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THE STRIKES AND LOCKOUTS IN THE IRON INDUSTRY AND THE FORMATION OF THE IRONWORKERS' UNIONS, 1862-1869

G. D. H. Cole has drawn attention to the militancy of the unions outside of the craftsmen's trades in the 1860's.¹ The "class cleavage" which he ascribed to the engineering, shipbuilding and the building trades enabled the skilled men to use their "New Model Unions" as exclusive barriers against dilution by the semi-skilled and labouring classes. In consequence, the Amalgamated Unions had pacific tendencies which were only partially offset by their adoption of a centralised organisation, through which policy making and finance were mainly controlled. Although Cole described the Ironworkers' Union as one of the provincially based Amalgamated Unions,² the three main unions which were formed by the ironworkers in the years 1862-3 never really succeeded in amalgamating along the lines described. When they did come together in 1868, after a period of disastrous defeats, the form of amalgamation they adopted resulted in a very weak union. The executive committee insisted upon making all decisions on the use of the strike tactic, but allowed the branches almost complete control over union finances.

This article describes the severe conflicts, both internal and external, which the ironworkers endured in their formative years, and how they were very nearly eliminated as an organised union. Brief mention will be made of the system of arbitration and conciliation, which the union eventually adopted as a means to its survival, in 1869. A subsequent paper will describe how the adherence of the leaders of the ironworkers' union to the Boards of Arbitration and Conciliation contributed to the winding up of the union in 1891 and its replacement by the Associated Iron and Steel Workers of Great Britain. The extent of the contract system among ironworkers will also be examined and the view that its workings made their unions exclusive and non-

¹ G. D. H. Cole, "British Trade Unions in the Third Quarter of the Nineteenth Century", in: *International Review for Social History*, II (1937), reprinted in *Essays in Economic History*, ed. by E. M. Carus Wilson, III, p. 202.

² G. D. H. Cole and R. Postgate, *The Common People* (London, 1956), p. 373.

militant, will be looked at critically. The struggles of the ironworkers were one of the main pre-occupations of the Royal Commission on Trades Unions which began work in 1867. Their history thus throws light upon the background of conflict, hitherto obscured by the parochial feuds of the Sheffield Outrages, which influenced the movements towards political and legal reform at the time.

I

The ironworkers' unions were formed at separate points in time and in different places, under the leadership of men who had strong ideas on the necessity for local control in union organisation.¹ Despite the repeated support of the members for resolutions demanding one union for all the ironworkers, the two main regions and the three main groups in iron production failed to unite over a period of five years. The regions in which the unions were started were on the north-east coast around Gateshead, where the National Association of Puddlers, Shinglers, Rollers, Millmen and Others, was formed in 1862; and South Staffordshire and East Worcestershire, where the union later to be called the Associated Iron Workers of Great Britain was formed in 1863. A breakaway group from this union, the West Bromwich Millmen's Association, was formed later in the same year. These unions were known among ironworkers of the time as the Northern, Southern and Millmen's Unions. The main recruits to the first two were the puddlers and shinglers, who turned pig-iron into malleable or wrought iron, while the Millmen's Union recruited only from the men who transformed the "puddled bars" into sheets, rails, plate, hoops and bars, known on the market as "manufactured iron". Exclusiveness was not a feature of these unions.²

The preamble to the rules of the Southern Union stated that "it is incumbent upon every man who belongs to the manufacturing of iron, to become a member and join the union at once". As inducement, members joining in the six months before January 1st 1864 were allow-

¹ Local combinations had been formed at earlier stages in the history of the ironworkers, most notably during the strikes in South Staffordshire in 1847-8. But these organisations ended with the defeat of the strikes. A strike in 1852 won 6d per ton, over the rate.

² G. D. H. Cole, *op. cit.* (reprint), p. 206, in particular implies that the ironworkers' unions were more exclusive than the engineers and the carpenters. Clegg, Fox and Thompson assert that the unions were dominated by "very comfortably off" contractors, who, despite being in a majority, were paradoxically kept under control by the joint power of the union and the employers. H. A. Clegg, A. Fox and A. F. Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 22-23.

ed in without the payment of an entrance fee, which was later fixed at five shillings. The puddlers' unions enrolled all the grades named in their titles for 3d per week and any underhand paid by these senior¹ grades at one half of this contribution. The Millmen's Union, recruiting from six lower grades besides the rollers, grouped them into three classes, who paid reducing entrance fees and contributions, according to their class of membership.²

The relationship of the higher to the lower grades and of the forehand puddlers to their underhands was not, as it has been described by several labour historians,³ that of an employer to an employee. Usually the forehand collected wages each fortnight from the works office and paid the subordinate members of his team daily or weekly. The fortnightly wage depended upon the tonnage produced; the daily rate was fixed by custom and practice. In several respects this system differed fundamentally from the normal wage labour relationship of the nineteenth century. For example, if the forehand had no work due to faulty materials or to short supplies, he nevertheless had to pay his underhands for standing by, while he himself earned nothing. In addition, the forehand could not bid up the wages of the underhands in the normal labour market fashion, when they were in short supply. Rule 45 of the 1869 Rule Book made such a practice illegal within the union, under penalty of a fine of ten shillings. Instead, forehand puddlers in particular, were required in such circumstances to team up together, to work "level hand", and to divide equally between two, the wages of one. Also, underhands' wages generally rose and fell in equal proportions with the fluctuations imposed by the ironmasters in the piecework rate of the forehands.⁴

On the other hand, the same rule book, in rule 47, gave a very distinct definition to the role of the true contractors and the unions' attitude to them. "Any member or non-member who works for or at, more than one furnace, or hammer or pair of rolls, or who contracts as

¹ Seniority was determined by the length of time at the trade, as no apprenticeship schemes existed throughout the industry, with the exception of a few specialist firms. See J. Kane's evidence to the Royal Commission on Trades Unions, q. 8,472.

² 5/-, 3/6d and 2/- entrance fees, and 6d, 4½d and 3d subscriptions.

³ Variations on this theme are to be found in S. and B. Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism*, 11th ed., p. 484; Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 15; E. Hobsbawm, "Custom, Wages and Work Load", in: *Essays in Labour History*, ed. by Asa Briggs and John Saville (1960), p. 125; G. D. H. Cole, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

⁴ Details from the evidence of a Staffordshire puddler, given during an arbitration case. This showed that underhands earned about one half of the forehands' weekly earnings in puddling. *The Ironworkers' Journal*, March, 1871, p. 6. The evidence covered a period eight years prior to this date.

a roller for more than one shift, is injuring the trade and depriving other competent men from getting situations and of receiving the means of living by independent labour; and that the influence of the General Council shall be used [...] to abolish this pernicious system that may have done good to a few men at the expense of inflicting serious injury to many." Nothing in this, nor in earlier rule books, gave the contractors control over the ironworkers' unions, nor did any rule deprive the underhands of the right to stand for or to vote for any position or decision within the union. Undoubtedly, their inexperience tended to deprive them of any real influence in the unions. But they were not deprived of this right by virtue of being employees of other ironworkers. In the words of the Sheffield Spring-makers' Delegate, G. Austin, at the First Conference of the United Kingdom Alliance of Organised Trades: "How much the ironworkers paid to their underhands was a question that many Sheffield trades were interested in, because their trades also were double-handed."¹ Austin added that spring making was a double-handed trade and although it had been difficult, they had managed to reach a fair adjustment between the earnings of the forehands and the underhands.

Thus the term "double-handed" would more accurately describe a trade in which the more skilled man divided his wages with his mate, than the terms "contract" or "sub-contracting" trades, which have normally been applied to the ironworkers.² The ironworkers' underhands were in many cases of a youthful age and their service with a puddler or a roller fitted them for later employment as forehands. As they were thus sharing the skills of the forehands, there seemed no reason why they should also receive their pieceworkers' benefits. Many other statements by trade unionists in the iron trade provide evidence³ for this more precise definition of the employment system in their industry than labour historians have adduced.⁴ Thomas Brassey, Jr, son of the most famous of railway contractors, was quite clear that sub-contract was piecework on a larger scale and involved no day-wage men.⁵

Had the contractors played any significant part in the ironworkers' unions, it is doubtful if the history of the five year period after their formation would have seen as many prolonged conflicts between the

¹ Reported in the Sheffield & Rotherham Independent (S&RI), July 20th, 1866.

² J. C. Carr and W. Taplin, *History of the British Steel Industry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), p. 14. Also A. Birch, *The Economic History of the British Iron and Steel Industry* (London, 1967), p. 257.

³ Quoted in N. P. Howard, "The Contract System in the Iron Industry" (Sheffield, 1972, unpublished).

⁴ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁵ Thomas Brassey, *On Work and Wages* (London, 1874), p. 265.

ironmasters and the ironworkers as in fact took place. In the account of the strikes and lock-outs which follows, there is no example of a dispute being caused by, or resisted and impeded by a class of small contracting employers, organised into unions. This does not mean that sub-contracting did not exist in the industry, but that the wage reductions and the anti-union policies of the employers, which caused most of the industrial disputes in the industry, were applied directly by a class of powerful ironmasters against the unions of the much maligned¹ and historically neglected ironworkers.

II

By 1862, large-scale production of manufactured iron was well established in the counties north of the Cleveland Hills around Durham, Darlington, Gateshead and Teesside,² much of the labour having been recruited from Staffordshire and Wales. The process of inducing the puddlers and rollers away from the south Midlands, where the earnings were already high, required the ironmasters to offer additional wages and low rents. As the north-east region became more competitive with other regions, the masters³ attempted to wrest these additional earnings from the men. Such an attempt at the Gateshead firm of Hawks, Crawshay and Co. led to a strike in June 1862. The masters responded by tightening works discipline and by instituting fines against those who left their work without permission. This treatment led to the formation of the first branch of the National Association of Puddlers, in August 1862.

However, the real impetus towards the spread of union organisation did not begin until the strike for a ten per cent rise in piecework earnings started in Staffordshire in April 1863. This strike was entirely a success, although it took nearly five months for the puddlers, to whom it was initially confined, to win their objectives. It resulted in the men gaining a rise of one shilling per ton over the base line of the Thorneycroft scale, by which their wages had hitherto been guided. This scale was the agreed outcome of the strike in 1848 and it regulated the piecework earnings of puddlers and rollers on a "shillings for

¹ The phrase was used by an anonymous puddler in a letter to the Engineer, November 20th, 1863, in which he complained about the lack of technical education in the industry.

² Numbers of Puddling Furnaces, North-East England and South Staffordshire:

	North-East	South Staffs.
1862	646	1,798
1870	1,678	2,518 (including North Staffs.)

³ Evidence of C. M. Palmer, north-east coast ironmaster, to the Royal Commission on Trades Unions, qq. 17,735-6.

pounds" calculation. Thus for every pound sterling in the market price of bar iron, the puddlers were paid one shilling and the rollers ten percent, the peak or optimum price of merchant bars being considered as £10 per ton. One of the complaints the ironworkers had about the Thorneycroft scale was that much of their work was directed towards the manufacture of iron sheet, which earned a higher price than bars on the market, but for which the ironworkers were paid no extra. They had tried before the strike to have the base line of the scale changed to the price of sheet, but this the ironmasters refused to do.¹

The strike began in only seven of the one hundred works in the South Staffordshire district. Initially, 409 puddlers were involved and the total number on strike at any one time never rose above one thousand, but the activities of the puddlers were not limited to these small numbers. An embargo was put upon any iron being sent from the works which continued in employment, to the rolling mills of the works on strike. This activity placed the men at work, who were supporting the strike in this way and by financial levies, in danger of prosecution under the Master and Servant Act (4th Geo. IV, cap. 32).

Puddlers at several works were taken to court by the masters and a correspondent reporting on one of these cases remarked upon "the reckless insolence" displayed by them. This was seen as an indication that "they had become infected with the general spirit pervading their class [...] a serious and general disaffection of the men to their masters" existed.² However, a spirit of class opposition was not sufficient to maintain the strike. As was made clear by the President of the newly formed Sheffield branch, Edmond Jones, reporting to his members after the end of the strike:

"When the struggle began in Staffordshire between the puddlers and their masters, the men were at their wits' end to know how to maintain it. In this emergency one of the workmen concerned applied in London on behalf of the men, to the President of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers for assistance.³ Having ascertained that the puddlers had no union, the president of the engineers explained that had they been in union he had authority to give them £50 at once and to lend them £1,000 to be repaid by instalments. But as they were not in union he could tender them no assistance whatever. The applicant returned to the few men who were continuing the struggle and explained to them the

¹ The Engineer, November 28th, 1862.

² The Engineer, July 24th, 1863.

³ Robert Danter was ASE President, 1866.

position of affairs. They at once resolved upon the formation of a union."¹

Thus in the cases of both the Northern and the Southern unions, strikes preceded and were causal influences upon the formation of the unions. In their evidence to the Royal Commission in 1867, the ironmasters tried to prove otherwise. The unions, in their view, comprised an outside body of men, who by their interference fomented strikes. Once established though, as Frederick Harrison pointed out, the union leaders more frequently than not attempted to restrain their members from taking strike action.² However, the "spirit of 1863", as it was later to be called by the more militant union members, was strong enough during the strike to overcome any tendencies towards caution by the union leaders. It reached beyond the puddlers themselves. When some of the puddlers imprisoned under the Master and Servant Act were released from gaol "they were conducted from the railway station in triumph, entertained to a good dinner and then headed by a band of music and colours flying, brought with their wives in a vehicle into the town".³ Occasionally, a feeling bordering on riot was displayed. Blacklegs were stoned at Dawes Works at West Bromwich and millmen who rolled iron that had been "blackened" were threatened with punishment by the puddlers.⁴

Contributions in support of the strike came from trades of all kinds including glass makers and cutters, anchor smiths, railway carriage builders and carpet weavers. That the strength of the strike extended well beyond its actual numbers was made clear when a large meeting of puddlers discussed tactics, just before the defeat of the ironmasters. At this meeting, the advisability of calling a general strike was discussed and rejected, not on the grounds that it would not be possible, but that the partial strike enabled those at work to subsidise the strikers through a levy of 1/- per week. The only weakness in this strategy was that it did not sufficiently involve the rollers, whose work was reduced by the blacking tactic, but who received no subsidies, as they were not actually on strike. This weakness was to be exploited by the ironmasters in the way that they brought the strike to an end on August 19th.⁵

It had been the custom for the ironmasters to settle the question of list prices for bar iron at their quarterly meetings, and thus by applica-

¹ S&RI, October 27th, 1863.

² Harrison's views are in the *Minority Report, Eleventh and Final Report, Royal Commission on Trades Unions.*

³ *The Engineer*, May and June, 1863.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *The Engineer*, August 21st, 1863.

tion of the Thorneycroft scale, to settle wages questions. However, they were obliged to call an extraordinary meeting six weeks after the midsummer quarterly, in order to concede in full the puddlers' demands. No doubt they were also alarmed at the rate at which orders were going to other regions and particularly to South Wales. To prevent a further loss of orders, they were also forced to depart from the Thorneycroft scale and to raise wages by one shilling per ton on piecework rates, while asking for the less than proportionate increase of ten shillings per ton on sales prices. They further departed from previous practice by not granting automatically a similar increase to the millmen. Thus the millmen, not many of whom had yet been recruited into the union, were obliged to take up the strike weapon at the same time as the victorious puddlers were returning to work. "The masters had been shamefully beaten", lamented *The Engineer*, a weekly paper widely circulated among managers and supervisors in the metallurgical trades.¹

The millmen were not the only group to whom the ironmasters refused the increase. Coal and ironstone miners, limestone getters, steel iron puddlers and blast furnace men were all pushed into militant action by the success of the puddlers and by the strategy of the employers in refusing across the board increases to these other grades who, as they worked in integrated ironworks, were under the same masters as the puddlers. However, the strikes and threatened strikes which these groups then engaged in secured the demands of most of them by the end of November. The ironmasters, encouraged by the up turn in orders,² were obliged to raise the prices of iron twice, by a total of £2, before the end of the year and on each occasion to pay a full extra shilling to the ironworkers. At the beginning of 1864 the ironworkers had gained a massive increase in unionisation, from perhaps a few hundred twelve months earlier, to an estimated 15,000.³ The puddlers had advanced their piecework rates from 7/6d per ton to 10/6d and stood at 1/- above the normal Thorneycroft scale of wages. For a full week of six shifts, producing 1.1 tons of puddled bars per shift,⁴ they could earn at the maximum £3 10/-. Of this perhaps 25/- or 30/- went to the underhand. However, the problem of irregular supplies of raw materials, of indifferent qualities of pig-iron and the

¹ Ibid.

² *The Engineer*, October 30th, 1863. Quoting the Birmingham Post, the policies of Canning and Cobden in India and Paris were cited as reasons for the boom.

³ Report of the National Conference of Puddlers at Gateshead, in S&RI, December 30th, 1863. The delegates of the Southern union claimed 10,000 members, 949 had been recruited in South Yorkshire and North Wales, and an estimated 4,000 in the north-east.

⁴ *The Ironworkers' Journal*, June 15th, 1871.

need to fettle or repair the furnace frequently meant that only three or four shifts were worked in the week. In these circumstances the puddlers worked only half a shift, particularly if the weather was too hot, and paid their underhands only half a day's wage each time. On these occasions the net pay of the puddler dropped to 30/- or 25/- per week.

Nevertheless, the success of the puddlers and the millmen provided a stimulus to other groups of workers. Colliers, nailers, spade and shovel makers and other hardware makers struck for higher wages and formed unions. The employers in these trades were doubly affected by the movement. Iron prices were higher and their workers were demanding higher wages. *The Engineer* described this period as "quite an epoch in the history of the district". The impact of the puddlers' movement was not confined to the Staffordshire area. The ironworkers of South Wales, Sheffield and South Yorkshire, Scotland and the North-East had merely to organise into the unions, ask for the increases and they were granted.¹ It could be argued, as John Jones, Secretary to the North East Iron Manufacturers Association, did to the Royal Commission,² that such wage movements were the result of the overall increase in demand and output that occurred at this time, and had little to do with trade unionism. It was in their resistance to the attempts of the employers to lower wages from the peak that was reached in 1863-4, that the unions were put to the trial of strength.

III

After their first contract with the ASE, which encouraged them to start a union, the puddlers of the south turned for assistance to the already formed union in Gateshead. Its rules were adopted and the recruitment of all grades commenced. But several difficulties arose to impede the building of one strong union. The millmen, under the dominant influence of the rollers, were divided on the question of one union. Most of them favoured a separate organisation, though meetings of the Brierley Hill men twice voted to amalgamate with the puddlers.³ In fact most of the millmen in this area had joined the puddlers' union in July 1863. But by September, when they were having to take action on their own to secure their 10% increases, the millmen at West Bromwich numbering about 400 men, decided to form a separate, breakaway union.⁴ No such difficulty had occurred in the Northern

¹ S&RI, October 27th, 1863.

² Royal Commission on Trades Unions, q. 9,622 and written evidence.

³ *The Engineer*, September 11th and 18th, 1863.

⁴ *Ibid.*, September 25th, 1863.

union. However, both the millmen and the puddlers felt aggrieved with the way the Northern union was insisting that those who abided by their rules should concede powers of executive control over the National union to the men of the Gateshead district. An argument on this point came to a head at the December Conference in 1863, when the Southern delegates attempted to amend rule 2 of the union. This rule stated that the officers and members of the Executive Committee should be drawn from the town in which the Executive was to meet for the following year. As the Gateshead men had already set up their executive and its programme of meetings, this was an attempt to keep control in the north to which the men from the south objected.

However, the millmen in the south already had differences with the puddlers from their district. They had asked for their wage increase to be back dated to the time when the puddlers received theirs and on being refused had been denied support from the puddlers on this point. No doubt the puddlers, whose wages tended to be as much as thirty shillings lower than those of a forehand roller, felt that they had not received much support from the rollers during the strike, chiefly when "blacking" had been requested.

Most importantly perhaps, the very technology of a mid-nineteenth century ironworks was liable to cause tension and a disparity of earnings between puddlers and rollers. Puddling, despite the efforts of the employers to introduce mechanisation, remained throughout the entire history of the manufactured iron trade a completely manual task.¹ Rolling on the other hand became more and more mechanised as the century progressed. By the 1860's and 70's, Nasmyth's hammer, three-high mills, reversible rolls and steam powered-shears, slitters, straighteners and cranes all led to a speed-up of the processes in the mills.

The uneven development in the technology of an ironworks would at times lead to the problem of bottlenecks, which in a wages system based on piecework could cause tension between the puddlers and the rollers. Thus, if the rollers complained about the poor quality of the puddled bars which might affect the output of finished iron, the puddler could be fined by the ironmaster. Similarly, if the puddler was given sub-standard pig-iron to process, and refused to work it without an extra payment, the subsequent delay in production would

¹ In 1895, UK production of puddled iron equalled 1.5 million tons, or one half of the peak output of 1882. In his presidential address to the Iron & Steel Institute, Sir David Dale remarked that this quantity was still produced by the old imperfect process of hand puddling, that once seemed doomed to extinction. *Journal, Iron & Steel Institute, XLVII (1895), p. 32.*

reduce the earnings of the roller and his team. Quarrels that broke out for such reasons were on occasions known to lead to violence.¹ But the basic disharmony between the rollers and the puddlers arose from the disparity in earnings even when there were no delays in production. As the puddlers were more numerous than the rollers, it was probably the fear that the interests of the rollers in the union would become subordinate to those of the puddlers, that prompted the breakaway in the south. That a similar breakaway did not occur in the north could be explained by the fact that the General Secretary, that most dominating personality John Kane, was himself a roller. The strength of the unity between puddlers and rollers in the north was made evident by the 1866 strike which was caused by a reduction of piece-work earnings imposed by the ironmasters. The amount that the rollers were reduced was between two and five times, according to the product, greater than the reduction imposed upon the puddlers. Yet the puddlers stayed out in support of the rollers to the very end of an extremely long struggle.

The extent of the disunity among the ironworkers, however, should not in the early stages of their development be exaggerated. All groups, whatever their immediate sectional interests might require, shared too many grievances against the ironmasters to allow for a complete separation of their organisation and objectives. One report of the settlement of the 1863 strike indicated that the puddlers were able to secure the removal of local grievances of long standing, "which put the puddlers in a more satisfactory position in other respects than as regards direct wages only".² A study of working conditions shows that at the time ironworkers were dissatisfied with the harsh discipline imposed by works rules³ and with the system of fines that maintained these rules. They objected to the long periods of a fortnight or a month between payments of wages, and to the "Tommy shop" or truck system, which despite its apparent illegality was still practised in some works. The lack of a general education⁴ and of technical courses which could aid promotion also dissatisfied the

¹ One such dispute led to the manslaughter of the roller by the puddler. S&RI, May 22nd, 1872.

² *The Engineer*, September 11th, 1863.

³ The rules of the Round Oak Company of 1855 (copy in Dudley Public Library) were probably typical. Other copies for other works can be found at Cusworth Hall, near Doncaster, Museum Library; Report of the Committee on Trades Societies, National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, 1860, p. 319.

⁴ At the Chillington Works in January 1862, the employees set up an Association for the Education of the Operatives, which petitioned the HMI for South Staffordshire for day-release education for boys. *The Engineer*, February 7th, 1862.

ironworkers. The question of wages also concerned not merely the piecework rate, but the use of low grade pig-iron by the ironmaster, which increased the effort and hours required of the puddler, while reducing his earnings.¹

Puddlers and rollers were also dissatisfied with the contract and underhand systems. In November 1863 an ironmaster in Bilston sued his puddlers through the courts,² because some iron had been wasted due to the absence of the underhands. It was argued that the puddlers should be punished, not for wasting the iron, but for refusing to charge their underhands in the courts with neglect. The puddlers defended themselves and their underhands on the grounds of the refusal of the ironmaster to award the pay rise directly to the underhands, instead of taking it out of the puddlers' earnings. The case was dismissed, as nothing in the works rules or in the statutes could force a puddler to fine his underhand. This case is important for the light it throws on the so-called contract system. The Master and Servant Act could not be applied if the puddler refused to behave like a master.

At about the same time, millmen and rollers from the East Worcestershire district of the Southern union were circulating a demand for an end to the contract system and calling a meeting to discuss ways of ending the farming out of work by their employers.

“They urge that the interests of masters are not served by the practice and that a few are benefitted to the disadvantage of the larger number. Their desire they say is that one man should have one man's job. At present it is not unusual for one man to have the rolling, cutting down, cob-wheeling, cinder filling, bundling and the mill-furnace work in his own hands. All this work they say, should be divided between three men,³ who would be paid direct from the office and the masters would then be paying only for labour done and not for overseeing in addition.”⁴

Problems arising out of all these issues were sufficiently common to all sections of the ironworkers to create a unity of purpose, although not of organisation, against what all the rule books of their unions called “the oppression of the employers”. In fact, the rule book of the men in the rolling mills, who were the most sectional group, contained in

¹ Letter for recruitment raised this complaint in the *Ironworkers' Journal*, September 1st, 1871.

² *The Engineer*, November 28th, 1863.

³ Presumably the three men would be able to engage their own underhands, as six tasks were listed. Such underhands would still be employees of the firm.

⁴ *The Engineer*, October 16th, 1863.

rule 20 the requirement that if any dispute arose between puddlers and their employers, the executive of the millmen should meet with the executive of the puddlers and should, if agreed, cease work with the puddlers. Despite the fact that the outcome of the 1863 strike was the creation of three unions, instead of one united association of ironworkers, the threat that these unions imposed on the prerogatives of the ironmasters and the potential for complete unity that they offered, in contrast to the weakness of the non-union days, meant that the employers were certain to take counter-offensive action. This they began, although not in an immediately concerted manner, in 1864.

IV

In April 1864 the ironmasters, who had been associated regionally in groupings that met quarterly, commenced an informal but nevertheless national association. At about the same time, the ironmasters in the Leeds district, an area of high quality iron production for the locomotive and steam engine trade, locked out their ironworkers at seven works for refusing to sign the "document". This action followed the step taken by John Marshall, the Leeds District Secretary of the Gateshead union, who had sent a letter to the proprietors of the Pottery Field Ironworks, near Leeds, demanding that a non-union furnaceman who black-legged during a strike be dismissed. Marshall, who had been Chairman of the second national conference of the Northern union in December 1863, was brought before no less than sixteen magistrates and charged with threatening and intimidating his employer.¹ After being ably defended by Mr Roberts of Manchester, popularly known as the miners' attorney-general, Marshall was found guilty, but sentenced to only three days imprisonment. However, the Leeds ironmasters used this case to attack the union on the grounds that it was interfering with their rights as employers and was professing to control the arrangements, qualifications and periods of service mutually agreed upon by employers and their employees. They posted upon the gates of their works a notice requiring all their employees to sign the document and quit the union, or be dismissed after two weeks. This ultimatum applied to about 1,300 men who had joined the union in the Leeds district,² but who had not yet decided whether they wished to affiliate to the Gateshead or the Brierley Hill executive.

¹ Case report in the *Glasgow Sentinel*, April 23rd, 1864. Marshall's defence rested on the attorney's plea that the letter was phrased in ignorance of polite language and was not intentionally offensive.

² Report of the First Annual Conference of the Southern Union, in *S&RI*, May 20th, 1864.

In Scotland in February, a similar case of the union demanding the dismissal of a non-unionist, whose incompetence had caused the men to lose earnings, resulted in the chairman of the newly formed Scottish branch of the union being sentenced to thirty days hard labour. The bench in this case was made up of ironmasters and their associates,¹ and the flagrant injustice of the case caused a strike that led to the release of all the men after only a few days.

Strikes of this kind and local strikes for wage advances in works of all districts made the increasing power of the ironworkers more and more obvious to the ironmasters. As recruitment to the unions spread to Scotland, South Wales and to the Millwall Iron and Shipbuilding Works in London and as membership rose to around 17,000 the ironmasters from all regions met in London on April 28th. In the words of *The Times*,

“they passed a series of resolutions which plainly enough intimated that they will no longer submit to the control which the operative ironworkers’ powerful union seeks to exercise over both employers and employed. They disavow any desire to interfere with the right of the workmen to combine for any fair and legitimate object, but they assert their firm determination to resist all attempts on the part of the men to dictate to their employers the mode in which their work shall be conducted and what workmen they shall employ.”²

To maintain this resolve, the ironmasters set up a committee representing all the ironworking districts.

The document, which the Leeds employers insisted should be signed by their workmen as a condition of employment, was almost identical in its wording to that which had been imposed upon the Amalgamated Society of Engineers during the lockout of 1852.³ The rules of the ASE, which had offended the engineering employers and which they had insisted, as a condition for a return to work, should be removed from the rule book, had been those which sought to abolish overtime and piecework and to control the employment of apprentices. No such rules existed in the ironworkers’ rule books, nor did the ironmasters stipulate exactly the functions of the union to which they objected. Some ironmasters, notably John Brown of Sheffield, had cautiously welcomed the unions, requiring only that they act

¹ Glasgow Sentinel, February 6th, 1864. The charge was brought under the Master and Servant Act, 4th Geo. IV, cap. 32. The charge against Marshall was under 6th Geo. IV, cap. 129.

² The Times, April 29th, 1864.

³ J. B. Jefferys, *The Story of the Engineers*, p. 42.

fairly and honestly with their employers.¹ On their part, speakers at meetings of the unions in the early months of their existence had insisted that they sought only a fair day's wage for a fair day's work, a standard price for labour and conciliation instead of strikes.² As John Kane said at the first annual conference of the Gateshead union: "We do not wish to intimidate or coerce our employers."

Third party speakers at these early meetings, who had been invited by the ironworkers in their quest for respectability, pointed out that certain of the union rules would be unacceptable to the masters. Thus Alderman Saunders of Sheffield pointed out that rule 17 in the local rules required the employers to give fourteen days notice of dismissal, whereas in cases of neglect of work or of infringement of works rules, the masters would insist upon immediate dismissal. Councillor Robert Sydney of Wolverhampton objected to the rule concerning procedure when masters and puddlers were in dispute.³ Rule 5, however, made the ironworkers' unions and their objectives quite incompatible with the aims of the employers. It stated that the funds of the Association should be used to "resist oppression and for raising prices". As the *Glasgow Sentinel* pointed out, "let [...] ironworkers civilly ask to participate in the increased value of their labour and they are instantly denounced as unreasonable, led on by idle demagogues and acting contrary to the principles of political economy. What is just and fair for the capitalist is unjust and intolerant on the part of the workmen."⁴

The Leeds lock-out was the first major offensive of the employers. It lasted five months, and at its peak caused approximately 10,000 men and boys to be laid off.⁵ The three unions of the ironworkers, the general public in Leeds and in the East End of London and other trade unions subscribed between them £16,000 to the 1,400 men locked out. Some of this money was used to encourage emigration, and 250 men chose to seek work elsewhere with its aid, although none of these left the United Kingdom. From July onwards, the employment of underhands encouraged a movement back to work, mainly among the better paid "best"⁶ iron puddlers. The men locked out were black-listed nationally in their own occupation and locally when they applied for work as farm hands or labourers. The eviction of ironworkers from

¹ S&RI, January 18th, 1864.

² S&RI, September 9th, 1863, and December 28th, 1863.

³ S&RI, November 4th, 1863, and January 18th, 1864.

⁴ *Glasgow Sentinel*, December 28th, 1863.

⁵ S&RI, April 25th, 1864. Although figures for union membership in the Leeds district vary from 1,300 to 1,400, the figure would include all grades whose work had to stop when iron production ceased, including miners.

⁶ "Best" iron was a nationally reputed Yorkshire brand.

their cottages, rented from the masters or from landlords such as Sir Geo. Armytage, who leased mineral rights to the ironmasters, also weakened the struggle of the men.

Eventually, the Leeds ironworkers decided to sign the document under protest, after John Kane had drawn up a slightly more politely worded statement and suggested to them that the masters might be satisfied with it. The union brought in legal experts, who advised that commitments made under duress need not be honoured. But the ironmasters proved more ruthless than the engineering employers, who had admitted that their employees had rejoined the union after signing the document in 1852.¹ In contrast to this tacit acceptance of unionism in the engineering industry, the Leeds ironmasters checked upon those employees who had signed the document and any who continued to attend union meetings were instantly dismissed.² By this method the unions were deprived of 1,300 members and the branches were never revived during the next forty years, by which time the iron manufacturing trade in the district had come to an end.

The threat posed to the unions by this lock-out brought together the two executives from Gateshead and Brierley Hill, in June 1864, in an attempt to secure a united leadership. After the conference in Gateshead in December 1863, the Southern union had decided that two executives were better than one. At their first annual conference in May 1864, the argument was put and accepted, that an executive at Gateshead would be too remote for convenient administration. As they had the largest membership and had borne the brunt of the fight against capital they considered that Brierley Hill was the proper place for the executive. Kane, who addressed the conference, was in favour of one executive sited in an intermediate town, but the majority supported the Brierley Hill leadership. A compromise resolution merely called upon the two executives to assist one another and to maintain fortnightly communications. At the first quarterly meeting of the Welsh district committee in April Kane had argued in favour of a system of union government in which the districts would have all the power of the executive, "save the levying of supplies and the declaring of social war".³ The unity attempt failed and the ironmasters turned their attention to the task of reducing wages levels.

While the Leeds lock-out was in progress and union funds were being poured by the rival executives into that unaffiliated district, the leading South Staffordshire ironmasters reduced the price of iron by

¹ Jefferys, *op. cit.*, p. 44. In 1852, 3,500 ASE Members were locked out.

² *Glasgow Sentinel*, November 5th, 1864, report from the Gateshead Executive to the Glasgow District Committee.

³ *Glasgow Sentinel*, April 4th, 1864.

one pound a ton and recovered some of their lost revenues by reducing the wages of the colliers and the blast furnacemen. The colliers fought a bitter and sometimes violent struggle in which the cottages of four blacklegs were blown up and an unsuccessful attempt was made to bomb the New British Ironworks. Massive importations of coal from other districts and a show of force by police armed with sabres defeated the colliers. The blast furnacemen, who were poorly paid day wage labourers, had been advised to join the puddlers associations but little effort had been made to recruit them and to provide for their needs. In order to resist the wage reduction, they set up their own national union and struck. Many of the ironworks, already short of coal, closed down and the puddlers, who were heavily committed to the support of the Leeds men, were unable to help the blast furnacemen. They too were defeated and their short-lived union collapsed.¹ J. McCarthy, the Secretary of the North East Blast Furnace Labourers Aid Society, which had agreed to affiliate to the Dudley Blast Furnacemen's Union, was imprisoned for three months during the strike and seven others from his union were given one month in gaol.²

One consequence of the defeat of the ironworkers in Leeds, which Kane attributed to the fear that Belgian ironworkers would be brought in to run the forges and mills, was that the union under Kane's initiative called meetings to advance the principle of co-operative ironworks. The campaign in Leeds had been an apologetic one, that had appealed to the fair-mindedness of the public. The militant John Marshall, who had unjustifiably been blamed with inciting the lock-out, was publicly reprimanded by Kane and was removed from office by the Leeds District committee. The leadership decided to drop any attempt to enforce the closed shop principle, despite the claim of Charles Allkins, the President of the Southern union, that one hundred percent unionism existed in the Brierley Hill district.

V

Taking advantage of their victory in Leeds, with the consequent financial weakening of the union and the more pacific attitudes of the leaders, the ironmasters met on December 22nd, 1864, in Birmingham.³ They decided to maintain the price of iron and to force down wages at the same time. One hundred delegates from all the iron producing regions except Wales and Leeds agreed that as competition between

¹ The Miner and Workmen's Advocate, April 16th, 1864, and S&RI, August 29th, 1864.

² S&RI, September 17th, 1864.

³ S&RI, December 27th, 1864.

the regions had caused two major reductions in the price of iron during the previous six months, with no comparable reductions in the wages of the manufactured ironworkers, it was necessary to "drop" the puddlers one shilling per ton and the millmen by ten per cent. In anticipation of the union's tactic of partial or selective strikes, by which the men at work assisted those who were out, the ironmasters prepared a counter strategy. In the words of W. S. Roden, a North Staffordshire ironmaster, to the Royal Commission on Trades Unions "they decided in case there was a strike in any one district and it could be shown that the unions combined together to uphold such a strike, such combination should be met by a general lock-out at the ironworks throughout the United Kingdom."¹

Following the publication of the notice of the reduction in ironworkers' wages, which was due to come into effect on January 14th, 1865, the iron trade correspondents in *The Times* and in *Ryland's Iron Trade Circular* gave their opinions that, owing to the lack of trade, the ironworkers would submit to the "drop".² The combined funds of the unions were estimated at £20,000 which was insufficient to maintain a strike for a fortnight. At a conference in Sheffield, late in December 1864, and at a closed meeting of the Brierley Hill Executive early in January, the two regions of the puddlers' union accepted the reduction. The West Bromwich Millmen followed this course in mid-January. However, both the ironmasters and the union executives had reckoned without the rank and file membership of the unions.

All the union branches at the six large works in North Staffordshire went on strike on the day the reduction came into effect. At all the works in South Yorkshire around Rotherham and Elsecar, the men did the same, including those at the important armour plate producing works at Park Gate.³ In the north-east the men at the Weardale Ironworks at Tudhoe also struck, as the loss of extra payments reduced their earnings by fifteen percent. In South Wales the puddlers at the Blaenavon Ironworks also struck. Almost immediately the ironmasters in North Staffordshire and in the North-East region insisted upon the implementation of the lock-out decision made at their Birmingham meeting. However, this was delayed until evidence that the unions officially supported these strikes was forthcoming. The South Yorkshire men and those at Blaenavon returned within a week, upon learning of the decision of the Brierley Hill executive.

¹ Royal Commission on Trades Unions, q. 10,549.

² *The Times*, January 7th, 1865, and *Ryland's Iron Trade Circular*, January 14th, 1865. *Ryland's* was a weekly, strongly anti-union.

³ *Glasgow Sentinel*, January 28th, 1865.

North Staffordshire thus became the main centre of resistance to the reduction in wages. It was a district to which ironworkers from the south of the county had been induced to migrate. After two years in the north the masters had withdrawn these inducements and the men found that the houses had no gardens, the rents were higher and the iron was harder and took longer to work.¹ The membership of the unions in the area was divided in its affiliations between the two executives. The Gateshead union claimed the membership of 450 men at Hanley and the Brierley Hill union claimed the allegiance of the 900 other organised workers in the area. When the strike started, as the delegates to the Southern executive had informed the meeting it would, both unions called upon their members still at work to send aid. Support for the strike was sought officially in order to prevent a loss of members to the rival union. The ironmasters obtained positive proof of this when John Kane sent an open letter to the Scottish ironworkers asking them to pay the arrears on the Leeds levy and to start a fund for the North Staffordshire men. This letter, as was customary with many trade union announcements, was published in the pro-union *Glasgow Sentinel* on February 4th.

On February 16th, the Association of Ironmasters of Great Britain (newly formed) met at Nock's Hotel in Birmingham. Ironmasters and their representatives from seventy nine firms from all parts of Britain agreed unanimously to give fourteen days notice of a national lock-out. Included were three representatives from the north-east region amongst whom was David Dale, better known in later years as a prominent conciliator in the iron trade. Also represented in the decision were John Brown's and Cammell and Co. of Sheffield, both of which firms prided themselves on having good labour relations. Two firms from Leeds took part as did the Pendleton Iron Co. of Manchester. The famous Butterly Iron Co. of Derbyshire joined the resolution a few days later and announced that as a condition for ending the lock-out they would require their ironworkers to sign the document. The ironmasters insisted in their resolution that the North Staffordshire strike was official and was typical of the usual tactics applied by the men. In reality, the strike was unofficial, the leadership of all the unions having recommended that no action be taken against the reduction. However, the inter-regional rivalry between the unions led them to support the unofficial stoppage.²

¹ The Staffordshire Sentinel, April 1st, 1865.

² When the ironmasters threatened the lock-out, the Gateshead executive immediately ordered their members in Hanley back to work and cut off their strike benefit. Whereupon the Hanley men all voted to join the Brierley Hill union, which then gave them similar treatment. S&RI, March 4th, 1865.

Faced with a lock-out of 10,000 members, both executives made moves to unite. For the second time in their short history of rivalry, they were forced to meet together under the attack of the employers. Twenty delegates met in Brierley Hill on February 28th. Although the millmen in North Staffordshire joined the strike initially, they soon complied with their union's instructions to return to work, and the lock-out was not applied against the millmen. They were, however, laid off for want of iron, and played a co-operative role with the employers during the lockout. The attitude of the puddlers to the threatened lock-out was made clear at the delegate meeting. No less than fourteen of them had mandates from their branches in favour of turning the lock-out into a strike against the reduction, some of whom from the north-east, wanted to strike for an advance of 1/- per ton, as a condition for returning to work. Presidents Kane and Allkins worked hard throughout a day-long meeting and eventually succeeded in reversing the mandate.¹ Instead, the delegates passed a resolution respectfully asking the men in North Staffordshire to return to work.² Kane was instructed to draw up an address to the masters, communicating their decision and asking the ironmasters to call off the lock-out. In prose laden with predictions of disaster, Kane described how a national lock-out would inflict upon innocent parties such as the colliers and the iron ship builders:

“untold misery, which might ultimately lead to revolution. You may depend upon it the day has gone by when the people would rest contented while misery and starvation were meeting them face to face. Once arouse the passions of the people by the monstrous system that you appear ready to introduce, depend upon it you will see and feel the fruits of your folly. Instead of reason, you resort to the cruel and heartless policy of starving when you cannot conquer.”

Indicating that the unions would foster a programme of emigration rather than allow the ironworkers to starve like the Irish people, Kane gave the reasons of the Executives for going against the wishes of the membership.

“Our justification for advising the Delegates to vote against the decision of their constituents is to be found in our desire to avoid the social convulsions that would inevitably follow the adoption of the steps proposed by you.”³

¹ Birmingham Post, February 29th, 1865.

² S&RI, March 1st, 1865.

³ Ryland's Iron Trade Circular, March 4th, 1865.

The ironmasters took no notice of this attempt at appeasement and went ahead with the lock-out, on March 4th in South Staffordshire and on March 11th in the Gateshead region. The strikers in North Staffordshire, upon whom the calling off of the lock-out depended, adamantly refused to return to work. They were visited by John Kane on March 3rd, but so angry were the strikers with the Gateshead Executive for cutting them off from financial aid, that Kane had to be escorted out of a back door in order to escape a mobbing. At a meeting two days previously, 1,400 men had decided that the only union they would support in the district would be the Brierley Hill union. However, when Charles Allkins and Walter Hobson, the President and Secretary of the Southern Union, delivered £250 to the strikers on March 4th and told them that it was the final sum in strike benefits to be paid to them, they were accused of being in the pay of the masters and were threatened with physical violence.¹

The reaction of the ironmasters to the failure of the union leaders to obtain a return to work was to intensify their pressure on the unions and to raise their demands. A Derbyshire ironmaster said he was willing to pay for men, under armed escort, to go into North Staffordshire to forcibly re-open the works there.² Bolckow and Vaughan, the Teeside ironmasters, made similar proposals to the Gateshead executive of the union.³ On a more realistic level, the ironmasters demanded the cessation of all financial aid to the strikers, whether collected officially or unofficially. They asked why the North Staffordshire men had not been expelled from the union; they demanded that puddled bars should be sent to North Staffordshire to enable the rolling mills to be started again. The northern ironmasters demanded that the Gateshead Executive make a complete break from the Brierley Hill union. All of these demands, except for the sending of men to break the strike, were acceded to by the union leaders, although they did not find favour with the rank and file. The movement of men and iron into the strike area for technical reasons did not take place. At branch level and in some district committees the executives came in for considerable criticism.

George Potter, the editor of the *Beehive*, sensed the support for real opposition to the ironmasters and ran foul of the London Trades Council in advocating aid to assist the North Staffordshire strike. He was accused by the leaders of the Amalgamated unions of interference and strike-mongering, but the large attendance at strike fund meetings called by the *Beehive* showed that on this issue the attitude

¹ S&RI, March 8th, 1865.

² Ryland's Iron Trade Circular, March 11th, 1865.

³ Ryland's Iron Trade Circular, March 18th, 1865, and S&RI.

of the leaders of the "Junta" to militant strikes was not supported by sections of the rank and file.¹

The only concession that the ironmasters made to the unions during the negotiations for the termination of the lock-out was that they agreed to divide the ironmasters' national association into separate regions, which meant that the north would not base its wages levels on those of the south. This was a move that offered no real benefit to the unions. When it became clear to the ironmasters that the unions could not control the actions of their members in North Staffordshire, the ironmasters in that region released the other masters from their commitment to a national lock-out made on February 16th, and the lock-out ended.² Not before Kane had sent draft resolutions condemning the strikers to all branches, with orders to pass them at public meetings. By this action he hoped to convince the ironmasters of the sincerity of the union and thus to give them a reason for opening their works.³ The ironmasters had learnt, however, that the unions could not control their members and they were to give this as a reason for rejecting demands for arbitration in the disputes that were to follow in the next four years. So, on March 31st in the north and on April 5th in the south, the Great Lock-Out ended on the masters' decision, with the unions divided and weakened.

The effects of this national conflict, which at its crisis point threw fifty thousand ironworkers out of work, on middle class public opinion were considerable. Calculations were made to the effect that the intransigence of 9,000 trades unionists had brought poverty and misery⁴ to 200,000 workers and their dependants. £120,000 a week in wages were lost and the loss of orders to French and Belgian ironmasters was put at £100,000 at the very minimum.⁵ Extensive press coverage was given to the strike and was mostly sympathetic to the ironmasters. The unions' behaviour in using the strike weapon to advance wages was merely being reciprocated by the ironmasters in using the lock-out to lower them.⁶ The state of trade governed the need to lower wages, and the unions had merely played into the masters' hands by their duplicity over the North Staffordshire strike. The

¹ The Beehive, April 4th, 1865.

² Staffordshire Times, April 8th, 1865.

³ S&RI, March 9th, 1865.

⁴ Birmingham Daily Gazette, Staffordshire Times and S&RI reports for March, 1865.

⁵ Ryland's Iron Trade Circular, January 4th, 1865. The politics of Chas. Ryland can be assessed from his negative advice to investors when Reuter's sought ¼million pound share capital: "Reuter's means such news as the Jews choose to send. Must be turned down."

⁶ The Times, March 9th, 1865.

unions had interfered so much in the legitimate business of the masters that "if the men should succeed on this occasion it will be no longer possible to carry on the works without the prevalence of a state of things which the masters describe as the serfdom of the employers under the employed."¹

The *Iron Trade Circular* compared the "tyranny and insulting deceitfulness" of the union executives with the behaviour of that similarly small and dangerous body, "the famous Committee of Public Safety", which dragged the French nation through "blood, ruin and cruelty". On the ending of the lock-out the same journal wrote: "The lock-out has answered its purpose. It has sufficiently demonstrated that there is a power greater than the Unions. They will be wise enough for the future not to awaken the slumbering giant."² In an editorial on the lock-out *The Times* described the calamity of employers who "find themselves on the way to ruin, while the employed become wretched and sullen". The only cure to such events, which were England's equivalent of wars and revolutions and which would always be with us, was mechanisation, emigration and the proper teaching of political economy to the puddler and his fellows.³

Frederick Harrison, in the *Fortnightly Review*, saw the question of trades unionism changing from one in which Englishmen attempted to reconcile their belief in the right of free association with the immutable laws of supply and demand. Instead, trade unions in the iron industry had led to the paralysis of a great trade, bringing 200,000 souls to the verge of abject want. Industrial battles such as these gain the system and energy of political struggles. As they grow less lawless and less violent, they become more indirectly destructive: "they threaten public peace, at least as much as the markets; they are becoming wars of classes for rights, institutions and power."⁴

The ironworkers in South Staffordshire were reluctant to return to work after the end of the month old lock-out.⁵ They delayed for a fortnight and held meetings to discuss whether they should stay out on strike to recover the wages they had lost, whether they should continue to aid the strikers in the north of the county, or whether they should refuse to return to work until a board of arbitration had

¹ Staffordshire Times, March 18th, 1865.

² Ryland's Iron Trade Circular, March 25th, 1865.

³ The Times, March 22nd, 1865.

⁴ Frederick Harrison, "The Iron-Masters' Trade-Union", in: *Fortnightly Review*, Old Series, I (1865), p. 96.

⁵ Staffordshire Times, April 15th, 1865. The account of the lock-out in Clegg, Fox and Thompson, op. cit., exaggerates the size of the strike and the duration of the lock-out.

been set up.¹ Significantly, those in favour of arbitration saw it as a means of replacing the Thorneycroft scale, but the ironworkers' principal method of overcoming the wage fluctuations that the scale brought with it, was the strike against the wage reduction. The North Staffordshire strike, which failed after five months, despite the men's rejection of the Earl of Lichfield's attempt at conciliation and despite the fund raising efforts of George Potter and the *Beehive*, was the first of four such strikes.

Although the employers had divided the executives even further than hitherto, and despite the fact that by the lock-out they had forced 1,350 men out of the unions, the real effect on the membership was to become clear in the ironworkers' reactions to later attempts at wage reduction. Had the ironmasters regarded the statement of the Wolverhampton district of the union, they might have turned to arbitration sooner than 1869.

"We like the worm shall turn again [...] we are now so inured to hard times that we smile at the idea of a strike or lockout. The discipline we are now under, instead of making us cowards, is only doing for us which we could not have done for ourselves [...] increasing a spirit of independence and indifference, which will whip our employers well for the treatment we are now so unjustly receiving."²

VI

The ironmasters waited until July 1866 before their next attempt at reducing the wages of the puddlers and the millmen. During the interim, in the early months of 1866, the Nine Hours Movement started a struggle for a 54 hour week in the shipyards and engineering works of the north-east coast region. The ironworkers at Consett Iron Co., Bolckow, Vaughan's and Bell Bros, struck for an advance of wages and were awarded an increase of 15%,³ and the blast-furnace men at these larger works were given a comparable increase after strike action. Thus there were signs, not yet general, that a movement for the recovery of wages lost in 1865 was beginning in the north-east region in the first half of 1866.

The ironmasters began to stockpile pig-iron and puddled bars, in preparation for another wage reduction and in anticipation of a strike against it. Meanwhile, the Nine Hours Movement posed a challenge to the ironworkers, for whom twelve hour shifts were quite normal.

¹ Ibid.

² Staffordshire Sentinel, April 15th, 1865.

³ Middlesbrough Weekly News, March 2nd, 1866.

However, the limitations of the puddling process may have prevented any link-up with the nine hours strikes. As it took at least twelve hours to produce a ton and a quarter of puddled iron, from six heats, a nine hour day would have cut piecework earnings by 25%. Thus the ironworkers did not join in the Nine Hours Movement, which ended early in May in a compromise by accepting a 59 hour week.¹ In the same period, the ironworkers suffered a set-back on Merseyside, when a six weeks strike for recognition at the Mersey Iron and Steel Works was defeated, and the employment of non-union labour only led to the loss of a branch of the Brierley Hill union. Further losses in membership occurred in Scotland in May of 1866, when one third of the ironworks were closed following the collapse of the Glasgow iron speculators market at Connal's Warehouse.²

In July, the ironmasters announced in the north-east that they intended to maintain the prices of finished iron, yet at the same time to reduce the earnings of puddlers by 1/- per ton. They also published a revised schedule of piecework rates in the rolling mills which reduced payments to that branch of the trade by between 25% and 75%.³ This was clearly an attempt by the northern ironmasters to recover the gain of 1/- that the ironworkers had won, following the 1863 strike in the south. The ensuing strike against this reduction was thus confined to the north, as no change in prices and no reduction had been announced in Staffordshire, where the main concern was to bring the ironworkers into line with the Thorneycroft scale. This was the first of three regional strikes against reductions, which were the result of the growing competition between the northern and southern ironmasters.⁴ It was marked by the unusual solidarity between the puddlers and the rollers and lasted for five months, and caused 12,000 men including blastfurnace men to be laid off. Towards its end a bitter outbreak of violence occurred. Two clergymen who intervened were threatened with assassination, but the main anger was directed against non-unionists, particularly the underhands, who were being used to break the strike.

However, the most serious consequence for the unions of the 1866 strike was the complete break that occurred between the puddlers' unions. A delegate conference from all three ironworkers' unions met at Wednesbury on October 29th, 1866, and resolved by a majority to

¹ Middlesbrough Weekly News, May 4th, 1866.

² S&RI, June 18th, 1866.

³ S&RI, January 5th, 1867, from a conference speech by John Kane.

⁴ Evidence by C. M. Palmer explained the competition in the labour market. Quoted in the Ironworkers' Journal, January 1st, 1869.

set up one National Amalgamated Association of Ironworkers.¹ But the Brierley Hill district of the Southern union and the central district of the Millmen's Association were not represented, and refused to accept the decision. The Brierley Hill men, the most numerous in the Southern union, argued that the need for them to maintain their autonomy, was based partly upon the necessity for local control, and partly upon the historical fact that their region had fought the major battle against capital in 1863 and thus should not concede the leadership to any other district.² The Millmen's union also renounced the decision of the Wednesbury delegates, and together with the remnants of the Southern union, they set out to reverse the decision by seeking the re-affiliation to their unions of those branches that had decided to align themselves with the new national union. For this purpose the Brierley Hill district set up the Associated Ironworkers of Great Britain, and taking a pessimistic view of the chances of success of the strike in the north, they cut off all financial aid to the strikers. They had previously promised £1,000 but sent only £50. So much sectionalism at a time when the men in the north-east were fighting a protracted struggle to maintain their wages levels proved disastrous to the strike and also caused a considerable loss in members.

No sooner had the men in the north-east gone down to defeat, when the ironmasters in the south, in Wales and in Scotland announced a reduction in the price of iron by £1 and made corresponding reductions in the wages of the men.³ The resulting movement among the puddlers in the south was strongly in favour of a strike against the reductions. Following meetings at every works in the district, delegates met at Brierley Hill in mid-January and unanimously resolved to resist by strike action.⁴ However, the Millmen's Association, "believing that the interests of employers and their employees are one, and with the hope that the proposed reduction in the price of iron will be the means of causing a much better trade",⁵ decided to accept the reductions. Within a few days the Executive Committee of the Associated Ironworkers at Brierley Hill reversed the unanimous decision to strike and recommended acceptance of the reduction. A short unofficial strike followed at 25 works and was defeated.

Thus far, since the formation of the unions, the ironmasters had twice deviated from the rules of the Thorneycroft scale, once in favour of the men, and the second time in their own favour. In the

¹ S&RI, October 20th, 1866.

² Glasgow Sentinel, November 5th, 1866.

³ S&RI, January 11th, 1867.

⁴ S&RI, January 15th, 1867.

⁵ Resolution quoted in the Dudley Herald, January 16th, 1867.

latter half of 1864 they had reduced the prices of iron on two occasions without reducing ironworkers' wages. In June 1866 they had reduced wages in the north without reducing prices. By their victory over the Southern ironworkers' union in the first quarter of 1867, they had brought the ironworkers back into line with the operation of the scale which the ironworkers had attempted to eliminate. At the end of the same quarter, the manufacturers in the north-east and in Scotland reduced their wages and prices to the same levels as those in the south, with only sporadic resistance at a few works, among the rollers' helpers.¹

The effects of the defeats of the Northern ironworkers in 1866, and of the Southern union in the following year, were shown in the evidence of the union leaders to the Royal Commission on Trades Unions, which commenced sittings in March 1867. In written evidence submitted by the Associated Ironworkers from Brierley Hill, the membership claimed in April 1867 was reported as 2,000. In 1865, there had been 6,000 members. In late November 1867 the secretary of the union stated in verbal evidence that the membership was between 900 and 1,000 out of a total labour force of about 4,000. He admitted to a figure of between three and four hundred who left the union because the officers would not allow them to strike. John Kane in his evidence stated that the membership of the National Association of Ironworkers, around Gateshead and from such districts as Scotland, South Wales, South Yorkshire and Hanley had been 6,500 in July 1866, of whom 5,000 members had been fully paid up. By the end of 1867 only one tenth of that membership was paid up.

The employers took further advantage of the waning strength of the unions. In January 1868 the North Staffordshire employers reduced their unorganised workers by 1/- per ton from the piece rates without reducing their iron prices, thus regaining entirely the advantage over the employers which the union had won in 1863. The blast furnacemen in the north-east, whose union had disappeared in the long strike in 1866, accepted a reduction of 10% at the same time. In April 1868, the Staffordshire ironmasters reduced the list price of bar-iron by ten shillings and took one shilling per ton from the puddlers and 12½% from the millmen.² This disproportionately greater reduction in wages than in prices was instrumental in breaking the already enfeebled union in the south. It took away half of the benefits gained by the union over the old Thorneycroft scale and also hit at the wealthy millmen's union.³

¹ Glasgow Sentinel, March 30th, 1867.

² S&RI, March 27th, 1868.

³ Birmingham Daily Gazette, April 13th, 1868.

Once again the unions, under pressure from the ironmasters were brought together in another attempt at amalgamation. On this occasion John Kane's aspiration for one national union was realised. Many of the leaders of the Brierley Hill union, who had in the past resisted attempts at amalgamation, had resigned the union on being promoted to managerial status or had left the industry.¹ However, the amalgamation brought together two very emaciated bodies, there being only 750 members on the books in the south and about 350 in the north. Kane won over the remainder of the Brierley Hill men by promising them support from the north in their resistance to the reduction in wages. This, despite the fact that little support had been received from the south during the strike of the Northern union in 1866.

Although the union was in a weak state, and despite the fact that many of the strikers were out of compliance in their subscriptions and were thus not eligible for strike benefit, the strike in South Staffordshire lasted for eight weeks. It occurred at a time when many men had been on half time working due to a slackness in trade for nearly a year. The funds of the new National Amalgamated Association of Ironworkers were very low. Cases of starvation in the ironworkers' families were reported and made more dramatic by the death on the platform, "after making a speech descriptive of the hardships he had had to endure as a consequence of having no work", of the chairman of the Tividale branch.² Kane was accused of "shocking bad generalship"³ for attempting to fight a wage reduction when trade was so bad and union funds were so low. But Kane, who had opposed the 1866 strike, was aware that the success of any ironworkers' union at this time depended upon its ability to carry out its stated objective of "resistance to oppression". The will of the leaders to fight was a vital factor in recruitment, even if the odds, in terms of market forces, were against the chances of success. The strike of 1868 probably kept the union in being, but it was not a success, neither as a means of rejuvenating the union, nor in keeping up the level of wages.

The reduction was eventually imposed upon the majority of the two thousand strikers, who had had to subsist on strike pay of two shillings per week. Differential rates began to operate in different works, where it had always been union policy to attain parity, at least on a regional basis. As a final mark of defeat, union members found themselves barred from many of the works of the biggest employers. Calls

¹ Evidence from the statement published by the South Staffs committee of the National Amalgamated Association, in the *Ironworkers' Journal*, September 1st, 1871.

² *Dudley Herald*, May 16th, 1868.

³ *Birmingham Gazette*, quoted in *S&RI*, April 21st, 1868.

for arbitration and a compromise settlement to the strike were dismissed by the employers, and after conceding defeat, the Southern unions of the puddlers and the millmen were wound up in December 1868. A very few transferred their membership to the National Amalgamated Association, and at the beginning of 1869 there remained only 476 union members¹ in the entire productive labour force of the iron industry, out of a peak membership of approximately 17,000 in 1864.

VII

It thus took the ironmasters five years to reduce the organised ironworkers to a mere handful and their level of earnings to the piecework rate of 7/6d per ton, at which it stood in 1863. It had taken the ironworkers one year to raise that rate to 10/6d and four years for the ironmasters to bring it down again. In that period the union was involved in defending its very existence and the earnings of its members, in strikes or in lock-outs over periods amounting in total to 106 weeks, including the five months strike of the North Staffordshire district. This fact alone supports the dramatic analysis of Frederick Harrison, particularly as the ironworkers occupied a "commanding height" in the structure of British industry. For every ironworker not working because of an industrial dispute at least four others, not in the ironworkers' unions, depended upon his work and would be laid off work. If each wage earner thus affected supported four other persons,² upwards of a third of a million persons in the working class were affected directly by the struggles of the ironworkers.

Harrison, in his *Minority Report* to the Royal Commission, written together with Thomas Hughes MP, who was later to become a prominent arbitrator in the iron industry, and the Earl of Lichfield, who had attempted to arbitrate in the 1865 strike, argued that where strong unions existed, the disposition to strike was moderated. They also noted, with reference to such strong unions as the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, the shipwrights, the printing compositors, glassmakers, ironfounders and house painters, that unionism of this kind had hardly raised the rate of wages in 25 years. Where earnings were increased it was due more to the actions of the employers than to the demands of the unions. In reference to the ironworkers, the *Minority Report* stated that their unions never possessed the power or the permanent character of the other amalgamated societies, neither did they operate benefit schemes outside of funeral grants.

¹ The Ironworkers' Journal, November 1st, 1869.

² Calculation made in the Birmingham Post, March 20th, 1865.

Yet the iron trades had the greatest frequency of strikes.¹ The comment of the Minority Commissioners on ironworkers' wages was particularly one-sided. They noted only the decline of between 20% and 30% without commenting on the rise of a similar percentage before the datum year, quoted as 1863 on the evidence of the ironmaster Walter Williams.² In fact the ironworkers held their level of highest earnings from August 1863 to January 1865, and provided an example to many other trades in their quest for higher wages in the process. Harrison had also noted elsewhere, although not mentioned in the Minority Report, that the ironmasters "had laboured for years to crush, discredit and repudiate" the ironworkers' unions.³

The formation of the Board of Arbitration and Conciliation for the Manufactured Iron Trade of the North of England in March 1869 has been well documented elsewhere.⁴ Most accounts recognise the strike weariness that existed in the industry at this time. Few, if any, understood just how complete was the defeat of the unions. Although the Board, which became the precursor of many similar boards in the iron and steel industry in the following forty years, is well known for its influence in the maintenance of industrial peace, it is little understood how the sole remaining union of the ironworkers became completely transformed by the Board. Thus of the twenty delegates who attended the meeting in March to discuss the claim for a 10% rise that had first been sought in September the previous year, and to discuss the adoption of an arbitration board, five delegates reported that their union branches had collapsed, eight said that their fellow workers wanted only the rise in wages and were indifferent to the board, three abstained and only seven were positively in favour of setting up a permanent Board of Arbitration.⁵

Five weeks after the Board was set up, a Delegate meeting of the union decided that the five operatives' representatives on the Standing Committee of the Board would act as the General Council of the union for the remainder of the year.⁶ This arrangement was later made part of the union's structure by incorporation into the rule book.

¹ Eleventh and Final Report, Royal Commission on Trades Unions.

² Quoted in the Minority Report, Eleventh and Final Report, loc. cit.

³ Harrison, "The Iron-Masters' Trade-Union", loc. cit., p. 112.

⁴ W. J. Ashley, *The Adjustment of Wages* (London, 1903); Daniel Jones, "The Midland Iron and Steel Wages Board", in: W. J. Ashley, *British Industries* (London, 1903); A. J. Odber, "The Origins of Industrial Peace: The Manufactured Iron Trade of the North of England", in: *Oxford Economic Papers*, III (1951), p. 204; J. H. Porter, "Wage Bargaining under Conciliation Agreements, 1860-1914", in: *The Economic History Review*, Second Series, XXIII (1970), p. 460.

⁵ *The Ironworkers' Journal*, March 15th, 1869.

⁶ *Ibid.*, June 1st, 1869.

By this arrangement the union's General Council came under the domination of Board members who were elected to their positions, both on the Board and in the union by a majority of non-union members. Only in a period of eighteen months in the boom years of 1872-3 did union membership exceed the numbers of ironworkers who subscribed one penny per month for representation on the Board. In all the other years before the demise of Kane's union in 1891, union members were outnumbered by subscribers to the Board by amounts varying from two to ten times greater.

Following the adoption by the union of the Board of Arbitration, the rules of the union were altered, so that official strikes became illegal without contravening the rules of the Board, to which the union was a party. Thus an official strike would have led to the break-up of the Board, if it occurred in the works of any ironmaster who was a member of the Board. As no such strikes occurred throughout the history of the Board, the union effectively denied itself the use of the strike weapon. It also denied to any of its members on unofficial strike union support and representation for the duration of such strikes. The rule that stated the aims and objectives of the union was changed so that the primary purpose of the union was no longer to render assistance to the members against the oppression of the employers. In its place the new rule said that the object of the Association "shall be to obtain by arbitration and conciliation, or by other means that are fair and legal, a fair remuneration to the members for their labour". Further, "the members of this Association shall use their influence with employers and others to join the present board and to form new boards".

Thus, the history of the National Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, Tinsplate, Blastfurnace and Other Workers, from 1869 to 1891, and of its successor, the Associated Iron and Steel Workers of Great Britain, from 1887 to 1916, became in all essentials the history of the relationship between the ironworkers and the Boards of Arbitration, upon which their employers and the officials of their union were represented. Ironically, the Board, within two years of its formation, had re-instated the Thorneycroft sliding scale system against which, in the early history of their unions, the ironworkers had fought so hard.

The ironworkers have been misrepresented in the history of the labour movement. The impact of the contract system on their union organisation has been misunderstood and exaggerated. Certainly their attempts at amalgamation were not motivated by the caution and exclusiveness of the older, amalgamated unions of craftsmen. The

uneven technological development of the iron industry gave the puddlers in particular a power to hold up production which they used to advance their real wages whenever they saw the market rising. They fought even harder to protect their level of earnings when the market was falling. In an era of growing world trade and competition, the ironmasters sought to deny their key workers a high wage industry. In a period when managerial skills were scarce, they preferred to give high earnings to contractors and solve some of their problems of recruitment and supervision at the same time. When profits on finished iron varied from 17/6d per ton to £2 8/- per ton¹ and puddlers' wages fluctuated from 7/6d to 13/- per ton, the feasibility of a high wages industry existed. But the ironmasters feared more than just loss of control over wages costs. Themselves advocates of "political economy", they could not tolerate the persistence of the ironworkers in disregarding the laws of supply and demand and in breaking away from the sliding scale system. For, in the words of Rupert Kettle, the first Arbitrator to the Board of Arbitration and Conciliation, did not "price form the only legitimate fund out of which wages can be paid".²

The determination of the ironmasters to suppress or to nullify the effects of trades unionism in their industry led to a series of protracted conflicts that disturbed the economy of the 1860's when American tariffs and the American Civil War, the Danish War and the collapses in the banking system were also disturbing mid-Victorian confidence. The struggles of the ironworkers, in their "resistance to oppression", and the effects of their behaviour on other workers contributed to the thinking in the legislature that modified the Master and Servant Acts, that set up the Royal Commission on Trades Unions³ and that eventually, appreciating the stabilising influence that well organised trade unions had upon wage demands, gave them recognition, some protection and a legal identity.

¹ Harold Jeans, "Sixty Years of Technical Progress", in: *Iron & Steel Review*, December 1927.

² *The Ironworkers' Journal*, May 1st, 1869.

³ Of almost 20,000 questions put by the Royal Commissioners, excluding those on the Sheffield and Manchester special Commissions, nearly 12% concerned the manufactured iron trades and their trades unions.