The Critic, 25 June 1898, pp. 21-22.

³ Ibid. The suspicion must remain strong that Collison varied the membership roll, and the theoretical rate of subscription, to suit his publicity needs.

⁴ Ibid., 18 June 1898, p. 13; 2 July, p. 25.

⁵ Private information.

⁶ Alderman, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

⁷ The Times, 10 October 1899, p. 9.

Collison, “a warm and consistent supporter” of the association.¹ There is no doubt that Livesey contributed to the association, but his publicly declared subscription of £10 a year could not have gone very far.² Nor is there any doubt that Livesey supported the idea of organised free labour even before Collison appeared on the scene.³ Yet Livesey’s long-term solution to industrial strife lay in the idea of co-partnership, not industrial warfare.⁴ The name of Sir William Lewis, the South Wales industrialist, has also been linked with the National Free Labour Association, but in this case there is not even evidence of continuous support, however small.⁵

There is, however, ample evidence that influential industrialists were not satisfied with the service Collison was offering. The Earl of Wemyss, on Collison’s own admission, “objected to the open warfare of strike breaking”; Lord Dysart and Lord Avebury were evidently of the same opinion.⁶ The dislike of physical-force methods was a major factor behind the formation of the Free Labour Protection Association in July 1897, “to test systematically the efficiency, or otherwise, of existing laws for the protection of non-unionists, and, if necessary, to obtain an amendment of such laws”.⁷ The backers of this association included G. A. Laws, Sir William Lewis and George Livesey; its chairman was the Earl of Wemyss.⁸ There was, indeed, much overlap between the membership of the association and that of the Liberty and Property Defence League.⁹ Collison, though publicly welcoming the Free Labour Protection Association, was in private contemptuous of it, because “no pacific or merely educational weapons would ever

¹ Collison, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

² Livesey to Collison, 3 October 1899, in Collison, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

³ Livesey to Sennett, 29 April 1892, in Reynolds’s Newspaper, 13 May 1894, p. 1.

⁴ Livesey to Collison, 18 September 1903, in Collison, *op. cit.*, pp. 248-50.

⁵ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

⁶ Collison, *op. cit.*, p. 309.

⁷ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 173; *The Times*, 6 September 1897, p. 10. Anger by employers at the passing of the Workmen’s Compensation Act, in 1897, was also apparently a factor contributing to the formation of the Free Labour Protection Association, Earl of Wemyss and March, *op. cit.*, II, p. 134.

⁸ The [Free] Labour Protection Association, *The Law Relating to Picketing as laid down by Recent Judgments* (London, 1899), p. 14.

⁹ Bristow, *op. cit.*, p. 234; J. M. Ludlow, “The Labour Protection Association”, in: *Economic Review*, IX (1899), pp. 244-46. W. J. Shaxby’s famous book *The Case Against Picketing* (London, 1897) contained at the front the rules of the Free Labour Protection Association; the book was published by Lord Wemyss’s Liberty Review Publishing Company, and the author was an official of the Liberty and Property Defence League, Royal Commission on Trade Disputes, p. 3208; Bristow, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

pierce the outer armour of Trade Unionism".¹ He feared, too, that it would poach his own members and cause him to suffer financially thereby.²

In fact the Free Labour Protection Association did engage in strike-breaking, an activity for which it was evidently not nearly as well equipped as was Collison's organisation.³ The significance of the Free Labour Protection Association lay in the fact that the Employers' Parliamentary Council grew directly out of it. Towards the end of 1898 the Tyneside engineering employer Sir Benjamin Browne, a leading member of the association, suggested the formation of a council "for the purpose of opposing or amending any Bills [...] injuriously affecting the interests of trade, or which seek to violate the principles of free contract or free labour".⁴ On 15 November 1898 the Employers' Parliamentary Council was formed; of this organisation, too, Wemyss was chairman.⁵

Contemporary English observers did not miss the point that the hand of Lord Wemyss was to be seen at work in many of the right-wing individualist and anti-socialist movements of the time. It was, however, left to two young Frenchmen to make some deeper connections. In the summer of 1902 Paul Mantoux and Maurice Alfassa came to Great Britain to undertake a survey of British trade unionism.⁶ They met leading figures in the industrial and labour fields, and the results of their research, including detailed accounts of these interviews, were published the following year.⁷ Perhaps it was because they

¹ Collison, *op. cit.*, p. 309; *The Times*, 8 September 1897, p. 8.

² Collison to Wemyss, 5 November 1897, Wemyss Manuscripts, RH 4/40/13, Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh.

³ *The Times*, 10 January 1898, p. 7. On the activities of the Free Labour Protection Association, see Frederick Millar (secretary) to Wemyss, 29 October and 14 December 1897; Wemyss Manuscripts, *ibid.*, Henry Fielding (secretary of the General Union of Carpenters and Joiners, Blackburn branch) to Wemyss, 18 December 1897, and Millar to Wemyss, 31 December, Wemyss Manuscripts, RH 4/40/14. Millar, who became secretary of the Employers' Parliamentary Council, admitted to the Royal Commission on Trade Disputes in 1904 that the Free Labour Protection Association "does not [now] exist as an active body", though it was still functioning in 1907, *op. cit.*, qq. 3360, 3416; *The Times*, 3 January 1907, p. 2.

⁴ The [Free] Labour Protection Association, *Report of Proceedings, 1898* [London, 1898], p. 7. Browne was also president of the Engineering Employers' Federation, and the formation of both the Free Labour Protection Association and the Employers' Parliamentary Council must clearly be seen against the background of the 1897 engineering lock-out; see the *Railway News*, 8 January 1898, p. 69, and Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *op. cit.*, pp. 173-74.

⁵ *Transport*, 23 December 1898, p. 526.

⁶ Like de Rousiers's party, they came under the auspices of the Musée Social.

⁷ Mantoux and Alfassa, *op. cit.*

were foreigners that people on both sides of the struggle were willing to talk more frankly to them than to the British press. At all events the outcome was not in doubt. Wemyss told them that the National Free Labour Association was "an artificial Association which receives all its funds from us [the Employers' Parliamentary Council] but we have tried to give it the appearance of a life of its own so as to make an impression on the public mind".¹ Collison had told the two Frenchmen that it was he who had furnished Edwin Pratt with the material used in the celebrated series of attacks on the trade unions, which appeared in *The Times* between 18 November 1901 and 16 January 1902.² Wemyss, though he corroborated this statement, hinted that Collison had in turn obtained *his* orders from the Employers' Parliamentary Council, and asserted that the resolutions and reports presented at National Free Labour Association congresses were in reality the work of the council.³

As far as Mantoux and Alfassa were concerned this evidence was conclusive. They saw the National Free Labour Association as the tool of the Employers' Parliamentary Council, one of the many means by which it was at that time openly seeking to tame the trade-union movement and destroy the infant Labour Representation Committee.⁴ No less an authority than Sidney Webb confirmed them in their opinion.⁵ Yet even the apparently watertight account given by the two Frenchmen leaves some significant loose ends. Collison made no secret of the fact that he received money from employers; indeed he admitted as much during his evidence in the Taff Vale case.⁶ But the Employers' Parliamentary Council only came into existence in 1898, and was absorbed into the Federation of British Industries in 1916, two years after Wemyss' death. The National Free Labour Association had thus existed before the foundation of the council, and survived

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 325-26. In a slightly different version of this interview, on p. 213, Wemyss is reported as saying "nearly all its funds".

² *Ibid.*, p. 316. The articles, under the title "The Crisis in British Industry", appeared anonymously and were later reprinted, under Pratt's name, as *Trade Unionism and British Industry* (London, 1904); they repeated many of the accusations made against the trade unions at successive National Free Labour Association congresses.

³ Mantoux and Alfassa, *op. cit.*, pp. 214, 326. That *The Times'* articles originated within the circle of Lord Wemyss is beyond doubt. On 22 February 1902 Millar wrote to the Rhymney Railway board of directors to ask them to buy the book form of the articles; the directors agreed to buy 200 copies. Rhymney Railway Board of Directors Minute Book, RHY 1/8, p. 344, 7 March 1902, British Transport Historical Records.

⁴ Mantoux and Alfassa, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-82, 182-87.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 316-17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

many years after its disappearance. Clearly any explanation of the association as the offspring of the council is partial only. Nor can the association be explained away as the particular brainchild of Lord Wemyss, directly or through any other organisation which he led.¹

William Collison founded the National Free Labour Association, and he seems to have been prepared (the truth, however, will in all probability never be known for certain) to receive money and facilities from whichever source happened to be the easiest available at any one time: in the early days the shipowners; later the railway companies; then the Employers' Parliamentary Council; from time to time engineering and building employers, and gas and tramway companies. The association's existence was very much one from hand to mouth. Its heyday was in the period from its foundation until the Liberal landslide of 1906. During that period employers used it as an insurance policy and a useful form of psychological warfare against strikers. The idea that Collison could ever hope to provide alternative sources of labour they dismissed as nonsense. What Collison provided was gangs of men, under a form of military protection, to act as industrial spies, wear down the moral of strikers, and so bring about the speedy collapse of strike actions.² It was the steady development of collective bargaining during the decade before the Great War, when even the railway directors, hitherto staunch opponents of "recognition", sat down to talk peace with the union leaders, that turned organisations such as the National Free Labour Association into dangerous relics of a stormy industrial past.³

Yet somehow the National Free Labour Association survived. It survived Lord Wemyss, the Employers' Parliamentary Council, and even the Great War. The evidence for its post-1914 history is sparse indeed. During the war Collison maintained as best he could the attack

¹ There is, apart from the evidence already offered, some qualitative documentation in the Wemyss Manuscripts of a certain formality, even coldness, in the relationship between Collison and Wemyss. In 1906 Millar warned the Earl against having his name connected with the National Free Labour Association, which, he alleged, "has, with good reason, the reputation of being an entirely bogus affair", Millar to Wemyss, 15 October 1906, RH 4/40/17. I am grateful to the present Earl of Wemyss for permission to reproduce this quotation.

² Mantoux and Alfassa, *op. cit.*, pp. 212, 215, 321-22; Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

³ There are no precise figures to indicate the impact the association had upon the outcome of strikes and lock-outs. There is, however, a series of statistics, issued annually by the Labour Department of the Board of Trade (and printed in the Parliamentary Papers), showing the proportion of such disputes settled by "replacement of workpeople" generally. Between 1889 and 1893 inclusive (the years of new unionism) the figure was 15 per cent; 1894-1901, 12 per cent; 1902-05 (the Taff Vale years), 14 per cent; but 1906-13, only 8 per cent.

upon trade unions. In July 1915 he warned the country that the unions would use the war to make trade-union membership compulsory on all government work, and perhaps somehow thereby “hand the nation over” to the Germans; at the same time he promised that, through the efforts of the association, this conspiracy would be foiled and that after the war the closed shop would be “a thing of the past”.¹ These dire predictions did not come to pass. Unrepentant, the association surfaced again just before the general election of 1923, when its “Executive Council” appealed to electors to vote Conservative and thus secure “the abolition of unemployment”.² The annual reports of the association also continued to appear. The 34th report, issued in December 1926, called upon its members to help “clear out the Reds”, and praised the work done by “its volunteers” in preventing the pilfering of coal supplies during the miners’ strike.³ Under the control of “revolutionary Socialist and Communist agitators”, the report declared, the trade-union movement had become “a gigantic engine of tyranny”; and the National Free Labour Association called once more, as it had been doing for the past twenty years, for the repeal of the Trade Disputes Act of 1906.⁴

The exact nature of the association at this time is not known. Certainly it played no part in strike-breaking and its main, indeed only, function, seems to have been to have acted as a feeble echo of the right wing of the Tory Party. Nor is it possible to say who the personnel of the association were. But it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that there could have been at this time very few active members – probably Collison (who now described himself as a journalist) and a few friends of pre-1914 vintage. Gone were the days of lavish publicity, weighty congresses and grand public meetings. The network of free labour exchanges had vanished. What is certain is that Collison was still in control of whatever remained of the association of pre-war days. He was still general secretary and manager of the association, and its headquarters were still at 5 Farringdon Avenue.⁵ About 1929 the

¹ National Free Labour Association, Special Bulletin, “The Workshop Army” (handbill in the possession of the author).

² The Times, 21 November 1923, p. 18.

³ Ibid., 21 December 1926, p. 9.

⁴ Ibid., 4 January 1927, p. 12.

⁵ The Post Office London Directory (1928), p. 1836. The address is interesting. In 1896 the London printing trade called on the services of the association to counter the influence of the London Society of Compositors. A Free Labour Bureau was accordingly opened for the printing and allied trades at 5 Farringdon Avenue, off Fleet Street. In view of Collison’s journalistic activities, this may therefore simply have been an accommodation address for the association,

association disappeared, or at least ceased to occupy offices in the City.¹ The exact date of its demise is uncertain. Collison himself died at his home in Chadwell Heath, Essex, on 8 March 1938, and evidently many secrets of the association died with him.

The quarter-century before the First World War was one of the most troublesome periods in the history of British industrial relations. Both sides of industry used extreme tactics. The National Free Labour Association was not the only strike-breaking organisation to emerge at this time nor, compared with the work of the Shipping Federation, was it the most spectacularly successful.² But it was the one most widely used by employers, and the one most generally abused by the trade-union movement. Though Collison exaggerated its importance and painted far too rosy a picture of its effect on industrial relations, it would be wrong to brush it aside as merely another “front” organisation invented by employers to do their fighting for them. Collison was far too much of an individualist to allow himself to be used in this way, at least not all the time.

At one level the National Free Labour Association operated unashamedly as a supply source for blackleg labour, as a “yellow” union. At another level it was a genuine if bizarre reflection of an extreme form of working-class hostility to (as it seemed) the rigidity of new unionism and the disproportionate influence socialists were having upon British trade unions. On this subject Collison did not mince his words.

“Everywhere to-day”, he wrote in 1913, “we see signs of general revolt and social eruption. Agitation is one of the most profitable industries of the moment. Socialism has been made to pay.”³

“I have lived a strike breaker. I shall die a strike breaker; the man who was in the first line of defence of ordered government, of manful labour, of brilliant craftsmanship, of hope for the individual. [...] I found the tyranny of a self-appointed, privileged

J.C.M., *op. cit.*, p. 60. Until June 1899 the association’s offices were at 79 Fenchurch Street, Free Labour, 15 April 1899, p. 8.

¹ The association is not listed in The Post Office London Directory after 1928.

² For other organisations dedicated to the supply of blackleg labour, apart from those already mentioned, see E. H. Phelps Brown, *The Growth of British Industrial Relations. A Study from the Standpoint of 1906-14* (London, 1959), pp. 166-67; Saville, *loc. cit.*, pp. 326, 330; Royal Commission on Labour, Vol. II [PP, 1892, XXXVI, C. 6795 V], qq. 12162-64, 12487; Vol. III [C. 6795 VIII], pp. 141-47; Royal Commission on Trade Disputes, qq. 4294-314. As late as 1912 a National Society of Free Workers Limited was established in Yorkshire, *Railway Times*, 28 September 1912, p. 329; 5 July 1913, p. 19.

³ Collison, *op. cit.*, p. 320.

aristocracy of labour [...] and finding that tyranny intolerable, I fought it.”¹

If the conditions implied here of the sort of industrial system envisaged seem idyllic, even, in view of the prevailing social and political climate, absurd, it must be remembered that Collison, Chandler, Penrose and the other organisers of the National Free Labour Association could boast of origins every bit as proletarian as those of John Burns or Ben Tillett. The activities of the association and the following which, however mercenary and transitory, it was able to build up should serve as a reminder to historians of the period that there was no such thing as working-class solidarity, and that employers and governments were not the only people at that time who disapproved of the militancy of the trade-union movement, and who were intent on resisting it.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 327.