Origins of organised labour

Combinations

- Early trade unions
- Made up of **skilled workers**
- Aims
  - Provide **insurance benefits** for their members
    - In case of illness
    - Benefits to their widows and children if the working man died
  - **Bargaining power**
  - **Restrict entry into their professions**
    - Insist on long periods of training
    - Protect status and income
  - Main reason
    - To protect the interests of their members
      - Not interested in wider issues
      - They were conservative, defensive and anxious to exclude unskilled workers
- Development
  - Mostly illegal
  - War years 1790s
    - Membership grew
    - Successful strikes
  - Reduced union activity after 1815
    - Due to
      - Economic depression
      - Government repression
      - In these periods, trade unions worked less well because they had less money and more demand for insurance
    - Attempt for national coordination failed in 1818

Combination Laws

- 1799 and 1800 → Repealed 1824 → Restated 1825
- **Made membership of a union punishable by imprisonment**
  - Reinforced illegality of combinations
- Why?
  - Period of fear
    - French revolution
    - Wars against France late 1790s
      - Over radicalisation
  - Fear of conspiracy
    - Combinations were secret
- Repealed in 1824
  - Government relaxation on repressive laws that had been passed for Peterloo 'crisis'
  - BUT trade union leaders could still be prosecuted if they tried to improve conditions
    - Striking miners prosecuted under an old 'Master and Servant' law (had diff purpose)
- Combination Act 1825
  - Unions legal BUT no collective bargaining nor striking!

Trade union action

- **Tolpuddle 1834**
  - Village in Dorset
  - Leaded by local Methodist preacher
    - George Loveless
  - What did Loveless do?
    - He tried to form a union to improve conditions for agricultural workers
    - Members swore an oath of secrecy
      - Because local farmers would be hostile
  - Government reaction
    - Prosecuted Loveless
      - Under an old Act of Parliament against secret oaths
      - Loveless sent to Australia
        - **"Tolpuddle martyrs"**
  - Outcome
    - Start of unions for agricultural workers
    - Positive figures of martyrs that pushed unions
    - Movement failed and people sent to Australia
    - No more activity among agricultural labourers!
- **'Grand National Consolidated Trade Union'**
  - Attempt to form national union in 1834
    - Inspired by socialist Robert Owen
    - Failed!

Limitations to trade unions

- Other activities
  - Those who wanted to improve conditions were distracted
    - Campaigns for the 1832 Reform Bill
    - Chartism
- Clash
  - Defensive and conservative aims of skilled men
  - Radical ambitions of unskilled men
  - vs
- Divisions
  - Political objectives
    - Parliamentary reform
    - Wider aims
  - vs
  - Just working condition objectives
    - Those who simply wanted better pay, shorter hours, better working conditions
    - Individual aim
- Size
  - Most working-class men did not join trade unions
    - Unions were
      - Small
      - Local
      - Confined to skilled men
    - Many workers excluded and uninformed
- Little middle-class support
  - The press that supported the skilled unions were radical
    - Socialist
    - Anti-capitalist
    - Middle-class men were generally liberal
- Illegality and prosecution

Cooperative Societies

- Members of working classes
  - Attempt to improve conditions for themselves
- Why?
  - Failure of Chartism
  - Alternative to trade unions
    - Did not achieve much for working class
  - Government reluctance to improve conditions
- **Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers**
  - Rochdale Pioneers
  - **Founded 1844**
    - **Consumers' co-operative**
    - During 'Hungry Fourties'
      - Low wages, high inflation
      - Exploitation by **truck shops**
        - High prices
        - Dependance
          - Some employers only paid employees in truck tokens
      - Adulteration
        - Common
        - Eg flour mixed with plaster of Paris
  - Founders
    - 28 working-class people
      - Skilled workmen, regular employment
      - Idealists
        - Influenced by Robert Owen
      - Background in Chartism
  - Co-operative store/shop
    - Rochdale, Lancashire
    - Sold food, clothes and other necessities
      - Reasonable prices
        - Not designed to be profitable
      - Initially only simple food
    - Rochdale Principles of Co-operation
      - **Voluntary and open membership**
      - **Democratic control**
        - Each member had 1 vote
        - Women could also be members and vote at meetings!
      - **Patronage dividend**
        - Surplus income paid back to members in proportion to members' purchases
      - **Educational facilities**
    - Neutral towards
      - Religion
      - Political party
      - Further motive
        - Encouraged **education** for all
- Outcomes
  - Start of a vast retail operation that would cover the whole country
  - Local cooperative societies spread
    - Gave many people the opportunity to participate in **democratic** management
  - Role in formation of Labour Party
    - Set up to get working class men in the House of Commons

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