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**The Furniture Workers - from Craft to Industrial Union  
1865 - 1972**

**Hew Reid**

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MAIN ABBREVIATIONS USED

A.G.	Alex Gossip
E.C.	Executive Committee
M.R.	Monthly Report
A.R.	Annual Report
G.M.C.	General Management Committee
NAFTA	National Amalgamated Furnishing Trades Association
NUFTO	National Union of Furniture Trades Operatives
FTAT	Furniture Timber and Allied Trades (Union)
A.U.U.	Amalgamated Union of Upholsterers

AMALGAMATIONS WITH ALLIANCE NAFTA AND NUFTO 1866 - 1972.

- 1872      East London Cabinetmakers Society  
              Fancy Cabinetmakers of London
- 1873      London Society of Continental Cabinet Makers  
              Amalgamated Society of Cabinet and Chair Makers (Manchester)
- 1874      East London United Society of Chair Makers and Carvers  
              Cabinet Makers Society of Sheffield (Cutlery Cabinets)  
              Manchester and District United Cabinet and Chair Makers Society
- 1875      Nottingham Local Cabinet & Chair Makers Society
- 1883      London Wood Carvers Society
- 1893      Photographic Cabinet Makers                            } 1896 Liverpool Local Hebrew  
              Hebrew Cabinet Makers                                 Cabinetmakers  
              Newcastle Polishers Local Society                    } Glasgow Local Carvers  
   Society
- 1902      United Operative Cabinet and Chairmakers Society of Scotland  
              to form National Amalgamated Furnishing Trades Association
- 1903      National Plate Glass Bevellers Trade Union (defunct)
- 1908      South London French Polishers Society
- 1909      London Society of French Polishers
- 1910      Liverpool Local French Polishers Society  
              Manchester Local French Polishers Society
- 1911      Amalgamated Society of French Polishers
- 1911      Edinburgh Society of French Polishers
- 1912      London Stone Carvers Society  
              Liverpool Local Polishers Society
- 1916      Old West End Cabinetmakers Society
- 1918      United Furnishing Trades Union (Independent Hebrew Society)  
              Perseverance Cabinet Makers  
              London Piano Workers
- 1920      Glasgow Picture Frame Makers Society  
              London Japanners Trade Union
- 1927      Liverpool Union of Picture Frame Makers
- 1945      Edinburgh Union of Upholsterers
- 1947      Amalgamated Society of Cricket Ball Makers  
              Amalgamated Union of Upholsterers  
              General Union of Bedding Trade Workers
- 1954      National Union of Carpet, Linoleum and Rubber, Planners & Fitters
- 1969      Midlands Glass Bevellers & Kindred Societies  
              United French Polishers Society
- 1971      NUFTO & ASWCM join to form FTATU

## The Furniture Makers - The First Beginnings

The History of the making of Furniture is inexorably tied to the development and decline of the successive civilisations which have given the punctuation to the story of man's emergence in a settled society. In tracing the development of the Trade Unions in the furniture industry it is necessary to provide as a postscript a brief summary of furniture making through the ages, and its development in the United Kingdom. Of necessity this history is not exhaustive, and must needs take a partial view, but it is included in the main work to set the scene for the emergence of the workers organisations in the middle of the Victorian era.

It is a generally accepted truth that the making and use of furniture is a characteristic of an advanced and settled society and the earliest examples of this craft and trade in the Western World were the products of the civilisations of Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome.

The tools and craftsmen to produce these articles had emerged in the transitional Mesolithic (Middle Stone) Age during which a fine range of carpenters tools, including the adze, gauge and chisel were developed. That period also added the carpenter's first machine - the bow-drill, in which the drill is rapidly rotated by means of a string wrapped round it, attached at each end to a sort of bow which is moved back and forth. (i)

(i) S.Lilley "Men Machines and History" 1910 p 17

The Egyptians from early Dynastic times (about 2,700 B.C.) used the bow drill as an integral part of their wood working technique. Judging from the surviving wood work, they used neither nails nor screws, almost everything being fitted together with wooden pins or dowels and the drilling of an accurate hole for this was essential. (i)

By this period the craftsmen of Egypt and Mesopotamia were producing a wide variety of articles of high aesthetic and technical quality. They were aided in this task by the skills of the metal workers who were by this time capable of making tools as diverse as axes, adzes, chisels, gauges, drills, knives, saws, clamps and razors.(ii)

The carpenter of this time was as versatile as he was skilled, and his output ranged across boats, chariots, furniture and musical instruments such as harps and lyres. Technical innovation was also taking place and from this period comes the first evidence of the construction of plywood, a five-ply board of glued wood strips of great strength and stability.

The objects of great beauty found in the tombs of the period demonstrate the degree of refinement which these workers could attain in catering for the luxury - in death as in life, of their rulers, highlighting one salient factor which is central to the development of the craft of furniture making, namely that for a very considerable period of mans history the commissioning and use of furniture of anything other than the most utilitarian was restricted to the ruling groups in a society, invariably the most affluent and the most cultured. (iii)

- (i) Goodman W.L. "The History of Woodworking Tools" 1912 p 76  
(ii) Lilley o.p. c.15 p 28  
(iii) Lilley o.p. c.15 p 22

The Greeks and Romans added to the range of wood working tools available by developing the rule, the square, smoothing planes, jack planes and moulding planes, as well as developing further in terms of sophistication those tools already available.

It can be suggested that there exists a relationship between tool development and furniture making skills on the one hand and the cultural development and the settled nature of society on the other, insofar as it determines the type and kind of work the craftsman is called upon to do.

It can be deduced on the evidence available from archaeological sites that the tool kit of the average Roman joiner in Rome or London was more extensive and specialised than that of his medieval counterpart in a small French or English village 1,000 years later. In these Western European countries the making of furniture of any quality dates from the Gothic period of architecture, when furnishing to match ecclesiastical and fortified building was produced in monasteries. Indeed, one of the oldest known pieces of British furniture is the Coronation Chair in Westminster Abbey, made for Edward I (1272 - 1307) by the Monk, Walter of Durham. (i)

Furniture making requires a variety of separate skills which eventually emerged as specific trades. The first of these separations or division of skills to emerge were those of chairmaker, upholsterer and bedding maker. The date of this separation is not clear; however it is apparent that by the 16th Century there was a delineation between the work of the carpenter and joiner and that of the 'furniture

(i) Goodman op cit p 92

maker into separate and clearly defined areas of work.

In the reign of Elizabeth I (1558 - 1603) the Norwich Indexes of Freeman list upholsterers; and chairmakers from 1640; and chirmenders from 1677. In Bristol the apprentices enrolled in the years 1662 and 1689 include upholsterers, and the first apprentice book of 1540 lists an upholsterer and bedder. (i) (ii)

Cabinetmaking as such has a less clearly documented history until the 1600's but this is more clearly understood if the furniture and furnishings of the Early Tudor period are examined.

The schedule of the contents of the house of Sir William More of Loseley are available for the year 1556. The most prominent feature of the hall was the large chair of the master of the house, standing upon a dias or raised platform at the top of the room. Before this stood the high table, the table dormant of Chaucers Franklin. To one side of the chair was a second and lesser one for the lady of the house and guests and family were accommodated at the high table on stools. At the lower end of the hall stood a hutch table, the Armoire, the ancestor of the modern sideboard, acting as a serving table for the household. Near the table stood the cup-board on which the appointments for the high table were kept. Either side of the fireplace were high-backed benches, garnished as necessary with blankets and cushions for comfort. (iii)

(i) Norwich Index of Freemen; N. Public Library

(ii) Bristol Archives Office

(iii) "Medieval Furniture"; Penelope Eames, London 1977 P-37

The floor of such a hall was not conducive to the use of good quality furnishings. Erasmus describes them as being laid with white clay and covered in rushes of which the upper layers were renewed with reasonable regularity. The lower layers, however, remained undisturbed, sometimes for as much as twenty years. The private chambers were, however, tiled on the ground floor and boarded on those above. The Parlour, the sitting room of the More family, was sparsely furnished. There was a 'table of Chestnut not a frame joyned to the same'. There was 'one joyned cheyre' and '5 joyned stoles of chestnut' with a supply of 'footstoles', and chests. These chests served as a secure receptacle for valuables as well as clothes and linen:

In cypress chests my arras counterpoints,  
Costly apparel, tents and canopies,  
Fine linen, Turkey cushions boss'd with pearl,  
Valances of Venice in needle work,  
Pewter and brass, and all things that belong  
to House and Housekeeping.

Taming of the Shrew 1594 - 1600 Act II (i)

Sparse as this was it was relatively well furnished by comparison to the dwellings of the craftsman and the cottager.

The inventory of about the same time of a weaver's house at Biddenden in Kent shows the house to be half workshop with the looms and tools of the trade occupying, a substantial part of the floor area. The domestic furniture was limited to a chair for the master, a stool for his wife, a trestle table with forms by it for the workmen and apprentices and a bed and two chests in the upper part of the house.

(i) Selection from Erasmus; P.S. Allen, Oxford 1918 2nd.ed. ?<sup>s</sup>

A contemporary document records 'Manie farmers thinkes his gaines verie small towards the end of his terme, if he have not six or seven years rent lieing by him, beside a fair garnish of pewter on his cupboard, with so much more in odd vessels going about the house, three or four feather beds, so many coverlids and carpets of tapestrie, a silver salve, a bowle for wine, and a dozen spoons to furnish up the sute'. (i)

The furniture of the cottager of the period can only be guessed at since none of it has survived but the painting by Peter Brueghel the Elder of 'Boars carousing in an Inn' and the Tavern Scene from 'Trattato di Arimetica' gives a clear impression. The home consisting of a box bed for the man and wife, straw mattresses on the floors for others, some stools and a form, a rough table and a hutch for food and perhaps a chest or two and this visual information is reinforced by the inquisition records of the town of Montalieu. (ii)

It has been seen that the upholsterer or upholter and bed maker were amongst the earliest recorded trades and the foregoing inventories support this contention and emphasis is given in Warners Patient Countess (1587) which shows that the convention which decreed that the master of the house should sit in a cushioned arm chair at his board was observed even in the humblest home. The Count lost in a forest is made welcome by a cottager with 'browne bread, whey, bacon, curds and milk were set him on the borde'. And for his ease 'A cushion made of lists, a stoole halfe backed with a hoope were brought him, and he sitteth down beside a coupe'. (iii)

- (i) Description of England; William Harrison (1577) p 60
- (ii) LeRoy Ladurie Montaillon; Scolar 1978
- (iii) Warner; The Patient Countess (1587) p 17

The Restoration of 1660 was probably the dawning of the era of the cabinetmaker as we understand the trade description today. As a modern trade it appears to have its origins in Italy and developed strongly in those countries most effected by the Renaissance. The work of Jean Mace of Blois from 1644 to 1672, Andre Boulle from 1672 to 1732 and J H Reisener c. 1760 under royal patronage being well documented.(i)

In London the evidence for the development of the industry stems from the work of Sir Ambrose Heal and he lists as the earliest business trading, that of Edward Phillip's upholstery shop in Cornhill (1584) which was followed rapidly by others in that area. Royal patronage was as important in London as in Paris and many of the craftsmen in this early period came from the Continent to the Westminster area - Gerriet Jensen of the Pavement, St. Martin's Lane from Holland was the Royal cabinetmaker for Charles II, William and Mary, and Queen Anne. Pauderin of Pall Mall was French cabinetmaker to Charles II from 1677 to 1685 and in the same period Heal lists Stalker of St. James in 1688 making Japanned furniture and Spane of St. Giles a carver in 1682.

The Restoration marked a watershed in cultural and aesthetic matters since, as Pinto suggests 'The long exile of the King and Courtiers had brought them under diverse foreign influences, principally French and Dutch'. Certainly the swing in fashion and manners from Puritanism with its emphasis on severity of style and minimal decoration to elaboration in costume and furnishings in the Restoration period was amplified because workmen, to meet the demand for elaborate and luxurious furniture were available. As a result of competition, and in

(i) Ambrose Heal; The London Furniture Makers 1953

some cases persecution, foreign cabinetmakers, experts in veneering, carvers, gilders, japanners and other specialised craftsmen flocked to England and acted as mentor and example to a new generation of British craftsmen. (i)

The presence of these foreign craftsmen soon had its effect upon the native tradesmen 'Joiners, cabinetmakers and the like....from very vulgar and pitiful artists are now come to produce works as curious for the fitting and admirable for their dexterity in contriving, as any we meet with abroad' wrote John Evelyn. (ii)

Furniture was at this stage in the development of the industry, still a bespoke trade and retailing of the products was unknown. 'The close proximity to the customer was a prime consideration in the selection of workshop sites and choice of urban and metropolitan areas by furniture makers had already become apparent'. (iii)

In part, this exclusivity was broken down by a growing market for the product of the furniture makers and this market was both stimulated and, in a sense, standardised by the publication of pattern books. The most famous designers and publicists being Thomas Chippendale and Son with the 'Gentlemen and Cabinetmakers Director' (first edition 1754, second edition 1759, third edition 1762) who had a workshop in St. Martin's Lane, George Hepplewhite, who died in 1786, and who operated from Cripplegate and Thomas Sheraton 1751 - 1806 who had his workshops in Wardour Street and published 'The Cabinetmakers and Upholsterers Drawing Book' in 1791 and 'The Cabinet Directory' containing an explanation of

- (i) E.Pinto; Small woodware thro' the ages. Batsford, London 1949  
(ii) "An Account of Architects and Architecture"; John Evelyn 1723 P 76  
(iii) J.J.Oliver; Development & Structure of the Furniture Industry P.5

all the terms in the Cabinet, Chair and Upholstery branches, and a 'Display of Useful Articles of Furniture' in 1803.

It is helpful at this point to draw back from the design and product development aspects of furniture and to examine the role of the materials used in the changing nature of the furniture makers trade, insofar as the materials used in the fabrication of furniture influenced the type and nature of the craftsmen employed in the trade.

Prior to 1660 the timbers used were, in the main, home grown, oak, elm, chestnut and beech being the predominant species. The Joiner was the maker of furniture at least as far as the carcase and chair products were concerned and it was as a natural progression from his work on windows, doors and internal panelling that he went on to produce the furniture of the period. Furniture was strong, utilitarian and, as can be seen from the earlier description of houses of the period, intended to be used by many generations, and prized rather more for its utility than its aesthetic qualities. Such examples as we can see today in museums and private collections were not without decoration but this was a secondary rather than primary aspect of the article produced.

The construction techniques were those of the joiner and the pegged mortice and tenon, and through dovetail ensured that the article would endure despite the limited life of the animal glues used and the undoubtedly damp conditions in which the article would reside.

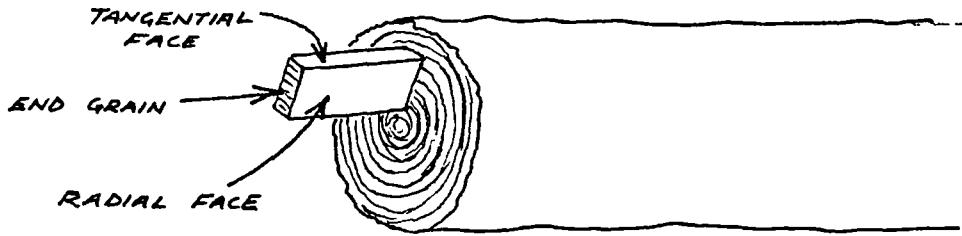
As has been already noted, the return of Charles II from exile on the Continent of Europe in 1660 resulted in a complete revision of that which was fashionable in high society home furnishings. In consequence,

there quickly developed in London, groups of tradesmen who at first copied and then adapted these influences for a growing home market, and with colonial expansion, an overseas market.

Walnut and mahogany became the timber with which to construct furniture, and the veneers of these and other more exotic timbers, such as rosewood, tulipwood and ebony, were used to enhance surfaces for decorative effect. Oak and other domestic timbers did not cease to function as furniture timbers, but rather their use becoming restricted to articles which were best served by their less decorative, harder wearing qualities. The country house might be furnished in walnut but the chapel had pews of oak.

The methods of construction changed and most markedly with the use of veneers. Veneers, at that time, and, indeed, until the mid 19th Century were sawn from a decorative or exotic log, in planks only 1/8th" thick (today they are machine cut at .65 mm) thus allowing a particularly beautiful log to provide the decoration for many pieces of furniture. A veneer, however, does require a completely flat surface for adhesion (though it can be glued to curves in a single plane and with 'tailoring' made to fit to compound curves. For the purposes of veneering, therefore, the existing joiner's technique of frame and panel construction was unsatisfactory as was the through dovetail technique.

Timber gains or loses moisture across its surface with changing temperature and humidity. These surfaces which may be of radial, tangential, or end grain, lose or gain moisture in the ratio of  
1 : 2 : 4   ///



It can be seen, therefore, that the end grain of the through dovetail would initially absorb more glue moisture than the surrounding area, making it difficult to achieve a lasting bond with the veneer, and even if such a bond was initially achieved, the loss and absorption of moisture of the panel substrate at the dovetails would at a later time result in the delamination of the veneer from the panel.

The new breed of craftsmen, the cabinetmakers developed the lap dovetail and the hidden mitre dovetail, which minimises, and in the case of the hidden mitre, conceals the end grain to be veneered in any carcass work.

The substrate materials used under these exotic timbers were many and varied with mahogany used for the very highest quality work, but softer woods such as cedar, Scots pine, poplar and other relatively absorbant materials being used. The use of a softer material for the panel was dictated by the need to have it flat and true for veneering and this was more easily accomplished with the hand tools of the period on these timbers, the relative absorbancy of the base also providing a keen bond with its overlay.

Carving has always had a place in furniture decoration from earliest times and this was not diminished with the use of the new materials and new fashions. Rather the foreign influences encouraged

a new and more dramatic approach to the art. Oak carving had had its roots in ecclesiastical stone carving, but the depth and complexity of the work which can be carried out in oak is limited by the lack of uniformity and texture in the material. It is quite as strong, if not stronger, than any other material used for wood carving, contrary to the views expressed by E.T. Jay. However, this very hardness, this lack of uniformity, and above all the relative coarseness of the texture were the features which led to the use of other timbers for the finest carved work. The timbers which came to prominence in the post-1660 period being mahogany, walnut, fruitwoods, eg pear and apple, and, above all, lime wood. (Though oak retained its position as the carving material for ecclesiastical work). (i)

The furniture craftsmen of the 18th Century were not an easily identifiable group, in that the cabinetmakers might be a craftsman shopkeeper, making and selling to a fashionable public, or he might be a shopkeeper who acted as an outlet for a number of craftsmen. He might be a working master who made for such shopkeepers or other cabinetmakers on an 'out work basis', or he might be a journeyman working for wages in any establishment requiring his skills.

There were, however, by the 18th Century considerable divisions between the trades in furniture making. A guide for the period states that the cabinetmakers could be making 'beds, chairs, chests, tables and all carcase work'. The work of the upholsterer was as it is today with the addition of providing what would be regarded as soft furnishings in the form of curtain hangings. (ii)

(i) E.T.Jay M.A. Thesis Some Aspects of the London Furniture Industry in the 18th Century. LONDON UNIV. 1962.  
(ii) A General Description of all Trades Anon 1747

The carver was the most skilled of those engaged in furniture making. Campbell writes of the cabinetmaker and carver 'by much the most curious workmen in the wood way, except the carver'. The carver was always a sub-contractor even when his work was of paramount importance to the finished article as in curved chairs, desks and panelling but 'The ingenious men amongst these kind of carvers are never out of business' wrote Collyer. (i)

The other trades discussed in Collyer are those of looking glass frame carver, case maker (for clocks) and japanners. These are described as the 'better trades' and the joiner turner, chair maker and frame makers were seen as of lesser standing.

The best furniture was beautifully made and beautifully finished but even as late as the early 1800's this production was for a limited market and the trend which was apparent in the furnishings of the various classes of society in the 1500's was substantially maintained and reinforced. For the rest of the population other than the wealthy, furniture was 'White wooden, wickers and ordinary matted sort, commonly called kitchen chaires'. Indeed, Campbell dealing with the frame maker, states that his work 'needs but little ingenuity or neatness as he only joins the deals (soft wood planks) roughly planed. (ii)

The hours of working for all workmen were long and by the mid-18th Century a twelve to fourteen hour day was a normal with turners working fifteen hours. The weeks was of six days and holidays were Christmas Day, Whitsun and Easter, and for London workers, eight hanging days.

- (i) R Campbell, The London Tradesman 1747 pp 171
- (ii) Anon. Gen.Desc. of all Trades p.57-8  
R Campbell, London Trades pp 17<sup>4</sup>

H. Angelo reports 'It was common for master frame makers, tailors and others who had engaged to complete orders within a given time, to bear in mind to observe to their customers 'that there will be a hanging day and my men will not be at work.' (i)

Wage rates for furniture workers in the 18th Century are difficult to fix in that wages would vary as the season both in calendar and social terms, since the trade was so tied to one sector of society. Equally, that which was paid in London would not necessarily reflect what was paid in other major towns. However, as some indication the General Description of All Trades gives for 1747 the following rates:-

Cabinetmaker	12/- to 15/- per week with up to a guinea a week for the man who knows his business
Chairmaker	12/- per week
Frame maker	10/- to 20/-
Turner	18/- to 20/-
Joiner	15/- (ii)

Campbell suggests that 30/- to 42/- is a possible wage for the most able man on piece work, whilst Collyer gives the rate for 1761 as being similar to those of the General Description of All Trades, with the addition of:-

Chair carver	30/- to 40/- on piece work
Japanner	20/- to 30/-
Picture Frame Carver	21/- upwards (iii)

These wages suggest that the furniture worker of the period was bringing upon the aristocracy of labour category. However, this can be

- (i) H. Angelo Reminiscences Vol 1 p.367 1888  
(ii) R.Campbell; The London Tradesman 1747 p.171  
(iii) Campbell p.70 & Collyer p.86-7, 95, 114, 170

attributed to a small number of highly skilled workers producing for an affluent market. The development of a wider market for furniture with industrialisation brought with it increases in the numbers of furniture workers and reductions in wages such that it would take until the beginning of the 20th Century for these wages rates to be again achieved by furniture workers.

It is in the mid-18th Century that there is the first evidence of combination in the furniture trades. In 1761 it is reported "A number of bills of indictment were preferred against the rebellious journeymen cabinetmakers, who have lately combined together to raise their wages and lessen their hours or working, etc. The combinations amongst journeymen, peruke makers, shoe makers, taylors, cabinetmakers, etc., is a growing evil and wants to be remedied". Having made its remonstration against the insidious activities of the workers, the Chronicle turns its attack upon the employers and their policy of price fixing and the operation of a cartel. It continues 'but there is a much greater (evil) amongst their masters, who agree together what price they will have for everything they make or sell, and this is universal amongst most tradesmen'. (i)

The cabinetmakers combination which was the United Society of Cabinetmakers is obscure in its origin and activities. There is, however, a card in existence issued in 1801 which carries as its main message 'To repair the loss of Tools by Fire, the chief end of our meetings'. This was an undoubted reflection of the times but the objectives of the Society were at least understood by some employers as the following job advertisement shows:-

(i) London Chronicle 12 Dec.1761 p6

"Cabinetmakers wanted for constant employ. Enquire at Mr Warffe's No. 168 Ratcliff Highway. None belonging to the Society will be employed".

The reference to 'constant employ' as being the incentive to attract craftsmen, greater than that of suggestions of high wages or short hours, is an indication that this problem of seasonal fluctuation in demand was as severe in those days as it is today. (i) and (ii)

It is tempting to see the development of the furniture industry in terms of a mass production industry, but it remained a hand based craft industry until the end of the 19th Century. It is true that rudimentary machinery existed for the working of wood long before that time, but its universal usage was delayed by the diverse nature of the trade, the relatively low demand for its products, the low capital investment of most makers and a hand based craft industry which, by specialisation and development, had the capability of considerable output.

Perhaps the most critical bottleneck in the productive process of furniture manufacture was the production of planks from the round log, the traditional method of conversion being the pit saw and, indeed, this method was used up until the earliest years of the 20th Century. A recording made by a High Wycombe worker who had been a pit sawyer for twenty years describes the process. 'In the woods a pit was dug, oblong in shape and about six to eight feet deep, roughly lined with planks where the soil was too crumbly to stand on its own. A long log on either side of the pit formed the main bearers, carrying the shorter cross bearers which in turn supported the tree to be sawn. Iron 'dog'//

(i) in Heal A. Country Life, Jan. 23rd 1942 letter  
(ii) Daily Advertiser, London 10th Oct. 1786 p<sup>2</sup>.

Iron 'dogs' were driven into the tree and bearers to hold everything firm. If really big trees were to be dealt with, a crab winch or rope tackle would be needed to move them into position and to shift them on to bearers when it was necessary to move them in order to avoid cutting through those bearers. Before going on to the pit the trunk had to be trimmed up and this was hard skilled work, in which the operator used a heavy long-handled, wide-bladed axe, known as a siding up axe. (1)

Once in position on the bearers, the log had to be marked out into planks and this was done by stretching a line from one end of it, rubbing the line with chalk or charcoal black and 'striking a line', that is plucking the line in the centre so that its rebound left a mark, faint enough, but just sufficient to act as a guide to the top sawyer who stood on the trunk itself and steered the saw with the tiller, a cross handle on a two foot extension bolted to the saw blade. Much of the actual work<sup>was</sup> done by the bottom sawyer, knee deep in sawdust and with more sawdust constantly running down on to him. The lower handle of the saw was simply wedged on to the blade for easy removal when it became necessary to remove the whole blade to allow the tree trunk to be moved over the bearers. The blade of the saw was greased and a wedge was driven into the tail of the cut to ease the work, but it was hard work and slow work and capable only of a limited output of planks and for all the skill of the sawyers, it produced a comparatively uneven thickness of plank<sup>1</sup>.

There is some evidence of a water powered mechanical sawing of soft woods in Germany and Sweden in the 14th Century but this practice

(1) Mayes History of Chair Industry in High Wycombe p.2,3 1962

was confined to softwoods until the 19th Century when, first of all, horse power was used and this in its turn superceded when reliable steam power was harnessed to the frame saw and circular saw, for hard wood conversion.

The effect of the introduction of horse-powered and, later, steam powered sawing was catastrophic to one section of the trade - the sawyers. Mayhew reports "The London Sawyers, though not a numerous body, still require full consideration, as belonging to a trade which has been extensively superceded by machinery". (i)

At the time of taking the previous census the number of the Metropolitan Sawyers above twenty years of age was 2,180; so that from 1831 to 1841, the London Trade had increased by 612. Since then, however, I am informed that the number has declined by nearly one half. The number of steam saw mills in the metropolis, in 1841, was fifteen; at the present moment they are sixty-eight, including those for cutting veneers as well as timber and deals. (ii)

The great decrease in the numbers of the trade was owing to the introduction of machinery. The first steam sawmill set up in the neighbourhood of London was established at Battersea, about the year 1806 or 1807 by a Mr. Smart. It was erected principally for the cutting of veneers, and the trade, though aware that it could not fail to take the work from them, still believed that it could do so to the extent that it has. "We knew" says my informant, "that the mills could cut veneers better and thinner than what we could, and more to an inch, which

(i) The Unknown Mayhew Thompson & Yea; Morning Chronicle 1849-50 - 1971 p 321  
(ii) Unknown Mayhew p. 323

is a great object of course, in valuable woods, but still we never expected that steam power would be applied to the cutting of timber and deals. Since that time the mills have gone on increasing gradually, year after year, until now there are twenty regularly working between Stangate and London Bridge, and no less than sixty-eight altogether, scattered throughout the metropolis".

Prior to the introduction of steam-powered sawmills, horse-powered mills were in use. Mayhew reports "For perhaps twenty years before this period (1806/7) horses had been employed to supercede men's labour. The principle on which these horse mills were constructed was not dissimilar to that now used in the steam sawmills. The horses then did the work of the engine now - working nine saws at once, but with perhaps only half the motive power of steam as regards velocity.... Steam sawmills continued to be gradually established throughout the metropolis until they now number sixty-eight - six, at least of the proprietors being also timber merchants. These mills average three 'frames' each, a frame holding nine saws. In case all the means of these mills were called into operation at one time, 1755 saws would be at work.... A gentleman, himself a conductor of a steam sawmill, took pains, at my request, to calculate the number of sawyers superceded by the application of steam power. These, from the best data, he gives at 750 'pairs' or 1,500 men. (i)

The process of development of machinery for the wood working trades had been slow and the utilisation of machinery was undoubtedly controlled by the low capitalisation of most furniture makers. The first sawmill

(i) Unknown Mayhew p. 328/329 op cit

in England was erected in 1663 in Hull and was wind-powered. The circular saw was introduced in 1777. James Stangill built a wind-powered sawmill at Limehouse in 1761 for which design he received a premium of £300 from the Royal Society of Arts. This was bitterly opposed by the pit sawyers, who burnt it down the same year, (i)(ii)

Mayhew reports the sawyers attitudes to machines":....Working men is much disheartened at the increase of machinery, when they're a standing at the corner of the streets idle and starving and see carts coming out of the yard filled with planks that they ought to have had. You see, sir, when some are injured by any alteration, they gets compensation; but here is our trade cut up altogether, and what compensation do we get? We are left to starve without the least care. I have paid 1/10d for a quatern loaf before now, and I could get it much easier than I can now. When I get up inthe morning, I don't know whether I shall be able to earn 6d. before nightfall. I have been at work ever since I was eight years old, and I'm a pretty good example of what the working man has to look for; and what's the good of it all? Even the machines, some of them, can't hardly raise the price of the coals to get their fire up. When they first set up they had 6d a foot for cutting veneers, and now they have only 1d. Machinery's very powerful, sir, but competition is much stronger". (iii)

The guiding genius of invention for the mechanisation of the wood working industry was General Sir Samuel Bentham who patented a planning machine in 1791, a rotary planing machine and a moulding machine, a morticing machine, a tenoning machine, a dovetail cutting machine and

(i) Furniture Working Party Report 1946 p.53 H.M.S.O.

(ii) Timber its Development & Distribution, A Historical Survey  
Harrup 1957 p.53

(iii) Unknown Mayhew P.334/335 o.p.c.t

a veneer cutting machine in 1793, and by 1840 Thomas Robinson and Son of Rochdale had produced their first wood working machine, belt drive, by steam power. (i)

If all this suggests intensive mechanisation of the furniture making industry by the beginning of the 19th Century it is quite erroneous. It was purely at the primary conversion stage of furniture making, namely the conversion of the log to plank form that mechanisation had any place at this time, and whilst this mechanisation broke the bottleneck of the pit saw, the industry developed along hand craft lines, albeit with a capability for a very high level of output, for the next hundred years. This contrast is exemplified by the report of the Editor of the Journal the 'Cabinetmaker's' visit to High Wycombe in 1908. He comments on the factory of R.J. Howland with sixty workmen and a machine shop where "the machines are separately electrically powered and efficiency is the keynote" and contrasts this with a visit to Henry Goodearl & Sons "who astonished us with the information that they had no machinery whatever, and here it was that we had the pleasure of seeing some of the methods of fifty years ago still practised and practised successfully even in competition with modern machinery. Here we saw chair-makers wearing what is called a breast bit. On first sight this looks like a narrow wooden life belt across the breast, but on close inspection we saw that in the centre it has a hollow to take the rose of the stock which is one of the most important tools in the kit of a man who makes chairs without machinery" (See accompanying photographs). (ii) (iii)

- (i) C Bale; Woodworking Machinery, Its Rise & Progress & Construction Lockwood (1914) pp.2,71,73,113,148,149,171,186,192
- (ii) Cabinetmaker June 1908
- (iii) Cabinetmaker January 11 and 18th, 1908

"As we pass along we come across a pole lathe, and an adze hollows a Windsor chair seat held firmly by standing on it. He uses his adze much in the same way that a pick-axe is employed, but to the uninitiated, the gleaming edge after cutting out a long crisp chip at every stroke, came perilously near the foot with which he holds the elm seat".

Such a factory was, however, even at this time, something of an anachronism and Ebenezer Gomme's new factory, built in the following year, was made "sinking a great deal of capital into new machinery to extend the mass production methods from the Windsor and common cane and rush seated work into better class work, and from then on the study of machines and men to increase output per man became the key policies to be pursued by successful enterprises". (i)

The machines were available when the demand for the machines had truly arrived.

The trade magazine for 1892 carried advertisements for only four different and simple machines in the course of the year, bandsaws, double boring machines, double cut off saws and a shaper and planer. However, by 1908 the magazine carried advertisements for twenty-five different types of machinery and what is, perhaps, more significant is the complexity of the machines on offer, such as "combined patent spiral cutting, planing and sandpapering machine, a multi-cutter dovetailing machine, automatic glue jointers". (ii) (iii)

- (i) Mayes History of Chairmaking p.121
- (ii) Cabinetmaker 1892
- (iii) Cabinetmaker 1908

Over a period of approximately one hundred years, that is through the 19th Century, the making of furniture became an industry. It can be seen that prior to that period furniture was a luxury, a bespoke a commissioned art/fashion form at one extreme and basically utilitarian at the other. Economic and demographic changes in Great Britain found their echo in the changes in the furniture industry. The furniture making centre of High Wycombe illustrates this change in a cameo form which was repeated, albeit less dramatically, in other centres.

The trade of chairmaker emerges in the 1790's when Samuel Treacher is sworn as a burgess of the town giving his description as Chairmaker, confirmed by an entry in the British Directory for 1784 which records all three Treacher brothers as chairmakers, and a stained glass window in High Wycombe Town Hall records the first chair factory in the town as being established in 1805 (though this date is thought locally to be about ten years too late) by Samuel Treacher and Thomas Widginton, employing, it is thought, some twenty men. (i) (ii)

By 1875 the town directory records that there were fifty chair manufacturers, averaging:-

The principal firms      2,000 per day

Fifteen smaller firms      1,500 per day

and Twenty smaller firms      1,200 per day

giving a total production of 4,700 chairs per day and that the five largest firms of William Birch, Cartwright, Cox, Glenister and Gibbons and Walter Skull, employed over fifty persons in the trade.

- (i) Records of Borough of High Wycombe
- (ii) Baileys British Directory 1784

Kelly's directory for the same year records an annual output from the town of 1½ million chairs at an average value of 3/4d each. This output was essentially hand work production since the same directory lists:

8 Sawmills and 1 Boring mill

Nor could those sawmills and boring mill be very large since the same survey records:-

3 Band Sawyers

6 Seat borers (i)

Oliver's work on the distribution of the furniture industry in the London area replicates this situation and shows the growth of furniture making establishments as:-

1801	1811	1846	1859	1871	1911
78	100	499	1304	909	1310

and there can be little doubt that this pattern of growth for the industry was repeated in the other industrial and commercial centres of the country.

The movement from the countryside and a more settled way of life, coupled with an overall increase in the population, is demonstrated by the growth of London in this period. In 1801 the Great London Conurbation contained 1,117,000 inhabitants and represented 12.56% of the total population of England and Wales. By 1871 the population had grown to 3,890,000, representing 17.13% of the total population of England and Wales.

(i) Kelly's Directory for the town of High Wycombe 1875

Mayes notes "Machinery was overcoming all opposition in the industrial towns, and if it was causing unemployment and want, it was also raising up a new class of wage earners who helped to build and install the machines and kept them running afterwards. These men, earning good wages, were occupying the new and better type of houses which were being built in long terraces in Northampton, in Leeds, in Birmingham, and wherever the new industries settled, and these were the customers for Wycombe chairs, provided always that those chairs were sound enough to satisfy hard-headed artisans and cheap enough to be within their means". (i)

This explosion of demand and of manufacture during the first sixty years of the 19th Century is clearly seen in Oliver's figures and it was made the more possible in that the 'later years of the (Napoleonic) war saw a general erosion of the apprenticeship restrictions both in practice and in law, culminating in the repeal of the apprenticeship clauses of the Elizabethan Statute of Artificers in 1814. According to their position, the artisans reacted vigorously to this threat....and that almost the entire skill or 'mystery' of the trade was conveyed by precept and example in the workshop by the journeyman to his apprentice. The artisans regarded this 'mystery' as their property, and asserted their unquestionable right to 'the quiet and exclusive use and enjoyment of their art and trades'. Consequently, not only was repeal resisted, a nascent trades council being formed in London, and 60,000 signatures being collected nationally to a petition to strengthen the apprenticeship laws; but as a result of the threat there is evidence that the trade clubs were actually strengthened so that many London artisans emerged from the wars in a comparatively strong position.

(i) Mayes History of Chairmaking in High Wycombe p.30 oP c.r

Yet this apparently strengthened position is an illusion since it applied as far as the woodworking trades to one Tenth of the Trade (Mayhew) or more optimistically one fifth to one sixth (Thompson) of the workers. The woodworking trades separating out into the honourable and dishonourable branches which essentially were concerned with the high and low quality ends of the market. (i)

The debasement of trades took many forms, and was sometimes accomplished only after intense conflict and in some cases as late as the 1830's. When William Lovett, who had been apprenticed as a rope maker in Penzance came to London in 1821 and finding no employment at his own trade, sought to get work as a cabinetmaker or carpenter the distinction between the honourable and dishonourable trades was not so marked. The fact that he had served no apprenticeship weighed heavily against him, but after bad experiences at a dishonourable shop and worse experience attempting to hawk his own products, he finally gained employment at a large cabinet workshop. When it was discovered that he had served no apprenticeship the men "talked of setting Mother Shorney at me". "This is a cant term in the trade, and meant the putting away of your tools, the injuring of your work, and annoying you in such a way as to drive you out of the shop". "As soon as I was made acquainted with their feelings, I thought it best to call a shop meeting and lay my case before them". "To call a meeting of this description, the first requisite was to send for a quantity of drink (generally a gallon of ale) and then to strike your hammer and hold fast together, which, making a bell-like sound, is a summons calling all in the shop to assemble around your bench". "A chairman is then appointed, and you are called upon to state your business". (ii)

- (i) London Labour H.Pour p.335,p.231, E.W.C. p.277 E.P.THOMPSON 1969  
(ii) William Lovett;Life & Struggles in Pursuit of Bread, Knowledge & Freedom 1920 Ed. p.31-2

Lovett's explanation of his difficult circumstances satisfied the men 'but their demands made upon me for drink by individuals among them, for being shown the manner of doing any particular kind of work together with the fines and shop scores, often amounted to seven or eight shillings a week out of my guinea'.

But ten or twenty years later he would not have succeeded in gaining employment in a respectable or society shop: the influential Cabinet Makers Society (of which Lovett himself became president) had consolidated the position of its members in the quality branches of the trade and closed its doors against the mass of unapprenticed or semi-skilled labour clarmouring without. At the same time the dishonourable trade had mushroomed, middle men had set up "slaughter houses" or great furniture warehouses, and poor "garret masters" in Bethnal Green and Spitalfields employed their own families and "apprentices" in making chairs and shoddy furniture for sale to the warehouses at 'knockdown prices. Even less fortunate workers would buy or scrape together wood to make workboxes or card tables which they hawked in the streets or sold to cut rate East End shops. (i)

Socially as well as economically the distinction between the Society and non-society was most marked. Mayhew records "The Cabinet makers, socially as well as commercially considered, consist, like all other operatives, of two distince classes; that is to say of "society" and "non-society men", or in the language of political economy, of those whose wages are regulated by custom, and those whose earnings are determined by competition. The former class numbers between six and seven hundred of the trade, and the latter between four and five

(i) E.P. Thompson M.E.W. Classes p.278/9 - P.C.T

thousand. As a general rule, I may remark, that I find "society men" of every trade comprise about one tenth of the whole. Hence it follows that if the non-society men are neither so skilful nor so well conducted as the others, at least they are quite as important a body from the fact that they constitute the main portion of the trade. The transition from the one class to the other is, however, in most cases, of a very disheartening character.....society men renting houses of their own - some paying as much as £70 a year, and the non-society men overworked and underpaid, so that a few weeks sickness reduced them to absolute pauperism. Nor, I regret to say, can any other tale be told of the Cabinet makers except it be that the competitive men in this trade are in an even worse position than in any other'.

Mayhew gives figures for society and non-society men in 1850. He writes, 'the trade societies in connection with this branch of the art, are those of cabinet, chair and bedstead makers. They are divided into three districts, vis, West End, Middle and East End. The districts contain five societies - one at the West End, another in the centre of the metropolis and the others at the East End. Three of these societies are in connection with the cabinetmakers trade; the remaining two belonging to the bedstead makers and chair makers. The following table shows the number of men in connection with each society together with the non=society men appertaining to each branch:-

	<u>Society Men</u>	<u>Non-Society Men</u>	<u>Total</u>
West End General Cabinetmakers	300	1400	1700
East End Cabinetmakers	140	1000	1140
Fancy Cabinetmakers	47	500	547
Chair Makers	130	1428	1558
Bedstead Makers	25	238	263
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	642	4566	5208
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>

For the 'society' men of this period, the rewards of exclusivity were considerable as Mayhew illustrates. 'Those who wish to be impressed with the social advantages of a fairly well paid class of mechanics should attend a meeting of the Woodcarvers Society. On the first floor of a small private house in Tottenham Street, Tottenham Court Road, is, so to speak, the museum of the working men belonging to this branch of the cabinetmakers. The walls of the backroom are hung round with plaster casts of some of the choicest specimens of the arts, and in the front room the table is strewn with volumes of valuable prints and drawings in connection with the craft. Round this table are ranged the members of the society - some forty or fifty were there on the night of my attendance - discussing the affairs of the trade'.

'The objects of this Society are, in the words to the preface to the printed catalogue, "To enable woodcarvers to cooperate for the advancement of their art, and by forming a collection of books, prints and drawings, to afford them facilities for self improvement, also by the diffusion of information amongst its members, to assist them in the

exercises of their art. as well as to enable them to obtain employment'. The Society does not interfere in the regulation of wages in any other way than, by the diffusion of information among its members, to assist them in the exercise of their art, as well as to enable them to obtain employment; so that both employers and employed may, by becoming members, promote their own and each others interests'.

'In the whole course of my investigations I have never experienced more gratification than I did on the evening of both my visits to this society. The members all gave evidence, both in manner and appearance, of the refining character of their craft, and it was a hearty relief from the scenes of squalor, misery, dirt, vice, ignorance and discontent, with which these inquiries too frequently bring one into connexion, to find one's self surrounded with an atmosphere of beauty, refinement, comfort, intelligence and ease'.

'The public, generally, are deplorably misinformed as to the character and purpose of trade societies. The common impression is that they are combinations of working men, instituted and maintained solely with the view of exacting an exorbitant rate of wages from their employers, and that they are necessarily connected with strikes, and with sundry other savage and willy means of attaining this object. It is my duty, however, to make known that the rate of wages which such societies are instituted to uphold has, with but few exceptions, been agreed upon at a conference of both masters and men, and that in almost every case I find the members as strongly opposed to strikes as a means of upholding them, as to the public themselves'.

(This being a reference to the London Chairmakers and Carvers Book of Prices for workmanship as regulated and agreed to by a committee of Master chair manufacturers and Journeymen 3rd. Ed. 1829).

'The payment of the journeyman cabinet maker is, both by the piece and by the week, 32s. a week, being the minimum allowed by the rules of the Society as the remuneration for a weeks labour, or six days of ten hours each. The prices by piece are regulated by a book, which is really a remarkable production. It is a thick quarto volume, containing some 600 pages. Under the respective heads the piece-work price of every article of furniture is specified; and immediately after what is called the "start" price, or the price for the plain article, follows an elaborate enumeration of extras, according as the article may be ordered to be ornamented in any particular manner. There are also engravings of all the principal articles in the trade, which further facilitate the clear understanding of all the regulations contained in the work. The date of this book of prices is 1811, and the wages of the society men have been unchanged since then. The preparation of this ample and minute statement of prices occupied a committee of masters and of journeymen between two and three years. The committee were paid for their loss of time from the masters' and journeymen's funds respectively; and what with these payment, what with the expense of attending the meetings and constitutions, the making and remaking of models, the cost of printing and engravings, the cabinet-makers book of prices was not compiled, I am assured, at a less cost than from £4,000 to £5,000'. (i)

(i) The Unknown Mayhew - E.P. Thompson & Eileen Yeo  
Selections from Morning Chronicle 1840-50 p.367 and 368

This picture of organisation, cooperation, and relative affluence was, however, restricted to a small group of craftsmen of the highest skills and the reality of the furniture trade in London and other large centres of population was the emergence of the 'garret-master'. This group of craftsmen operated on their own or with family labour, with limited capital, and produced furniture on a speculative basis. Their output they sold to a new breed of middlemen known as 'slaughter-house men' who in their turn retailed the articles to the public or other dealers.

This evidence presented to the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Sweating System makes it clear as to how this situation arose. "The cabinet trade was formerly in the hands of manufacturers employing workmen on their own premises. Within the last twenty years the trade has altered. Some of the large drapery establishments have adopted the system of selling furniture, which they buy from dealers, and do not themselves directly employ workmen. Large (drapery) houses now buy from dealers, who, in turn buy from the small makers. They reside chiefly in Bethnal Green, Curtain Road, and Hoxton.....They work in shops with a few hands, generally several children, including girls, being among them". (i)

In his evidence to the committee, Mr Parnell, The Secretary of the West End Branch of the Alliance Cabinetmakers Association, explained how the system operated. "If a firm gets an order to supply furniture to a customer, it gives out to a sub-contractor, who in his turn gives it out to another sub-contractor, who gives it out to a foreman

(i) Evidence to the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Sweating System. Vol.17 pp. 279-281 1890

who gives it out as piece work to workmen". This system leads to minute sub-division of labour and renders possible the employment of unskilled and child labour".

The other factor which mitigated against the garret master was his lack of capital. This required that that which had been made being sold before any other item could be produced and with the slaughter house men well aware of this position, it placed the garret-master in the position of accepting whatever he was offered. This situation was in its turn, compounded by the trade being seasonal in demand and the articles being large. Slack trade forced down prices even further and the sheer bulk of furniture required that it be moved out of the workshop before anything more could be made.

A garret-master chairmaker related his life to Mayhew as:-  
"I work from six every morning to nine at night - some work till ten - I breakfast at eight which stops me for ten minutes. I can breakfast in less time, but its a rest; my dinner takes me say ten minutes at the outside and my tea eight minutes. All the rest of the time I'm starving at the bench. How many minutes rest is that Sir? Thirty eight. Well, say three quarters of an hour, and that allows a few sucks at a pipe when I rest, but I can smoke and work too. I have only one room to work and eat in, or I should lose more time. Altogether I labour  $14\frac{1}{4}$  hours every day, and I rest on Sundays, at least forty Sundays in the year. One may as well work as sit fretting. But on Sundays I only work till its dusk, or until five or six in Summer. When its dusk I take a walk. I'm not well dressed enough for a Sunday walk when its light, and I can't wear my apron very well on that day to hide patches. But there's eight hours that I reckon I take up every week in dancing about to the slaughterers. I'm satisfied that I work very

nearly one hundred hours a week, the year through, deducting the time taken up by the slaughterers and buting stuff - say, eight hours a week, it fives more than ninety hours a week for my work and there's hundreds labour as hard as I do just for a crust".

As evidence of the work done and the under-capitalisation of the garret master, Mayhew reports: "A general cabinet maker commenced business on 30/-, a part of which he thus expended in the materia, for a four foot chest of drawers:-

	s.	d.
Three feet six inches of cedar for ends	4	0
Sets of mahogany veneers for three big and two little drawers	2	4
Drawer sweep (deal to veneer the front upon)	2	6
Veneer for top	1	3
Extras (any cheap wood) for the insides of drawers, partitioning etc.	5	0
Five locks	1	8
Eight knobs, 1/- glue, sprigs etc	1	4
Set of four turned feet, beech, stained	1	6
	<hr/>	
	19s.- 7d.	

For the article, when completed, he received 25s. toiling at it for 27 or 28 hours". (i)

There may be a question as to how valid such information is bearing in mind that it was being given to an observer unfamiliar with the skills of the trade. In this instance, however, the object is a standard five drawer chest and on the basis of the materials specification and knowledge of the processes involved of framing up,

(i) Mayhew, p.392      ⑧      c.1

hand cutting drawer dovetails, hand veneering top and drawers, fitting locks and feet, that it would indeed be a skilled craftsman who could produce such a chest to a finished state in the time stated. Furthermore, the earlier reports of a hundred hours week would tie in with this, for only thus could the cabinet maker earn his guinea a week.

The Furniture trade had become an exploitative sweating trade with the exception of the work for the highest quality sales. The old pattern of making and selling from one establishment having broken down into a new approach of retailing and sub-contracting, all meaningful apprenticeship safeguards were abandoned (with the exception of the honourable trade sector) and the trade swollen with an influx of the unskilled, of women and children. Working hours became intolerably long, Sunday working a norm and conditions quite unfavourable to any form of trades union organisation. The woodworker could obtain his materials cheaply and with his own tools become his own sweating master, working himself and his family and perhaps other juveniles round a seven day week, and hawking the products in a competitive situation to a limited number of outlets.

The furniture trade was thus very difficult to organise from a Trades Union point of view and it would take a further deterioration in the trade of this sector of the market coupled with a rise in the demand for cheaper mass produced items to see a revival of the small factory situation, which in its turn would lend itself to Trades Union organisation.

The circle was broken by the need to supply in volume, to a

standard pattern, for the new and expanding markets at home and overseas. These allowed for orders to be placed by retailers, by Government, by agents, military authorities, and others, which with the new machinery available to assist hand production forced the development and consolidation of the separate masters and workers into a factory situation.

In 1881 B. Cohen and Sons advertised "A large stock of all styles suitable for home, colonial and foreign markets, with representatives travelling by rail and steamship to all markets". And what these representatives took with them was not the product or the miniature but the catalogue which in its turn established and reinforced standardisation of output, and what was happening in the cabinet making side of the industry was equally true of the chairmakers. One High Wycombe manufacturer made 8,000 chairs for the Great Exhibition and transported his production to London, Liverpool, Manchester, Australia, Constantinople and New Zealand. In the mid-1870's Moody and Sankey's evangelistic campaign called for 19,200 chairs all made in High Wycombe.

(i) (ii) (iii)

As has been earlier stated there is scant evidence of any workers organisations prior to 1800 but in the elaborate Books of Prices of the period in the Preface and Agreement to the 3rd Ed. there is the implication of earlier disputes and disagreements resulting at an earlier date in some form of industrial action by either side "The Frequent Disputes which have recently occurred in the Metropolis, between various Manufacturers and their Journeymen, in consequence of

- (i) Post Office London Directory 1881
- (ii) J.J. Sheaham; History and Topography of Bucks 182 p.920
- (iii) R.H. Coe; Story of High Wycombe Furniture (Brochure 1951)

disagreement of opinion, respecting the value of workmanship contained in the various articles they severally manufacture are too generally known; and the inconvenience resulting from the want of Rules for decision, have been too severely experienced, to require either particular enumeration of general comment, in justification of the motive that induced the publication of the following pages, which have for their object, the prevention of such disputes in future: as, in many instances, the contentious alluded to have been productive of the most disagreeable and injurious effects to individuals of both parties".

(i)

This model and far-sighted move is made the more effective by the setting up of a joint committee of arbitration composed of equal numbers of Manufacturers and Journeymen to resolve disputes "and that their determination in every such case be considered by each party as final", and a similarly composed committee to look at and price new models of furniture since they "have taken into consideration the continual variety which Fancy and Fashion are ever introducing into the various Articles of Manufacture.....and from the impossibility of foreseeing the alterations which future fancy may suggest".

Most of the early records of the local workmen's societies in the Furniture Industry have gone. However, from local newspapers, threads can be traced of the efforts of the early pioneers of the union movement in the industry and of these High Wycombe is the best documented example.

(i) Chair and Cabinetmaking Book of Prices, London 1811 P-

In the High Wycombe area the local paper The Bucks Free Press records "A big meeting of chairmakers to consider the conduct of Mr Glenister - a large manufacturer". We are not informed as to the cause of this meeting. However, the chairmakers in the town formed "The Chairmakers Protection Society" in December 1855 with Robert White as President, William Busby as Vice President and Owen Mead as Secretary. The splendid Certificate of Membership designed by Owen Mead shows two chairmakers with the tools of their trade and the Latin motto "Pro Jure Laboris Certamus", "We stand for the right to work". It was, as in the London situation, a society concerned with the mutual improvement of its members and one of its activities was a Mechanics Loan Society from which a member could borrow money to buy tools or any other agreed purchase. (i)

The first years of the society record only meetings and lectures of an 'improving' nature. However, in February of 1857 a manufacturer Mr Smith "proposed a reduction in the price for framing odd chairs". Smith's men objected to the reduction and went on strike, and it is appropriate that it is noted that at this time, in High Wycombe, as in other towns there was a custom and practice price for all grades of work, whether formalised in 'the book' as in London and Edinburgh, or as would appear in High Wycombe as a matter of local practice.

The Society now numbering some two hundred members decided to support the seven men on strike. To raise the necessary 2/4d. per man per day required a levy of 3d. per member. However, this proved to be far from popular with the membership and the end result of this first confrontation was a return to work of the strikers on the basis of a compromise and the gradual disintegration of the Society.

(i) B.F.P. Feb.1854

It was not, however, dead and in 1861 the Society decided to combat the evils of unemployment and provide "the keen worker with opportunities for taking more shares in an enterprise in which he could be man and master". As a result of a series of meeting there was formed in 1861 a workman's co-operative. The High Wycombe Chair Manufacturing Co.Ltd. It was formed with a capital of £5,000 divided into £1 shares, each share to be paid up by instalments of not less than three pence weekly and "every shareholder to be a member of the Chairmakers Protection Society". Eventually after a series of further meetings the company was formed as "the Wycombe Co-operative Chair Manufacturing Company". The aims of the company were stated to be "the combination of labour and capital, employer and employed, of master and servant, in the recently established Co-operative Societies designed to supersede the system of strikes ruinous alike to both parties, and to elevate the working man to a higher standard and to a more respectable position in society". The co-operative, however, was never firmly established probably because of the difficulties in raising the capital on the shares and within a period of two years it had faded from notice and with it the Chairmakers Protection Society. (1)

The chairmakers of High Wycombe were not, however, completely happy with their situation and are reported as complaining a few years later that their rates of pay were so low that in order to earn a living wage "we have to start at six in the morning and work till eight at night and cannot get our wage till six of a Saturday evening". They also protested most bitterly that the "Truck" system was still in operation so that their nominal wages were rarely realised. (see footnote)

(1) Mayes History of Chairmaking H.W. p.50 o.p. c.i.t.  
Footnote Many of the early employers in High Wycombe were shop and pub owners and payment by credit note the 'TRUCK', exchangeable for beer or food from their premises, 'Tommy Shops' was rife. It was made illegal by law in 1831 and extended in its provision in a further act of 1887. This latter act having the effect of stamping it out in High Wycombe.

In 1872 a new chairmakers Trade Union was formed and this proved to be both popular in the Town and in the surrounding district. The earliest statement of the Union stressed that they were organised to help the manufacturers as well as the workers by endeavouring to secure uniform rates of pay throughout the trade, making it impossible for the unscrupulous manufacturer to recruit cheap labour and so undersell those who paid fair rates. It was also their intention to take action against the "truck" system", and to discourage chairmakers from keeping beer and "Tommy shops".

At first the meetings were joint ones between the Union and the Manufacturers but the Manufacturers refused to consider a new printed list of prices. They (the Manufacturers - now 31) had met privately and sent the Union a letter "That this meeting respectfully decline the printed list of prices as submitted, but that the question of prices is under consideration by the employers".

This impass might have remained in being for some time; however, a dispute arose in which members of the Union were "locked out". The Union replied by removing labour from another factory and the employers "locked out" all union men, putting four hundred chairmakers on the streets.

The Union was young and impoverished and wished for an early return to work. Indeed, their deputation to the Manufacturers was most conciliatory. "It is hereby declared by the Committee of the Chairmakers' trade Union that they have combined together solely for the purpose of self-defence, and to secure certain prices for their

work at the present crisis, and not for the purpose of aggression or with any ulterior object, or to obtain increased prices in the future except under similar exceptional circumstances".

The dispute lasted from July 1871 until early September of the same year and ended with a gradual drift back to work on a compromise solution. It did, however, prove to be too much for the young union and it, and its predecessors, had done, faded away. Trade Unionism in the Furniture Industry in High Wycombe as in many other centres was not to become viable until the arrival of the Alliance Cabinetmaker Society with its central organisation and dynamic leadership.

## 1865 - 1901 The Alliance Cabinetmakers Society

In the 19th Century, the trade of furniture making made slow progress towards unionism compared to other industries of a comparable size of workforce and output. The Amalgamated Society of Engineers formed in 1851 with 5,000 members grew to 54,000 by 1888 similarly the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners grew from 8,000 members in 1850 to 54,000 by 1888 and the Friendly Society of Operative Stonemasons which had 5,000 members in 1850 had 16,000 members in 1878. (i)

The sectionalised, regionalised nature of the trade coupled with a mobile workforce, low capital investment requirements and a highly seasonal trade, all combined to make efforts to build other than local societies, a near impossible task. Indeed, such were the problems of organisation that despite the existence of one of the most vital, politicised and effective trade unions of the early 20th Century, the majority of workers in the furniture industry were not incorporated into a union until the second world war.

By the mid-19th Century the conditions within the furniture trade in the larger centres of population in the United Kingdom such as Glasgow, Manchester, Belfast and Liverpool mirrored that of London both in its products and its organisation. This was effectively a three-tier structure:-

Division 1 - The West End bespoke trade. Small in numbers and highly respected, but with no involvement in any other aspects of the trade.

(i) British Trade Unions; Clegg Fox and Thompson p.2/3 Oxford 1964

Division 2 - The high class, ready made trade. Essentially a West End grouping around the West End Cabinetmakers Society, which regulated entry and employment within the best shops.

Division 3 - The mass of tradesmen, operating independently or in small shops, dependent upon sub-contracting work, but capable of supplying any and all markets.

It was against this background that the Alliance Cabinetmakers Society was formed in 1865. (i)

The mid-1860's were years of relative prosperity and good trade for a variety of industries, encouraging in its turn the workers in these industries affected to press for an increase in their wages. 'The upheaving of labour is almost universal throughout the Kingdom. Hardly a trade exists but what is putting up its claim to participate in the large profits now, and for some time past (being made) by the capitalists from the healthy state of trade' reported the Beehive. (ii)

The Furniture workers organisations in London of this time were the West End Society's of the Cabinetmakers and Carvers who together numbered some 300 members and the East London Cabinetmakers Society with less than 50 members, colloquially known amongst the employers as 'the 40 thieves'. None of these societies responded to the opportunity of this time by promoting a wage movement for either their own members or the mass of workers in the capital city, and so as a London Cabinetmaker later recalled 'The Alliance began with a view to organising the trade in the East End, which had undoubtedly been neglected by the more prosperous body of men in the West End who

(i) Alliance Cabinetmakers Records 1865-1875  
Life of Lewis Lechie (Upholsterers Societies) in 19th Century

(ii) BEEHIVE July 14 1866

claimed the exclusive right to work in the West End shops as also did the Manchester Union (Friendly Society of Cabinetmakers) in the best shops in the Provinces'. (i) (ii)

The cabinetmaker who wrote the article was slightly mistaken in his view, insofar as the first steps in the promotion of the Alliance were not principally to organise the East End but rather to seek a wage increase for the majority of workers who were, of course, concentrated in the Eastern and Northern parts of the city.

The Beehive reported, 'On October 11, 1865, a meeting was held in the Albion Hall in St. Lukes, Chelsea (just off the Kings Road), to organise a wage movement amongst the city's non-society cabinetmakers'. 'The meeting was crowded to excess with workmen exclusively from the principal shops in the Eastern and Northern districts of the Metropolis'.

'The men decided to seek an advance of ten per cent both by day and by piece' (some workers being on fixed day wages whilst others were paid by the piece produced) 'and elected delegates from each shop to direct the movements'.

A movement fund was set up and contributions collected and on October 18, forty-two shop delegates representing some 600 men met to pay their collection. It was established that the majority of employers were willing to give the advance, provided it was adopted by the whole trade and so when an even larger group of 63 shop representatives met on the following week, they formed themselves into

(i) Cabinetmaker & Art Furnisher; Nov 1, 1881

(ii) A chat about trade societies; Cabinetmaker & Art Furnisher

May 1, 1890

'The Committee acting on behalf of the Journeymen Cabinetmakers'.

The first task that the committee undertook was to produce and circularise amongst the employers, a handbill, requesting them to meet with the committee and discuss the workers' demands. It stated 'the prosperous state of trade warrants the assumption that the capital of the country can afford to pay a higher price for labour'. (i)

On November 4th, 60 employers, including John Maple, met with the committee and agreed in principle to the ten per cent wage increase, but contingent upon its acceptance by the other employers in the district who were not represented at the meeting, and who numbered some 120.

The tone of the meeting was not, however, negative since, as one employer conceded, 'when in these districts the cabinetmakers saw the builders, joiners and iron workers, and all other trades have got a considerable advance, they naturally said to themselves - who were they, that they should be excluded from the operation of the seemingly general system, and, therefore, kept in a position which caused them to be looked down upon by those other trades. They considered themselves in every respect equal to them in intelligence and respectability'.

A sidelight on the evolutionary nature of the trade was cast by one other employer's comment, when he suggested 'that the higher wages in the East End might encourage cabinetmakers to give up business on their own account and come into a comfortable shop, and thus quit being of use only to upholsterers (that is, having their work covered up!)

(i) Beehive October 28, 1865

Though the general tone of the reaction was of acceptance, the employers were less than happy at the prospect of having to deal in the future with any organisation of workmen and the formal notices of change of rates bore the message 'The application for an advance was made by the men generally, and not by any society whatever, and the employers do not recognise such societies at all'.

This move did not, however, intimidate the men of the trade and a meeting of all journeymen was called on November 22, 1865, in the Hall of Science on City Road, London. Attended by over 1,000 furniture workers it resolved by acclamation that 'the only way of obtaining and maintaining the ten per cent advance is by the formation of an association'.

The new Society was to be called the Alliance Cabinetmakers Association 'formed with the avowed purpose to obtain the advance of ten per cent throughout the whole trade' and 'to support those members whose situations might be sacrificed in maintaining the price of work'. 'The allowance to such men to be 15/- per week'. (1)

It was reported that fifty employers had formally agreed the increase but many others were showing a marked reluctance to meet the demand. The Chairman (unnamed) stated that 'every measure should first be tried before extreme steps are taken, but if necessary, we must not flinch from taking these steps'. The meeting ended with over 800 furniture workers agreeing to join the new Association.

(1) Beehive 25 November, 1865

The new Alliance met formally for the first time on 29th November, 1865. This was only two days before a deadline that they had set for the payment of the wage advance and so a small committee was set up, empowered to withdraw as many men as was necessary from the shops that refused. In the event such drastic action was not called for by such a young and inexperienced union, and by the end of December the increase had been won for all the members.

Membership of the Alliance cost 3d. per week in these early formative years, and for the first two years of its existence confined itself to being a dispute pay only society, since it was reported 'they have confined themselves for the present, to the purpose of creating a fund for the protection of trade' and 'the committee are very anxious that the whole of the non-society men in the trade should join, in order to enhance the wages and social position of their class'.

There is no mention of qualification for entry and by taking this position the new Society was showing that they were not, either in conflict with, or aping, the exclusive attitude and ideals of the older more conservative societies such as the West End Cabinetmakers or the Friendly Society of Cabinetmakers. This evangelical approach was mirrored in their resolve not to hold their meetings in public houses, as was the common practice of the times but rather in the Alliance Hall in Old Street Road, East London.

The buoyancy and optimism of the new society was swiftly deflated, however, with the return of a trade depression in 1866. This threw into

relief the inherant weakness of their organisation, insofar as unlike the West End Societies, its members were unable to exert enough pressure to force an overall acceptance of an agreed price for a specific type or piece of work within their sector of the trade. The only course of action open to them was to imitate the approach used by the East London Society, the 40 thieves.

This system worked on the basis of each individual shop drawing up its own price list and attempting to enforce these prices as standard within that shop. This system could be very effective but it had, however, the inherant weakness that it depended upon the condition of trade, in its turn dependent upon the general level of prosperity in the country, and in the final analysis dependent upon the reasonableness or rapacity of the employer.

This shop bargaining approach of the East End '40 thieves' is graphically described 'Provided a new hand does not underwork another by occupying a job at a lower price than that already paid in the shop to others, even if that price be a bad one, he does not infringe upon the society rules. But of what practical utility is such a system? It does not even keep up the prices to a fixed standard in more than one factory: for supposing that one employer gives twenty shillings a foot for a sideboard of a certain pattern, another may, if he thinks proper, fix his price at 18/- per foot for the labour upon the same description of article, and yet the Society has not got a positive right of interference'. (i)

(i) Cabinetmaker & Art Furnisher Nov.1st, 1881

These problems of organisation and enforcement were effectively beyond the capacity of a broad general society in a period of depression and within two years of its formation the Alliance had adopted a more craft society profile, more capable of sustaining a membership in period of recession as well as prosperity.

By 1868 the Alliance had only 159 members but they were organised into two branches, No.1 Central London, meeting in Finsbury, and No.2 West End, meeting in Fitzroy Square. The Society now charged a joining fee of 4/- and contributions of 7½d. per week but it offered to its membership a comprehensive range of benefits:-

Strike Pay	18/- per week
Unemployment Pay	12/- per week plus 1/- per child
Sick Pay	10/- per week (for an extra contribution of 3d. per week)
Emigration Gift	30/-
Tool Insurance	£7
Death Benefit	£3 - widow £2 widower

In terms of benefits and contributions the Alliance was now much more in line with the exclusive craft societies of the trade but whereas they (the craft societies) adopted rigid qualifications for entry, the Alliance did not require any evidence of apprenticeship as a pre-requisite of membership. Members had only to be employed in the trade, and not to employ any boy other than their own sons.

This inclusive rather than exclusive approach has been and was the undoubtedly reason for the Association's growth over the years to come,

and coupled with careful husbanding management ensured that from a faltering beginning the Alliance would grow from strength to strength.

The evangelical aspect of unionism was not forgotten, however, within the new format of the Union and in 1872 it started to form libraries of books in each of its branches. By the following year these amounted to over 500 volumes of a suitably improving nature, obtained by purchase and by gift. The General Secretary of the Alliance, J.R.Smith, reported 'Your committee believing that the more the members are educated, the more they will see the advantages and benefits of this association'. The books could be borrowed free for a period of up to 4 weeks and 'members are particularly requested to keep the books as clean as possible'. (See Appendix for list of books).

Still a very small group of craftsmen, the Alliance took the major step forward in 1872, which was both the foundation and catalyst for growth which was to put the society at the very centre of Furniture Trades Unionism, with its Amalgamation with the East London Cabinet-makers Society (the forty thieves). As J.R.Smith, General Secretary, reported 'this is the most successful step that has ever been taken by the members, not only to benefit our own individual interests but to promote the prosperity of the whole Cabinet Trade'. (i)

This new found strength prompted the Alliance to promote a general trade movement in the London area for the improvement of wages in 1872 when trade again improved. The circulars were distributed in every furniture making establishment in London resulting in a meeting of

(i) A.C.M.A. Report July 1st, 1872

over 2,000 cabinetmakers 'To rescue the Trade from its present degraded condition'. (i)

The meeting agreed that 'the time has now arrived for asking our employers for an increase of wages and a reduction in the working laws' and to this end a delegate committee of Alliance and non-society men was formed 'to direct the movement for a ten per cent increase in wages; the question of hours being left for each shop to pursue separately. The levy on each workman was 2d. per week, to be held separately from normal Alliance funds, and the committee was empowered to withdraw workmen from the shops as necessary to secure the increase. (ii)

The movement was most successful and by August 24th some 91 employers had complied with the men's demand, though there were others who remained unmoved.

One employer told the committee that he intended 'to remove to the West End and pay West End prices' whilst another, a parquet floor manufacturer refused to accept the increase, telling the committee 'that he could hire boys to do the work'. (iii)

By November 1872, almost all the Alliance members had won their ten per cent increase and their delegates on the wage movement committee wished to end the 2d. per week levy and bring the movement to a close. The non-society men on the committee bitterly opposed this, but as the Alliance men claimed 'As by the united efforts of society and non-society men the ten per cent cause has been almost entirely won, there is no longer any need for the continuance of the existing

- (i) Beehive July 20th, 1872
- (ii) Beehive July 27th, August 3rd, 1872
- (iii) Beehive September 7th, 1872

mixed delegate system, and those who are outside and wish to continue to have protection, have nothing to do but to come into the society'.(i)

The non-society delegates responded to this proposal by stating that the society would not take them in since the 300 men involved 'had an apprentice or two'. This, a reflection upon the working conditions and system of the time, being a reference to the Alliance rule which stated 'under no circumstances will the rules of this Association permit a member to employ a lad or have anyone working for him (unless he be his own son), as by employing a lad, he becomes as employer, and a sub-contractor, and is no longer a Journeyman receiving wages for his own personal labour'. (ii)

Though the non-society men pressed for a continuation of the wage movement, it was wound up on November 30th, and though this has an appearance of high-handed action by the Alliance executive, it rather reflects the realism of the young society. (iii)

The Alliance Association had set themselves a series of objectives which were effectively attained. They had organised a mass wage movement which was overwhelmingly successful, they had sustained this effort over a period of seven months without the movement disintegrating, they had recruited a substantial number of new members, and shown themselves to the Furniture Industry as a young but organised and virile Association.

This positive identity paid dividends almost straight away and the Fancy Cabinetmakers of London, who, up to this time, had been but

(i) The Furniture Gazette, The Cabinetmakers wage Movement Nov. 2nd, 1872

(ii) ACMA Minute Book May 11th, 1872

(iii) Furniture Gazette November 23rd, 1872

a loose amalgam of men in this sector of the trade, and had considered forming themselves into a more organised group decided instead 'that the interests of all the decorative furniture trades are identical' and formed Branch No.3 of the Alliance with 91 members. (i)

This decision by this group was of particular significance, not only in terms of an increase in the numerical strength of the society, but also by virtue of the fact that these highly skilled craftsmen, chose to join the generalist Alliance rather than the more conservative West London Society. J.R.Smith, General Secretary, recognising the significance of this group notes 'there is every prospect of it (the Fancy Cabinetmakers Branch) becoming a large and powerful branch, which we trust will do a large amount of good in that branch of the trade, and at the same time form a strong support to the Association'. (ii)

Such hopes were soon realised and within weeks the London Society of Continental Cabinetmakers with some 80 members joined the Alliance to form Branch No.4 and with the founding of Branches in Hastings, Reading and Bath, the Alliance moved from its position as a London based Society to become a more nationally representative society.

The trade conditions in the early 1870's continued to be prosperous and taking advantage of this, branches were formed over the country in the next few years at an almost bewildering speed, with eight branches in 1873, twenty in 1874, twenty-eight in 1875 and forty in 1876. With this growth of membership amongst the unorganised workers,

- (i) Beehive Oct.26th, Nov.2nd, 1872
- (ii) ACMA Report 6th Jan. 1873

the Alliance was also able to attract into the fold a number of old local societies. The Manchester Amalgamated Society of Cabinet and Chairmakers was followed by the East London United Society of Chairmakers and Carvers, the Cutlery Cabinetmakers Society of Sheffield, the Manchester and District United Cabinet and Chairmakers Society and the Nottingham Local Cabinet and Chairmakers Society. Within a few short years this small London based society had grown from two hundred members to nearly 2,000 and had become both a national union and the largest single union representing the workers in the Furniture trade.(i)

The Alliance was not only expansionist in outlook but also saw movement itself as a part of the Trade Union/as a whole. As early as 1867 they had joined the International Working Mens Association, and with increased financial strength were making donations to other groups of workers in the throes of the struggle for recognition. J.R.Smith reports 'The Association hasvoted the following sums to other societies - £35 to the Agricultural Labourers, which with voluntary subscriptions of £33.13s.1d. makes a total of £68.13s.1d. (and never did a cause demand our sympathy more), £20 to the Elastic Web Weavers Association, Leicester, and £10 to the Gold Beaters Society'. This may, however, be an indication of the inclinations of the executive of the union rather than the membership since there is no record of general membership voting on these sums of money. Such a view is, however, lent little credance by the large sum raised by the membership for the Agricultural Labourers which suggests that this wider view of the working class struggle was accepted by the membership as a whole. However, in 1874, the Alliance and five of its members found themselves at

(i) Annual Reports ACM 1873/4/5

the very centre of the struggle of the Trades Union movement in the country for legality. (i) (ii)

The action centred over the legal right to picket. This right had been placed in jeopardy since 1867 with the case of Regina Versus Druitt, which outlawed any picketing 'calculated to have a deterring effect on the minds of ordinary persons by exposing them to having their motions watched, and to encounter blacklooks'. The Gladstone Criminal Law amendment Act four years later enshrined this principle as the law of the land and the Alliance, in common with other trades unions had been active in agitating for the repeal of this Act, participating in numerous demonstrations and sending regular deputations to lobby Members of Parliament. (iii) (iv)

The case that proved to be the turning point for the workers right to picket arose in 1874 at the firm of Jackson and Graham in Oxford Street, London. In this furniture making company the men 'had waited on the firm in reference to some more definite understanding about the payment for overtime. The men had also complained to the firm that they were compelled to lose so much time waiting for the machinery (the workers were on piece work) in a machine assisted hand production situation and if the machinists had not got the next work 'roughed out' or 'converted', then the men had to wait until they had done so, but without receiving any payment for this waiting time. The firm would have needed to employ more machines and machinists, or produced work for a stock holding position, after machining to avoid this).

(i)(ii) Beehive 14 Sept. 1867 and ACMA Annual Report 1873

(iii)(iv) Taylor, the 5th Estate, p.189-90 and ACMA Report 6th July

(v) ACMA Report 4th Jan, 1875

1874

On Friday, 13th November, 1874, as the Alliance Journal reports 'the men met with the foreman, expecting an answer to the overtime question, but were told that they were all discharged at one o'clock on the following day, but would be re-employed on the following Monday, under a new system of "lumpwork", (this being a piece work system with no provision for waiting time or for overtime). The men informed the E.C. of the Alliance who sent a deputation to the Management of Jackson & Graham on the Monday morning, but failed to persuade the firm to change its policy. The Union then withdrew the men from the premises and they remained out on strike until February of the next year.

A series of letters was exchanged between the Alliance and the firms which culminated in following threatening response from Jackson & Graham on the 10th February, 1875:-

".....on consideration I think it would be a waste of time for me to confer with a deputation from your Society. We have resolved to put an end to that system of organised idleness (I should be justified in using a much stronger term), which has, I believe, been instigated and supported by your Society, ever since we opened our manufacturing in Ogle Street. We have never sought to reduce wages, but on the contrary, have always been amongst the first to advance them, and I think your Society will have reason to regret the hostile course it has adopted and continues to pursue towards our firm". (i)

The threat was made good when some few days later, five members of the Alliance were arrested on the charge that they 'did conspire to

(i) Letter Jackson & Graham to Alliance Cabinetmakers Association 10th Feb, 1875

molest or obstruct the prosecutors, by watching or besetting their place of business and that they did this in order to coerce them to alter their mode of carrying on their business'.

The Times reported the case as 'At the Old Court of the Central Criminal Court on 5th May 1875, before the judge, Baron Cleasby (who normally sat in the court of Exchequer), Messrs Ham, Hibbert, Mathews, Read and Weiler, were charged with conspiring together to molest workmen in the employment of William Edgar Graham and others, with attempting to coerce the employers to cease to employ their workmen and to molest workmen with a view to induce them to leave their employment'.(i)

'The prosecution opened the trial by explaining that Jackson and Graham were a firm of cabinetmakers and upholsterers of Oxford Street, London, employing some 100 hands. Until November 1874 they had paid their workmen by the day but after 13th November they had introduced piece work'. 'This method of payment gave great offence to the association (the Alliance) of which all the defendants were members and Messrs Ham and Read were on the executive committee'. 'This decision resulted in a withdrawal of labour by the Alliance and a deputation called upon Mr Jackson on the 16th November asking whether the prices paid might be arrived at by a shop committee'. 'This Mr Jackson refused and the Committee of the Alliance wrote to Jacksons to say they could not consent to their members working under such terms'. 'Mr Jackson went on to report that for the next 3 months the five defendants were observed walking up and down outside the factory between the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. and particularly during the dinner period'.

(i) Times, May 6th, 1875 p.11

The trial continued on the following day and the prosecution brought forward a variety of witnesses, all of whom were men working for Jackson and Graham under the 'piece work' system. They all confirmed Mr Jackson's contention that picketing was taking place and that the defendants did try to explain to them the reason for the dispute, and to try to persuade them to leave the firm. All referred to the picketing as 'a nuisance' but all agreed that the picketing was peaceful and that there was no physical interference with any workman. (i)

The prosecution summed up their case with: 'A workman is undoubtedly free to make terms with his master and the employer is equally free'. They went on to suggest to the jury that the question was whether the 'pernicious and abominable system of picketing was to be permitted, with all the vexation and annoyance which was implied in such a system!' 'This picketing was coercion of the vilest form, a quite sinister mode of tracking the artisan, which made him a marked man for life'. 'There could be no question that the men charged, had been guilty of molesting the defendant by watching and besetting'.

When the defence opened their case they reminded the jury that the Medical and Legal professions were both Trade Unions with written and unwritten rules including debarring any member from practising for the rest of his life if he were guilty of breaking the rules of the profession. Mr Wright, Q.C. defending Harry Ham touched the kernel of the matter stating "Watching and besetting could not surely be regarded as a crime". "No picketing could be criminal within the

(i) Times, May 7th, 1875 p.12

meaning of the Act (Criminal Law Amendment Act 1871), unless it was accompanied with or used in such a way as to actually amount to personal and physical molestation".

Baron Cleasby summed up the evidence stating "This Act has made it an offence to molest or obstruct any person with a view to coerce him to quit any employment he was engaged in". He went on to state that the Act laid down quite clearly that "Such molestation includes following a man about from place to place, and includes the watching or besetting of the workman's home or a master's business".

The five defendants were found guilty and in sentencing them Baron Cleasby stated 'I don't know what would become of society if any number of persons could be allowed to watch and beset the premises of people in business.....certainly nothing could be more injurious to a man's business than to have day by day, morning and night, his premises watched, and persons going there and going away, accosted and addressed.....and to some extent threats held out' and the defendants were sentenced to 30 days in prison. One of the defendants, as he was being removed "declared in a loud voice and excited manner that they were morally right though legally wrong".

The release after imprisonment of the five Alliance members from the Cold Baths Field Prison was 'the occasion of a remarkable demonstration of working class outrage' at these 'class made laws'. 'The prison authorities released the men several hours earlier than they announced' in order to avoid 'boisterous crowds of working people'



DEMONSTRATION OF THE LONDON TRADES UNIONS.

### The Trade Union Demonstration.

The five cabinet-makers, Weiler, Hibbert, Hain, Reed and Matthews whom Baron Gleasy sentenced some weeks ago to a month's imprisonment for "picketing" were made heroes on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of this month. On that day their sentence expired and many thousand working men gathered together to welcome them back to freedom. The moment they were outside the prison gates, crowds of their friends rushed to shake them by the hand and by-and-by a tremendous procession of trade societies was formed, amidst which flags waved and bands played. This proceeded to Hyde Park, where many "strong" speeches were made against the present combination laws and Messrs Jackson & Graham of Oxford Street - the firm that was instrumental in getting the men convicted. Previous to this, however, there was a dinner in the Cooperative Hall, Castle Street, at which Professor Bresley took the chair. Sir John Morley M.P., Mr. Macdonald M.P., Mr. Ashton Dilke (brother of Sir Charles Dilke) were present and made speeches. That the demonstration will have good effect is almost certain; it will doubtless lead to an alteration of the present uncertain laws of this country regarding employer and employee.

but despite this tactic over 400 trades union delegates met the men at the prison gates and escorted them to a celebration breakfast in their honour, sponsored by the Alliance.

Later in the day Professor E.S. Beesley presided over a dinner to honour the released men in the Co-operative Hall, which was attended by 'a large crowd including H. Crompton, F. Harrison, A. MacDonald, J. Chamberlain and G. Howel' and at which the five members were presented with 'a handsome purse of money of nearly £140'. The celebrations culminated in an open air meeting that night in Hyde Park 'in which over 100,000 working people, including many representatives from Alliance Branches in the provinces, demanded that in future, legislation should place the workman and the employer in equality before the law'. (i) (ii)

The case of the five cabinetmakers and the public sympathy engendered by their trial and commial, was very largely responsible for the changes which took place to modify this law, but the young Alliance society was faced with a heavy bill for the defence and support of the members and their families. The final sum amounted to nearly £800 but happily very many individuals and trade societies contributed to a Defence Fund (see Appendix for list of contributors) of some £550 and so enabled the Alliance to remain solvent and active as a Trades Union.

It was this very activity which was at the centre of the Union's growth. In a particularly modern and progressive step they produced a publicity brochure which was distributed throughout the trade,

- (i) Beehive 5th June, 1875
- (ii) ACMA Annual Report 31 Dec. 1875

encouraging the non-society men to join them. Describing it the Monthly Report notes 'Your committee are of the opinion that if the advantages and benefits to be derived by joining the Association were better known and understood, that there are many towns that would join our Association, and hope that the members will circulate the prospectus showing the benefits and progress of the Association as much as possible and trust the whole of the members will co-operate with your E.C. in prompting and extending the principles and interests of the Association'. (i)

The Alliance was a centralist society, in that the union dues were collected locally from members, payments on the prescribed scale then being paid by the Branch, and the surplus after the payment of Branch expenses, passed on to headquarters. In Branches where subscriptions did not cover the benefits being paid, the balance was sent out from headquarters and in this way strict and stringent financial control was exercised from the earliest years of the Society when it was at its most vulnerable.

The centralist approach was made more positive still in 1876 when as the economy took a down turn the Alliance were involved in strikes in Bolton, Oldham and Torquay in defence of wage rates which the employers wished to reduce. These actions cost the Alliance £1,064 in strike pay and reduced the net worth of the society by nearly half over the year. As a result of this financial setback the Alliance adopted a policy of centralised sanction for action to improve wages or conditions. The Branches might vote for a wage demand to be made

(i) ACMA Report 6th July, 1874

but the Society would only sanction this if in the opinion of the Executive Committee it was economically viable.

Whilst the first ten years of the Alliance was a period of good trade and general prosperity, this was followed by a long and painful decade of economic depression. The value of a strong centralist control was, however, shown during this time 'Several Branches have been desirous of asking their employers for an advance of wages, but in most cases your E.C. have recommended them to postpone their movements until trade improves'. (i)

Yet in the midst of their problems the Alliance was prepared to help other societies in greater difficulties than themselves 'Several other Trade Societies have been in difficulties, and have appealed to us for assistance, whilst many for the want of better organisation, have completely disappeared. Although trade has been so bad with us, we are pleased to state that we have been able to assist the following societies French Polishers, Nut and Bolt Makers, Razor Scale Pressers, Silk Throwsters, Miners and Stone Masons....to the amount of £83.17s.1d'.

Under the General Secretaryship of J.R.Smith the Union was disinclined to political opinion, and the depression years were noteworthy for their lack of political message to the membership. 'There can be no doubt that the cause of the great depression of trade in this and other countries at the present time, is owing to the unsettled state of affairs in the East of Europe, but it is not our place in this respect to give an opinion in reference to political matters, although our members have

(i) ACMA E.C.Report 31 Dec. 1877

to bear the burden of the same' and 'The great depression in our trade in this and other countries....is chiefly owing to the very unsettled state of affairs in the East, but it is not our place to give any expression on political matters'. (i)

For the Alliance under Smith the political activity of the 70's and 80's was a closed book and the political outlook of the Trades Union Congress of this period finds no echo in the records of this furniture workers society. The explanation for this neutrality, indeed refusal, to consider political matters, stems from the defensive position that the furniture workers had to adopt during the period. From 1877 to 1887 the membership of the union dropped in half to only 1,101 members, against the trend of growth of part of the Trade Union Movement (Carpenters and Joiners 10,000, 1870 - 18,000, 1880, Amalgamated Association of Operative Cotton Spinners 11,000, 1870 - 17,000, 1888).

This growth on the part of other Amalgamated Societies was not general and whilst membership of the T.U.C. was just short of one million in 1874, it had fallen to 379,000 in 1884 and only risen to 568,000 in 1888. 'Much of the explanation lies in the trade cycle, since unions tend to flourish in prosperity and wither in depression' notes Clegg Fox and Thompson and this was certainly true of the Young Alliance Society, indeed so severe were conditions at the depths of the depression for the Furniture Trade in 1886 that the society had to borrow £400 from the Birbeck Bank to meet its liabilities, and members were paying double contributions. Such was the volatile

(i) ACMA Report, 31 Dec, 1877

nature of the Furniture Industry in those hand production times that this debt was paid off within a six month and by 1890 the union had well over 4,000 members and was worth nearly £2,000.(see footnote)

The early leader of the Alliance, J.R.Smith retired in 1886 and was replaced unopposed by Harry Ham as General Secretary. This position of General Secretary also changed in financial terms in that it was made a full time appointment with a salary of £117 per annum; prior to 1877 the whole of the union organisation had been run on a voluntary basis, of expenses and loss of earnings only, for the E.C. and the General Secretary. The Union had adopted from the start a three year term of office for all officials, and elections on a national rather than regional basis. E.C. meetings were held on Saturdays and Sundays to enable members to get to London but economic and social necessity tended to result in the societies officers being London or Home Counties members rather than truly representative of the membership.

Whilst this generated a strong local autonomy within a centralist structure which was democratically acceptable, it did leave the question of recruitment in the hands of the local branch which was not always in a position to expose local members to the possible consequential victimisation as a result of their activities. To overcome this particular problem part time trade organisers were drafted into various areas from outside during the late 1880's and the names of Parnell, Walker, Adams and Robson are shown in the account under the heading of Trade organising wages and expenses.

Footnote Estimates of numbers employed in furniture making are confused for this period since they are included in all statistics with carpenters and joiners but it can be assumed that some 110,000 males and females were employed in the furniture trades of the 230,000 quoted for 1891 quoted in the Brit.Labour Stats 1841-1921

The position of Trade Organiser was regularised in 1891 and Tom Walker, London cabinetmaker, was appointed as the first Organiser of the Union at the salary of £117 per annum to aid recruitment and this appointment strengthened the society substantially and Amalgamations of a number of local societies followed in its trail. The Photographic Cabinetmakers, the Newcastle Polishers Local Society and Hebrew Cabinetmakers Society joined the Alliance in 1893 bringing in 423 members. This latter society did, however, result in the Union incurring some extra expense as the records show. Translation of Alliance rules into Hebrew £5.5s.0d. and printing 1,000 copies of rules in Hebrew cost £7.10d.0d!

Having a Trade Organiser within the Union could not, however, change the pattern of transient union membership which occurred within the Furniture Trade. Harry Ham wrote in 1888 'The Cabinet trade is not one of the great staple trades of the country, therefore, except in the large towns, our numbers must be comparatively small, but our average benefits will be found to be equal, if not in advance, of those of any other Society!' The Alliance had introduced a new graduated scale of Contributions and Benefits in 1880:- (i)

Entrance fee 4/-. One shilling when proposed, one shilling on election and remaining 2/- within six months.

<u>Standard Wages of the Town</u>	<u>Contribution</u>	<u>Cut of Work Support</u>	<u>Dispute Support</u>
A. 35/- and over	7d.	14/-	21/-
B. 30/- and under 35/-	6d.	12/-	18/-
C. 25/- and under 30/-	5d.	10/-	15/-
D. Under 25/-	4d.	8/-	12/-

(i) ACMA Annual Report 1888

Emigration £1.10s.0d. Tool Insurance £7 for an extra 1/- per £1 per annum. Death Benefit £5 to widow, £2 to widower. Six month membership before coming into benefit.

Yet, despite this latter clause, and the entrance fee there was a pattern of drifting in and out of membership becoming established within the trade that was to continue until the 1940's. In the 1890's this phenomena was at its worst relative to overall membership and in 1893 the Alliance, with 4,800 members, gained 2,303 'new' members but lost 2,390 who were deleted from membership by being in arrears of dues.

Such shifting sands of membership were, however, reinforced by a solid core of members who prided themselves on 'never being in arrears'; a fact which was always mentioned in any notice of retirement and further must be seen in the context of the crude industrial relations climate within which the industry operated. An indication of the difficulties whihh this produced was the dispute between members of the Alliance who were woodturners in London and their employers. The Alliance took the employers to court for deducting 4/- per week from the wages of the workers for the use of steam power (to drive the lathe) and won the case. In consequence of this decision, some of the employers sought to reduce wages by 4/- per week whilst others locked out their men for refusing to voluntarily return up to 4/- per week from their wages.

Despite these backwoods conditions a new recognition and respect for the positions of the unions and employers in the industry was emerging. Until the mid-1890's all agreements had been of a loosely

regional but effectively factory based nature. Each town did have a general convention with regards to wages, as is recognised in the contributions and benefits section of the Alliance rules, however, it was a convention and carried no more effective force than could be applied by the laws of supply and demand.

By 1896 with 'the most prosperous period known to any of our members' the Alliance was able to secure a London agreement with the re-formed London Cabinetmakers Federation. This agreement established day rates for cabinetmakers and shop fitters, for a  $52\frac{1}{2}$  hour week at a minimum rate of  $9\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour and fixed rates for overtime. The agreement was arrived at without dispute in the majority of the London factories but the 'Hebrew shops' required a four week withdrawal of labour before the conditions could be imposed. By fighting this battle under the leadership of Tom Walker 'our Hebrew members have been rescued from the grip of the sweater and placed under the same conditions enjoyed by their fellow members of British and other nationalities'. (i)

This new concept of Federation on the part of the employers was a phenomena with which the Alliance was faced in the 1890's. At first it appears to be a benign and useful arrangement but the darker side of this development was first brought home to the Furniture workers with the great Engineering Strike of 1897. The annual report records 'This year will always be memorable in the annals of Labour in consequence of the great struggle which took place in the Engineering trades between organised capitalism on the one side and organised labour on the other, wherein the Federated Employers backed by the wealth

(i) ACMA Annual Report 1896

accumulated as a result of the past labour of the workers, and aided by traitors to the cause of labour, were able to inflict a severe defeat on the organised workers in those trades, backed only by the funds they had been able to accumulate by years of self-denial from their barely subsistence wages, and the aid of others of their own class, in the same position'. The Alliance raised nearly £500 for the Engineers in this dispute by special subscription of the £116,000 of support from British and overseas unions. The employer's federation, whilst ostensibly rejecting a claim for an eight hour day, were 'determined to obtain the freedom to manage their own affairs which has proved so beneficial to the American manufacturer'. It was an attack on the union's rights to collective bargaining which was to find an echo in the assault upon the Furniture workers in Scotland in the next year. The Furniture workers recognised the challenge that this new employer militancy and Harry Horn ended his report for the year by calling for a fighting fund for organised labour to fight the organised Capitalists. This call found its answer in 1899 with the setting up in 1899 of the National Federation of Trades Unions (subsequently referred to as the General Federation of Trades Unions, G.F.T.U.). The Alliance was one of the first societies to join the Federation and after an entry fee of £16.18s.8d. they paid in £400 in the first year and came into benefit after twelve months membership. The Alliance membership of the G.F.T.U. enabling the union to claim support in the event of an official strike, at the rate of 5/- per member per week. (i) (ii) (iii)

- (i) ACMA Annual Report 1897
- (ii) Trades Union Congress Annual Report 1898
- (iii) Letter to Times Col.Dyer 5th Sept,1897

One other effect of the Engineering lock out upon the Furniture workers was to jolt the leadership from its non-political stance 'There is another lesson which the workers should learn from the action of the Government during this struggle, and that is not to let their organisation and combination end with Trade Unionism alone, but to use it effectively at all elections for Governing bodies, both local and Imperial, so that they shall as a body, have a powerful voice in directing the future relationships between Capital and Labour, and obtaining for every citizen in the country the right to labour so that they may live as human beings'. The immediate task, however, was to come to terms with the new employer federations and the Alliance was particularly effective in these negotiations.

Regional Agreements were signed in other centres as a resultant of trade movements and the newly developed federation of the employers, and whilst the West of England, Nottingham, Liverpool and the North Eastern employers co-operated in arriving at agreements, this was not the case in Manchester. The Manchester Furniture Makers Federated Association refused to recognise the union and the Alliance withdrew its members from their factories. The dispute lasted six months and cost £3,700 in strike pay before a settlement was reached. Though expensive the prosperity of the times allowed 'members in dispute to work in other towns and thus not be a drain on funds'. The hours of working were reduced to 53, day rates agreed for cabinetmakers, chairmakers and carvers, overtime rates, travelling allowances, and lodging allowances established, whilst for their part the Alliance members agreed 'not to work at night for another employer after leaving their ordinary employment, nor to make any job at home'. (i) (ii)

- (i) ACMA Annual Report 1897
- (ii) ACMA Annual Report 1897

Conditions of employment were now well established in England but the same could not be said of Scotland. The main furniture union north of the Border was the United Operative Cabinet and Chai'makers Society of Scotland, a generalists society with similar aims to the Alliance and with whom they signed a working agreement on transferability in 1875. This co-operation extended to a mutual action in Glasgow and on the Clyde in 1893 in defence of wage rates as a result of which talks were held on a proposal for amalgamation. The membership was in general agreement with this link up and in 1897 a formal vote of the membership was taken; however, though the voting figure cannot be found, it was unfortunately insufficient in terms of the number of members voting to satisfy the legal requirements for amalgamation. Whilst arrangements were being made for another vote to be taken in Scotland, an unexpected legal difficulty presented itself, in that it was found that it was illegal for a non-registered Trade Union (The Scottish Society) and a registered one (Alliance) to amalgamate. In consequence of this the Scottish Society had to go through the procedure of changing its rule book to allow it to be registered and then follow this by a vote of the membership for amalgamation.

This lengthy procedure was, however, overtaken by events in the Spring of the following year. The Scottish employers had now formed a National Federation (for Scotland) of Furniture Makers and on 30th March, 1898, notices were posted in all workshops stating 'all men starting work the next day must comply with the following conditions'. These were twelve demands in all which can be summarised as:-

An abandonment of any restraint or restriction on production (the 'shop limit' which was used to regulate earnings and protect the older

worker). The employer may adopt piecework or time work as he wishes. That the limit of overtime be raised from seven hours to ten hours per week. That the closed shop where operated be abandoned by union members and workers shall accept deductions from wages for any spoilage of work or breakage of glass. (i)

'The men were required to start straight away next morning under these conditions....but with keen Scottish foresight, be it ever said to their credit, they seemed to intuitively grasp the full meaning and import of the Employers demands, and there and then resolved to resist them with the strength borne of the knowledge that to be forced to accept such conditions would be to absolutely destroy all the work that our Association had been doing for years, in increasing wages, lessening hours, and improving conditions of employment, as well as the fact that the proposals, apart from the slavery to which it would reduce the men, was a subtle and insidious attack having for its object the destruction of Trade Unionism, by the substituting of Individual in place of Collective Bargaining'.

'The struggle last ten months, and proved to the hilt the existence of a spirit of solidarity which the employers never anticipated. Had they done so it is highly probable that the lock out would never have been entered into, as it ruined some of them, and much exclusive English trade was lost to the manufacturers and has never been regained'.

The catalyst for this dispute was the wage claim presented by the General Secretary of the Scottish Society, Alex Gossip, to the employers in the town of Beith. Aged 36, he was a militant Socialist, founder

(i) ACMA Annual Report 1898

member of the Independent Labour Party, friend and close associate of Keir Hardie, Tom Mann and Ben Tillet. He was also a founder of the Socialist Sunday School Movement and a formidable and spell-binding orator.

Of the dispute he recalled later that 'Very few of our people blacklegged and this was the more remarkable, as after the first few weeks no member knew how much, if any, dispute support would be forthcoming from week to week'. (1)

The dispute bankrupted the Scottish Associations dispute fund and it was forced to borrow £1,610, but the main burden of expense fell upon the Alliance who spent £5,097 in dispute support, lost £1,820 in income from their lock out members and paid out another £500 in expenses associated with the dispute, which the Scottish Society was unable to meet.

The Alliance levied their membership at 3d. per member per week through the whole of the dispute and the Scottish Society went even further 'members who secured jobs in the shipyards or across the Border, being levied at 2/6d. per week in addition to their ordinary contributions'. There was meeting after meeting to resolve the dispute, but the deadlock continued, until January 1899. The means by which the strike was ended remains a matter of some controversy. Clegg Fox and Thompson (History of British Trade Unions) quote Robertson, who states that a three day conference 'produced a compromise on piece work and overtime but the societies were compelled to give way on

(1) History of NAFTA Alex Gossip Pamphlet London 1930 p4

non-unionists and the limitation of output. At a time of prosperity 'a noticeable setback'. (i)

Alex Gossip writing some years later presents the events in a totally different light. He, (Gossip) issued a challenge to the employers leader, Mr John Reid, to a public debate on the questions in dispute. 'I spoke to such effect, that all the obnoxious points were swept away'. Indeed, if Robertson's account is correct, the concessions granted to the employers were valueless since a 'shop limit' (see footnote) is easily reimposed by the workforce over a period of time, and non-cooperation with men who refuse to joint the union is almost impossible to police in the day to day manufacturing situation. It was not therefore a defeat for the joint unions, they still retained collective bargaining, they still existed as a strong organisation, and they did obtain a working agreement with the employers. (ii)

Not a Pyrrhic victory but one which was won at a heavy cost as Harry Horn records, 'the suffering endured by the men and their families, the worry and anxiety of the union officials, the bad feeling

(i) CFT History Brit.Trades Unions p.160 N.Robertson  
Dir.Labour Rel. in Brit.Furn.Trade B.Litt thesis  
Oxford 1955

(ii) NAFTA A short hist. A Gossip Pamphlet 1930 P.S.

Footnote Shop limits. A traditional practice in furniture factories, subject as they are to severe seasonal fluctuations in demand, to limit the output of the workforce by means of a general agreement between all craftsmen as to a ceiling of output or earnings beyond which they shall not go in order to spread the work available over the lean periods of the year and to ensure continuity of employment.

engendered between employer and workman, the loss of trade by the employers that possibly will never be regained, all these costs can never be accurately gauged, and should make sensible reasonable men, pause before ever lightly entering on such a struggle again, indeed nothing would justify such unless some vital principle was at stake, and because in this case it was so, the Scottish lock out was faced and fought out to the bitter end'. (i)

In this, the first truly major confrontation with organised employers, the Alliance were less than happy at the level of antagonism which it engendered between employer and employed, and Harry Ham and Jim O'Grady, Trade Organiser (appointed on the death of Tom Walker in 1898) were at pains to avoid a similar reoccurrence, as the Annual Report makes clear. 'During the past twelve months, many advantages have been gained for our members. This fortunately has been accomplished at little cost, mainly through the business like way in which our Branches assisted by the advice of your E.C. and General officials, have conducted their movements'. (ii)

'In London we have been successful in obtaining a code of working rules that will bear comparison with any town or trade in the Kingdom. Whilst retaining all the advantages won in 1896 (minimum rate of 9½d. per hour and 52½ hour week), we have been able to increase the minimum wage by ½d. per hour and have the hours reduced by 2½ per week; but the most valuable part of the working rules, in our opinion is the elaborate machinery that provides against stoppages of work either by lock out or by dispute, until the matter is first submitted for consideration to a Board of Conciliation and Arbitration'.

- (i) ACMA Annual Report 1898
- (ii) ACMA Annual Report 1899

The national trend to Federation amongst employers had with the notable exception of Scotland, resulted in an immense strengthening of the position of the Alliance. Once adversaries, now for the time being, at least, they were co-partners within the industry. Indeed, the strength of the understanding of this new role is revealed in the same Annual Report.

'The Alliance has set up similar codes of working rules (to those in London) in Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Bury, and in Gloucester and achieved a 48 hour week in Manchester'.

'We (the E.C. and General officials) are of the opinion that the acceptance by the employers of a code of working rules is of far more importance than an increase of wages'. 'We commend this policy to our Branches, as we are sure, speaking in the light of experience, that such a course would not only be of advantage to the members concerned, but result in an enormous saving of funds now paid away in dispute support'.

This financial accounting approach to Trades Union organisation was never challenged in this period by the membership yet it presents an image far removed from the crusading organising spirit, popularly presumed to have prevailed in these times. The reality was that of local societies coming into the Alliance rich in numbers but with pitiful assets. Typically, the amalgamation of 1893 brought 462 new members but only £125 in assets. The lesson to the membership was particularly stressed by the unsanctioned dispute in Leeds in 1898 in which to gain another  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour for 58 members cost the Alliance over £1,500 in dispute support. 'It is becoming more clearly evident

than ever that such disputes once begun, the result, so far as the men winning, is extremely doubtful'.

The message of the times for the membership of the Alliance was that of consolidation. The theories relating growth of membership to militancy were incapable of being applied to the Furniture trade and a political and economic philosophy for the membership was yet to be developed. This was a union at an interregnum which would close with amalgamation with the Scottish Society and the panoramic vision of Alex Gossip at the helm.

Before that amalgamation took place the Taff Vale judgement burst upon the trade union scene and the furniture workers at least took this change in the legal situation of trades unions very seriously indeed. Harry Ham explained to his members, 'Any branch or general official acting within the scope of his authority, can involve their union in an action in law with the certainty, in the present state of the law, of a verdict for damages and costs being given against us'. (i)

The Alliance had from a very early period required E.C. sanction for any trade movement, but the inertia which became the norm at the turn of the century 'making the work of the E.C. much easier than otherwise would have been the case by abstaining from moving for improvements of local conditions' was unacceptable to some branches and unofficial action had been taken without E.C. sanction. These strikes were roundly and publicly castigated by Harry Ham. 'The movements at Hadley and Dublin ended in a fiasco' and he goes on

(i) ACMA Annual Report 1901

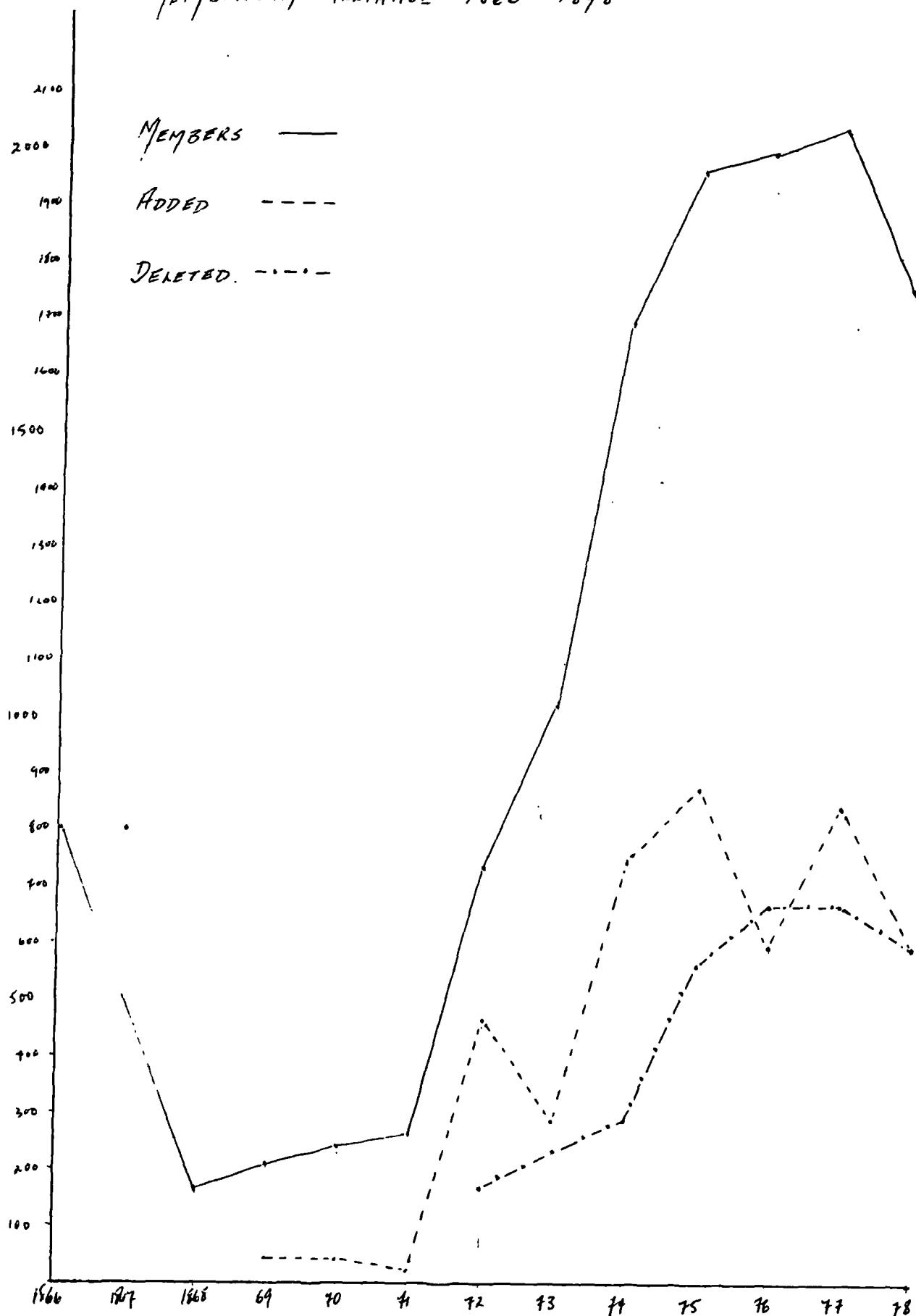
referring to 'a hopeless struggle', 'unacceptable', local misunderstandings', 'no clear line of action to be followed in the event of a refusal by the employers to concede the mens demand'. (i)

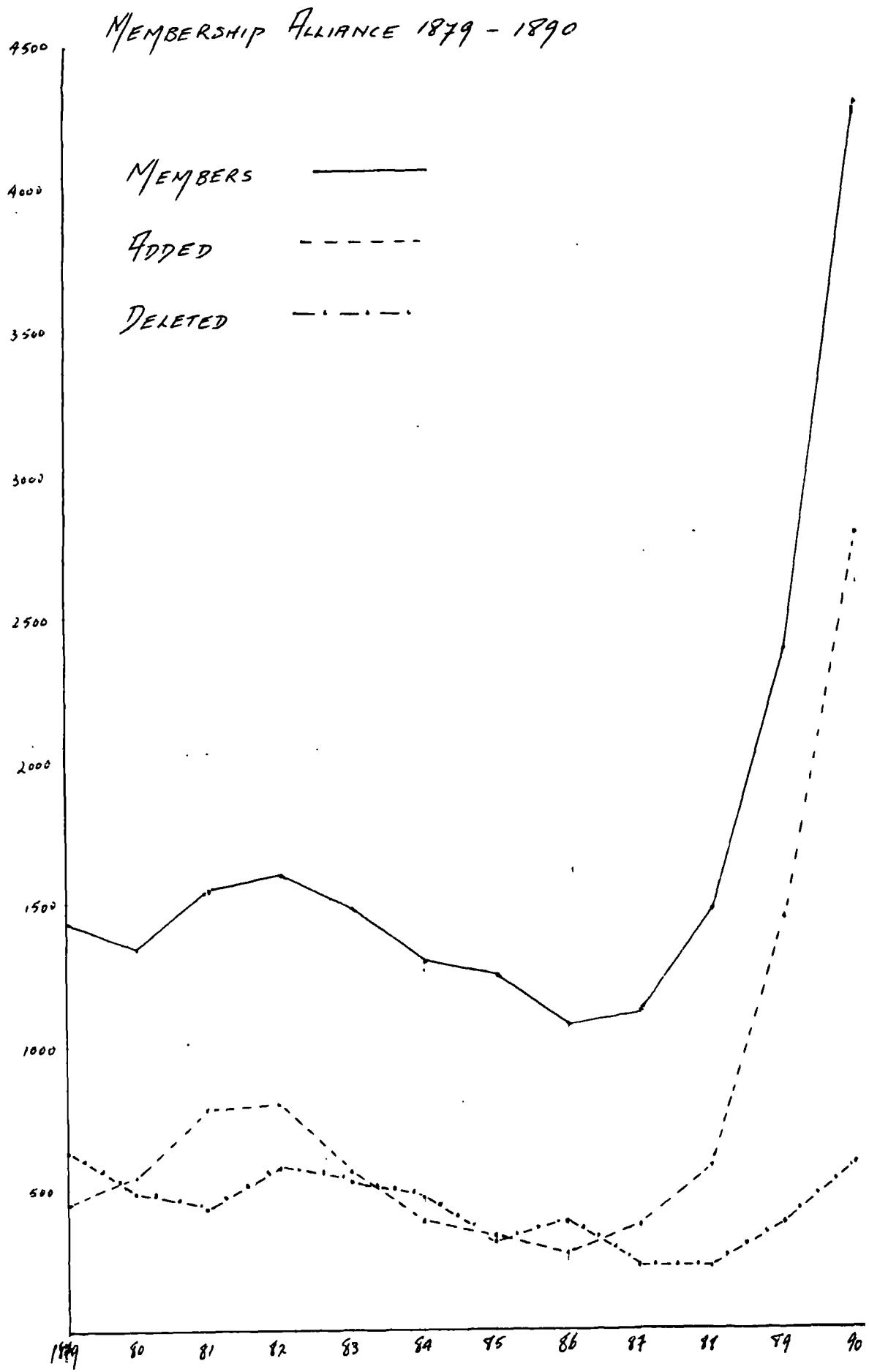
Yet this concern was justified within the role of management of an enterprise, in which Harry Ham projected the executive and general officials of the union, and in justification he made clear to the members the changing nature of the furniture trade. 'During the past years the employers organisations (local federations) have been quietly forming themselves into line, so that disputes in future will be on a more extended scale. Side by side with this we see the gradual absorption of the small by the large employer....the whole trend is towards the elimination of small undertakings. The unit of capital is thrust out of production unless it will federate with other units... the cash nexus becomes the only relationship between employer and employed....most of their (the large companies) energies are applied to the commercial aspect of the question; when this is nearly completed they will undoubtedly turn their ambitions to the big corporation of the men in the unions'.

The final event of this period was the amalgamation of the Alliance with the Scottish Society. After the earlier vote of 1897 the Scots had changed their rules, registered as a Trade Union and re-voted with the necessary two thirds majority for amalgamation. The Alliance had hoped that they might be able to persuade other furniture societies to join this new national group but with no success. 'The fact is, however, that some of the Unions in our trade do not, as yet, see the necessity of amalgamation' but 'two of the National Unions

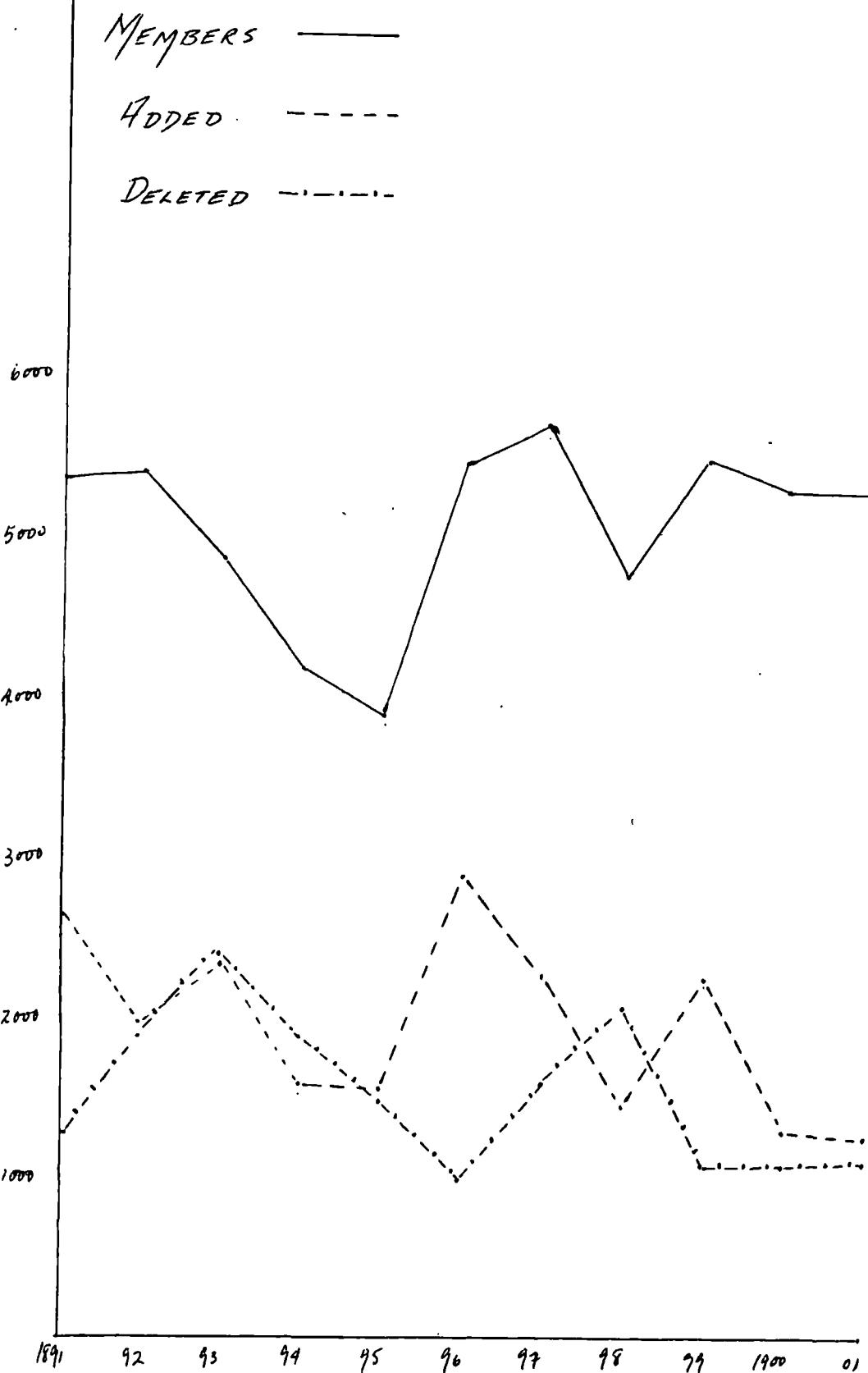
have become one, and give eminent promise of effecting greater things for its members than if they were still separate'. Harry Ham could hardly envisaged the impact that the National Amalgamated Furnishing Trades Association was to have, as a furniture trades union, as an influence of Trade Union organisation and politics, and upon the National political stage. A new dynamic society was born which was to have an influence and a role far in excess of its size and its power.

# MEMBERSHIP ALLIANCE 1866 - 1878

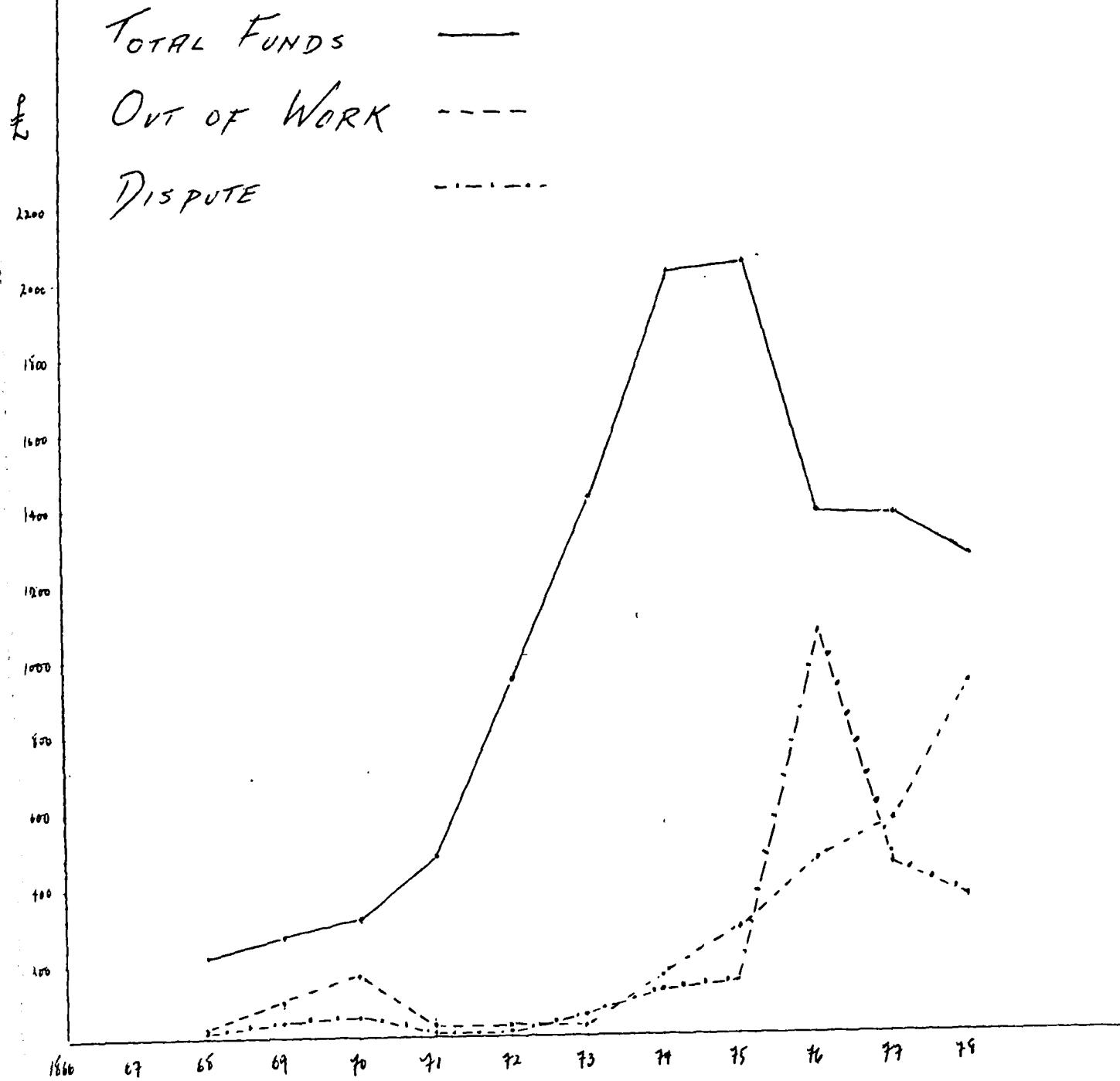




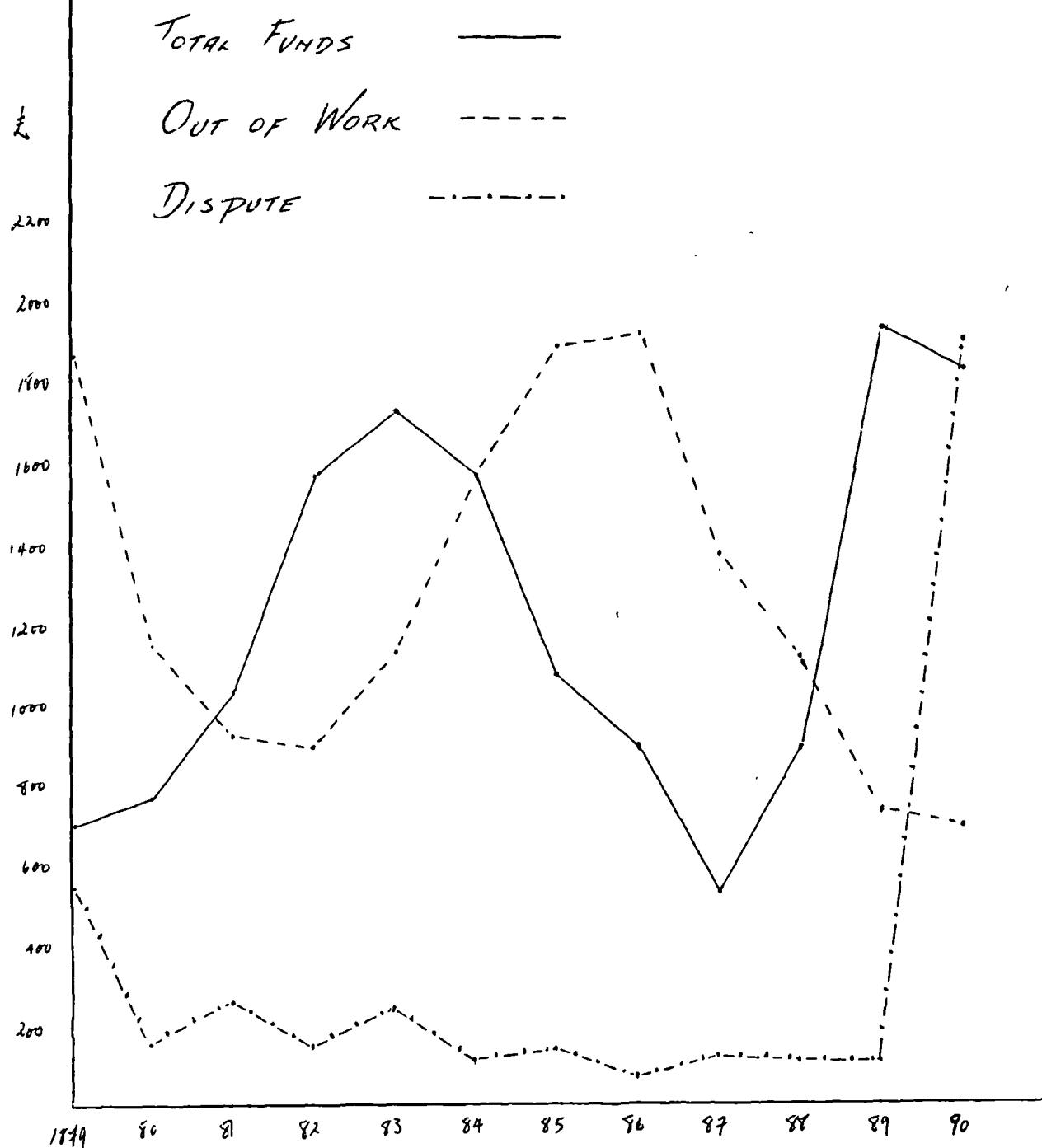
# MEMBERSHIP ALLIANCE 1891 - 1901



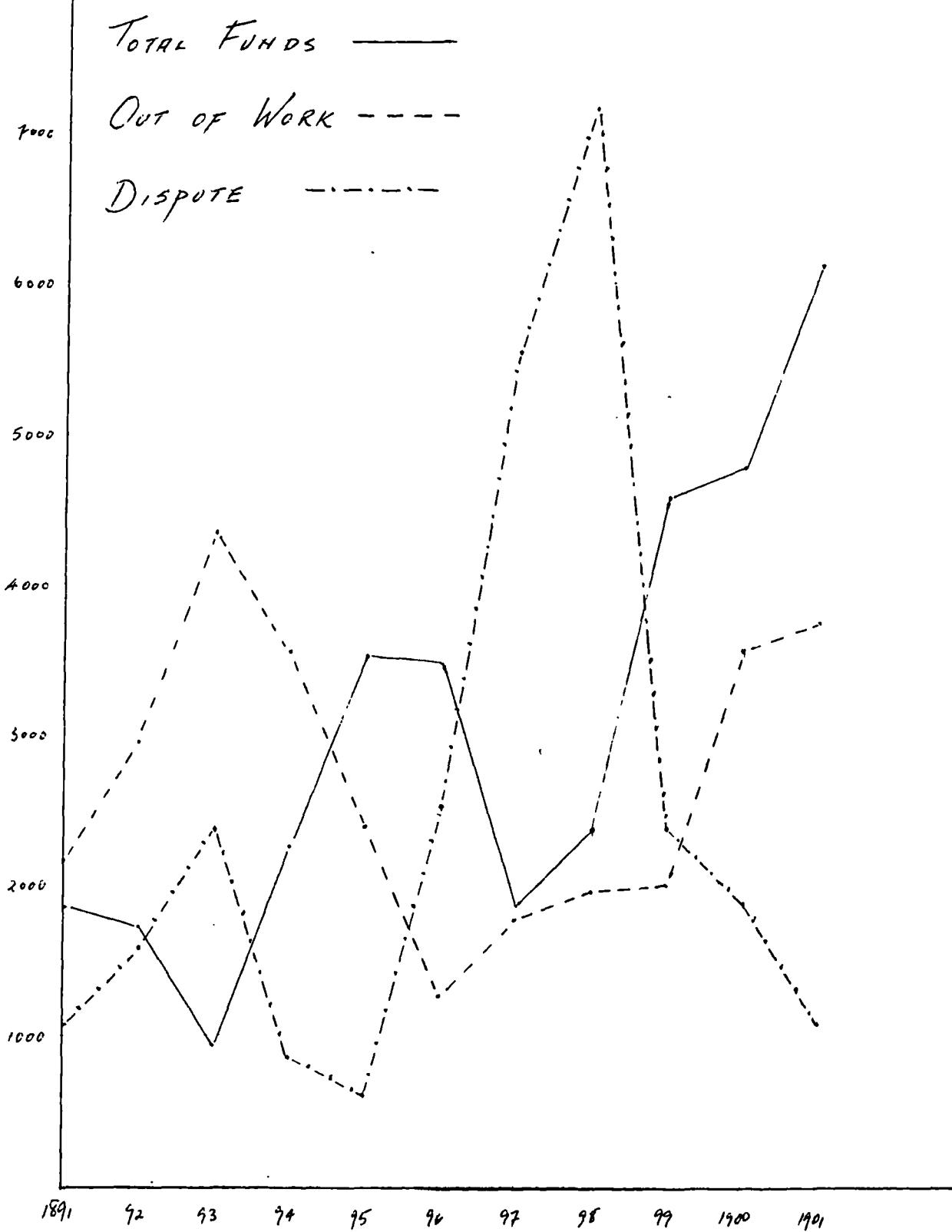
FINANCIAL RECORD ALLIANCE 1866 - 1878



# FINANCIAL RECORD ALLIANCE 1879 - 1890



FINANCIAL RECORD ALLIANCE 1891 - 1901



ALLIANCE 1866 - 1878

Out of WORK AND DISPUTE PAY  
PER MEMBER.

OLD  
PENCE

140

120

80

60

40

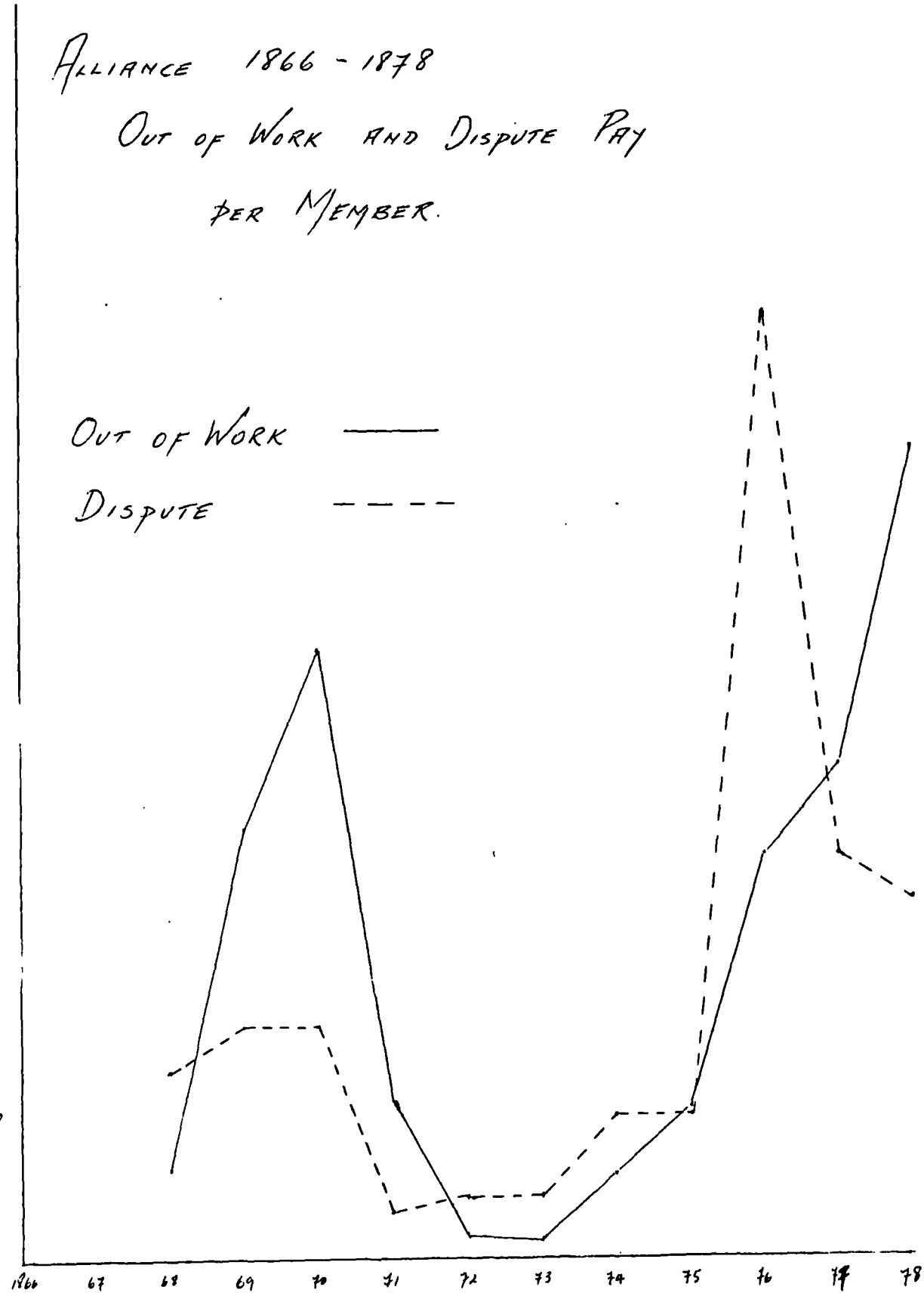
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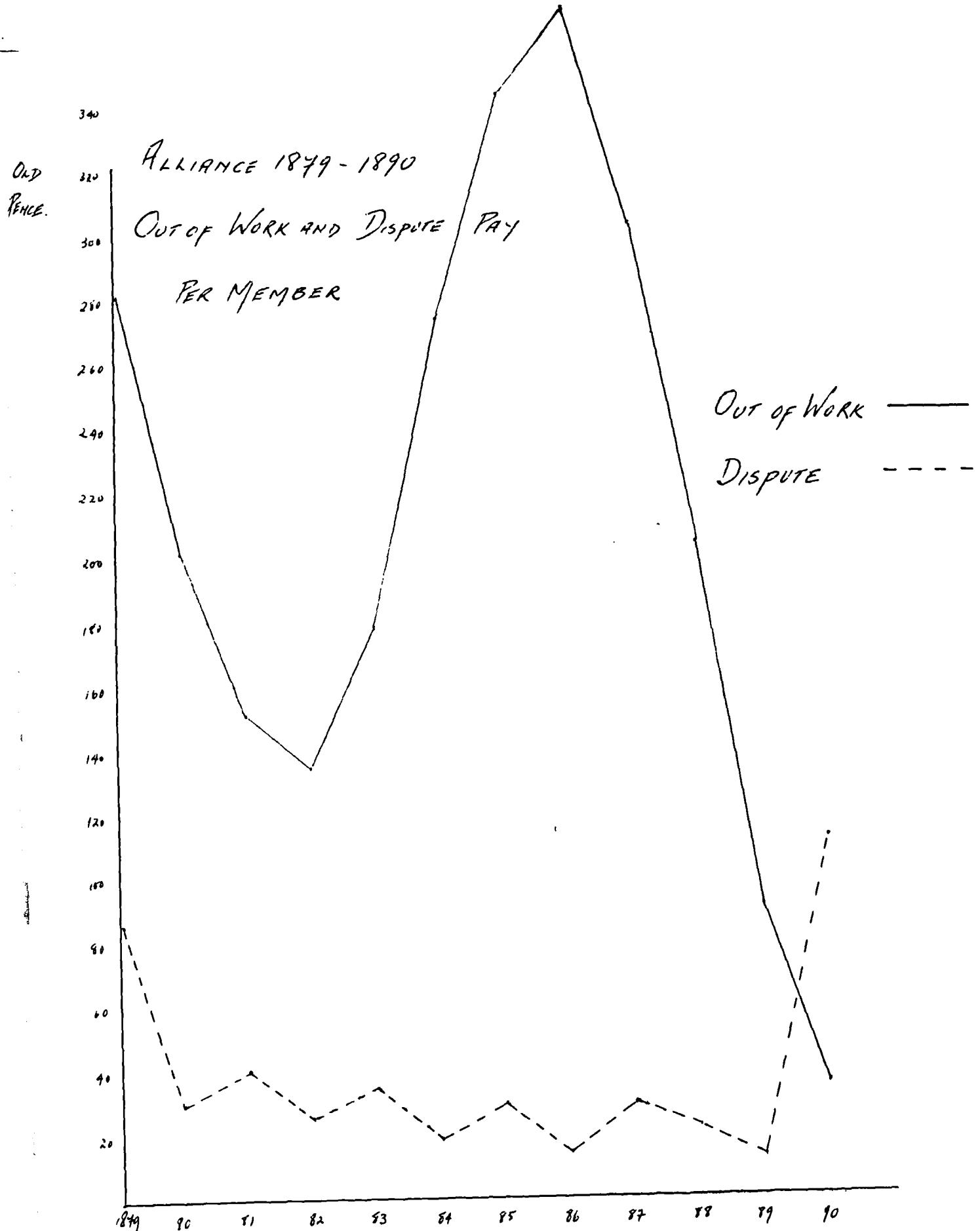
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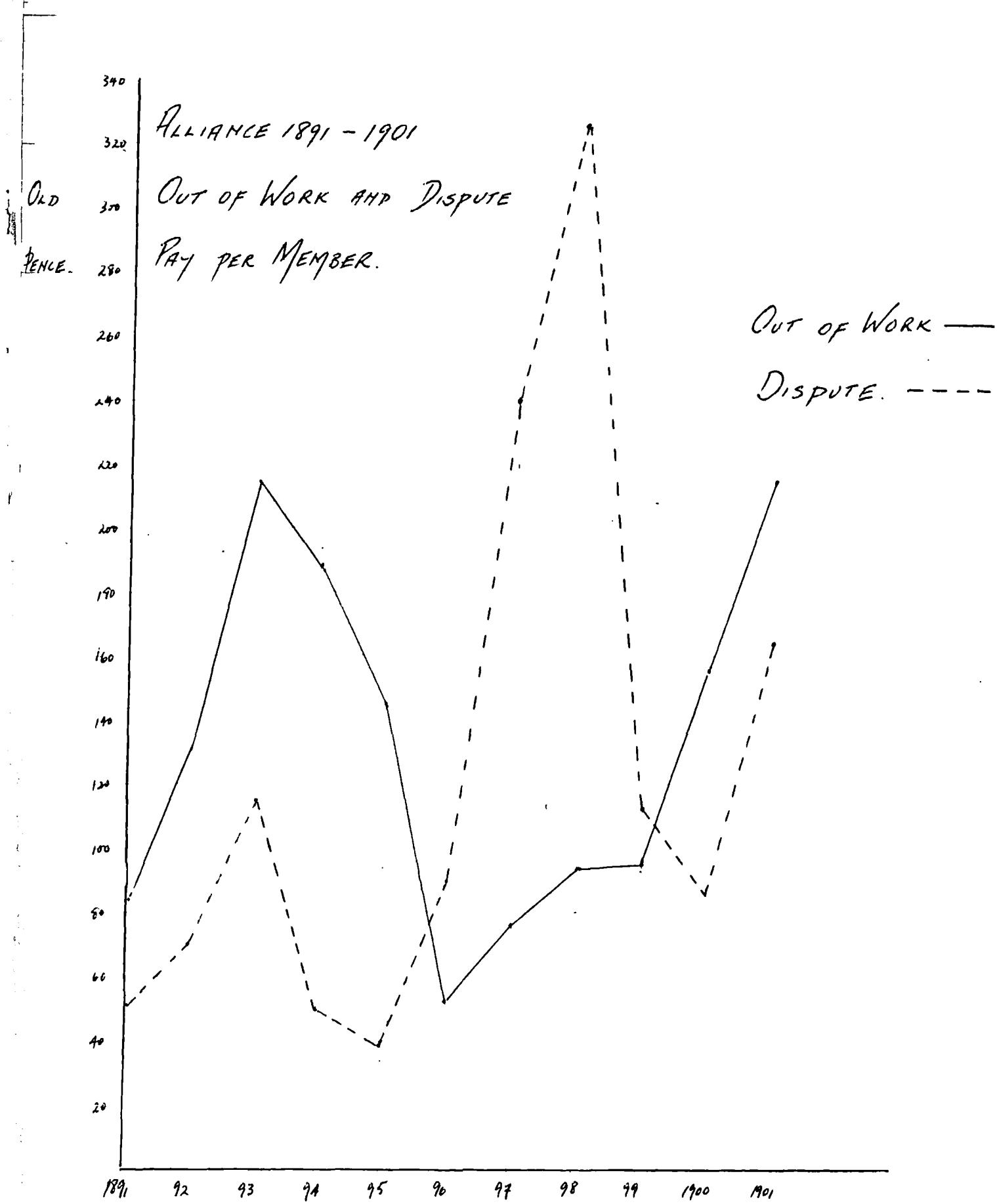
OUT OF WORK —

100

DISPUTE - - -







## NAFTA 1902 - 1913 - A GATHERING OF STRENGTHS

Prior to the turn of the century the furniture workers union was essentially a craft society whose most pressing concern was that of the maintenance of the interests of their members rather than involvement in the political movements of the period. With the formation of NAFTA and subsequent amalgamations there was brought together within one society a group of dynamic, effective and advanced socialist officials who, with the backing of their members made the Furniture Workers an organised body with an influence far beyond their numeric strength. In this decade the NAFTA found a voice, a militancy and an identity which was recognised at the National and International level as that of a union of dedicated, determined and politicised Socialist workers which has remained with the union to this day.

Initially though these were the years of the Taff Vale judgement, described by Harry Ham as a period 'in which the legal profession backed up by the employing interests represented in Press and Parliament, did their level best not only to intimidate the unions by attacking their funds, but also, to so weave the meshes of law around our organisation as to make it impossible to move without fear of running foul of legal decisions'. (i)

The NAFTA in common with other unions decided that the only way to change the law was to 'pay for direct representation in Parliament'. The pages of the monthly reports for 1902 carried the debate amongst the membership, with lucid, lengthy and reasoned arguments in favour of the proposal, of which the following are a sample:-

(i) Annual Report NAFTA 1902

'It has always seemed to me to be one of the strongest anomalies that the workers should be of the political opinion that the best people to make laws for their welfare are of the class whose interests are diametrically opposed to their own, and that they should believe it possible that those who live on the profits made out of the labour of the workers would ever be likely to formulate and carry out reforms which would be of real service to the workers themselves'.

'None of us would dream of sending our employers to represent us at our Trade Congresses or conferences to formulate plans for our future guidance and welfare, yet the majority of our class seem to consider they are the proper persons to make the infinitely more important laws of the land, which should have the same object in view. The idea that they ever will do so of their own free will is utterly fallacious'. W Parnell, No.2 Branch London, West End.

'The old cry of 'No Politics' in the Trade Unionism was proper enough when the introduction of politics meant the division of unionism into more Liberal and Conservative camps, but the old order changeth, giving place to new, and the cry of 'no politics' must be relegated to the things of the past. Political action is now consciously and continuously used by the capitalist class in defence of their own selfish interests; why, therefore, should the workers be afraid of defending their own interests in the same manner'. E.O'Hara, Sec.  
Manchester No. 4.

Many referred to Taff Vale, and all drew the same conclusions that reform of this judgement lay through parliamentary representation because 'in trade disputes, now we have not got an individual employer to meet, but in most cases a combination of employers'.

'The great lesson to be derived from this is the absolute necessity for direct labour representation. The old struggles have been for political emancipation. The coming struggle will be for political emancipation. We are slow to recognise the immense power we possess in the franchise'. Thomas Gordon, Manchester No.2.

In the rolling tones of the evangelical preacher one member wrote 'Thanks to the economic evolution, we are now on the edge of a precipice and have to choose between an ignoble death and a straight fight, a fight in which there can be few casualties on our side if we march solidly, for we shall be as an avalanche; once set rolling we are bound to gather strength and power as we go along, and the Labour Representative Committee is the via media by which the practical and the ideal may meet on neutral ground and forget the calumnies they have heaped on each others heads and the epithets that have often taken place of argument. Let us try it as an experiment, believing with Carlyle that the good will alone live'. F.Cooper, Birmingham No.19.

'I am pleased to see we are awakening from our torpor, and commencing to recognise the necessity for the workers of having capable men of their own class to represent them in Parliament. Never was a time more propitious than the present to put this grand scheme into practice'. John Watson No.37. (see footnote)

A vote was taken in September 1902, and by 3,155 votes to 467 (of the 6,200 members) it was agreed that a fund be set up, 'the Labour

Footnote Will Parnell, for 27 years the secretary of No.2 West End Branch, had stood for Fulham as an I.L.P. candidate in the early days of the Labour movement but failed to gain a seat.

'representation fund' levied at the rate of 3d. per member per quarter, with effect from the first quarter of 1903.

In May of 1904 J. Ramsey Macdonald in his capacity as Secretary of the Labour Representation Committee wrote to the Union asking that they nominate a candidate to be placed in a constituency 'most likely to yield good results'. Yet this period was but the dawn of the young Labour Party and a nomination was no sinecure, or guarantee of success as the letter makes clear. 'The success of the movement to which we are all pledged, mainly depends how far we can consolidate the rank and file. As you know, we have met with a considerable amount of success in inducing Trades Unionists, who used to be divided between the Liberal and Conservative parties, to find a common meeting ground upon our Labour platform'. (i)

This appeal was followed by a further letter in which Macdonald asked the Executive to place before the members the Labour Maintenance fund. This fund of 1d. per member per year being to pay a salary of £200 per annum and contribute to the election expenses of the Labour candidates (Members of Parliament were not paid a salary until 1911). The NAFTA membership voted on the proposals of the E.C. that a candidate be selected and the Labour Representation Committee Maintenance Scheme be adopted, in July 1904, and passed both items. (Maintenance Scheme 1054 for 47 against Parliamentary Candidate 1,052 for 54 against). A vote of only 17 per cent of the members.

This then provided an overwhelming mandate for the Labour representation fund but on a minority vote, and this remained one of the

(i) Letter J.R....May 1904

anomalies of the union over the years. A highly politicised and active minority and a total membership which acquiesced and accepted without challenge the lead of the activists.

The first six months of this levy brought in only £77.3s.2d., just under half of what should have been collected, despite the fact that 'non-payment of this levy will render a member liable to be placed out of benefit'. Such a draconian pronouncement was outside of the spirit of the general application of the rules on benefit, and there is no evidence of this sanction ever being applied, indeed to have done so at some times would have been to place 75 per cent or more of the membership out of benefit.

Initially the list of nominated Parliamentary Candidates comprised nine members including Harry Ham and Alex Gossip, but the final vote was taken by the membership on only three (the remainder not wishing to go forward to selection); A.Eades, Birmingham, F.Fountain, Leeds, and O'Grady, East London. The voting being Eades 59, Fountain 149, O'Grady 1,232.

The Alliance had held votes of the membership but with the coming into being of NAFTA this referral of all questions to the full membership became a democratic passion/until the outbreak of the second world war there was hardly a month passed but the membership were not required to vote 'en masse' on at least one proposition from the Executive.

Jim O'Grady, having been elected as the NAFTA candidate, was selected by the Labour Representation Committee to fight Leeds East at the next Parliamentary election. The cost of the election was estimated as some £650, of which the Association offered £250 if the election was in 1904 and more if it was held at a later date. The National L.R.C. would pay £30 towards the Returning Officers fee and the rest would be raised locally within the Constituency.

The Executive had high hopes of this candidature 'The Member (Cantley) holding the seat, which is a purely industrial centre, is a Conservative, and is bitterly opposed to Trades Unionism. He is also strongly in favour of the introduction of Chinese slavery into South Africa (see footnote) so the chances of our candidate are fairly good'.

The election took place in 1906. There were 51 Labour candidates, by of whom 15 were not supported by the L.R.C., mainly miners' candidates who were not happy with the L.R.C. It was fought on the question of tariff protection, Home Rule for Ireland and a Trade Dispute Bill to reverse the Taff Vale decision. The result was a Liberal Labour Alliance majority in the House of Commons of 271. The L.R.C. had 29 members elected and 25 Lib-Lab members were also elected. This excellent and, in some ways, astonishing result had been produced mainly by the secret agreement between Ramsay Macdonald and Herbert Gladstone which permitted L.R.C. candidates in a number of seats to stand without Liberal opposition. One of the beneficiaries of this post being Jim O'Grady in Leeds East.

Footnote A very topical issue, which attracted a protest rally in Hyde Park on 26th March, 1904, with an estimated attendance of between 150,000 and 200,000. Amongst the speakers were Alex Gossip and Jim O'Grady.

The Union Journal stated that the local press gave his candidacy little coverage and so the local Labour party produced newsheets which encouraged the voters to come and hear 'The wild revolutionary expounding the newer political gospel'. In fact, this was the only mention of O'Grady in the Yorkshire Post, and The Leeds and Yorkshire Mercury made no comment upon his campaign other than to list the places, dates and times of his meetings in common with its coverage of all of the campaign meetings. (i)

The Conservative candidate and sitting member, Henry Struther even Cantley did not, however, inspire confidence/in the Conservative Mercury. 'The dreary Mr Cantley meeting last night was a little more long suffering than usual' and 'The progress of Mr Cantley's campaign had made the result a foregone conclusion....Mr O'Grady will top the poll'. In contrast, the Liberal Yorkshire Evening Post was most enthusiastic in its reportage of O'Grady's candidacy. 'All thro' the campaign Mr James O'Grady, the labour candidate, has had most enthusiastic meetings and even when he has been addressing the electors in parts of the constituency which in later years have been noted for their very element, the result has been the same, there being a unanimous vote on practically every occasion' (referring to the practice then prevalent of taking a vote upon the speaker's candidacy at each meeting) and on polling day it reported 'The prospects of Mr J O'Grady, the Labour candidate are extremely rosy....Mr O'Grady's workers, of both sexes, to the number of more than 200, were early astir and reporting the result, "Enthusiastic scenes at the Committee room of

(i) Yorkshire Post 13th Jan, 1906

Mr O'Grady". "He arrived after the announcement of the result to a great storm of cheers and his wife then lead a torch light procession round the division". (i) (ii) (iii)

The Post had branded him as a revolutionary. But this was not revolution which Jim O'Grady espoused but rather the I.L.P. Socialism of his colleague Alex Gossip. This was the Socialism of the heart, and of the emotions, evolved in the language of the James 1st Bible. He wrote to the membership 'I came out of the stress and heat of that glorious fight, purified in spirit and mind. I had felt the pulsing of the great soul of Humanity, I had heard the cries of the vast toiling millions, of which East Leeds is a microcosm, struggling towards the light, it was the dumb become articulate. I saw the great giant Labour, straining to burst the social and economic bonds that have held him slave so long. I discerned, actually, the sun of emancipation creeping slowly above the social horizon, and I dreamed of a near future full of the possibilities of joy and contentment for the common people'. Jim O'Grady received 4,299 votes, Cantley 2,208, a majority of 2,091. So popular was the rhetoric of the new Member of Parliament that his election address was re-printed (4,000 copies) and sold to members at 1d. each, the proceeds being devoted to the Tom Walker's Children's Fund. (iv)

With the election of Jim O'Grady to Parliament there remained the question of how he could continue his work for the Union as well as be an M.P. The Executive Committee considered this question and

- (i) Leeds & Yorkshire Mercury 12th Jan, and 15th Jan, 1906
- (ii) Yorkshire Evening Post 9th Jan, 1906
- (iii) Yorkshire Evening Post 15th Jan, 1906
- (iv) J.O'Grady NAFTA Monthly Report Feb.1906

decided in the interim that it was possible to combine both jobs as it noted with complete seriousness, 'the House(of Commons) does not meet till late in the day, closing early on two nights, and not sitting at all on Saturdays, will permit of at least 36 hours per week being devoted to his work. Of course, members well know that the Parliament Session only lasts six months in a year, therefore the T.O. can and will put in his full-time during the other six months in carrying out the usual duties of his office'. (i)

'The undoubted gain to the Association will be readily appreciated by our members, and its effect will not be lost on the employers as a body'. (see footnote)

Alex Gossip in his monthly report notes the emergence of the 'Labour Party - with the right man in the right place at his head (Kier Hardie)'. 'Already they have made themselves felt, though the capitalist newspapers do not give them much of a show and prefer to report dreary inanities by men like Asquith & Co.' Yet despite this lack of sympathy with the Liberal Party, it did as a Government, pass most of the legislation which had been canvassed by the T.U.C., as being a programme of progress for the working man.

The Trades Dispute Act was passed which reversed Taff Vale and gave protection to Union Funds, as was a much enlarged Workman's

(i) NAFTA Monthly Report Ref, 1906

Footnote In 1911 the decision was taken by Parliament to pay members of the House of Commons a salary of £400 per annum. This allowed Jim O'Grady to relinquish his role as Trade Organiser for the NAFTA and to retain his links with the Union in the role of Parliamentary Secretary. O'Grady held the post of Trade Organiser since 1899 and in the words of Alex Gossip 'was a force to be reckoned with'. The man who succeeded him to this post was equally to be reckoned with, Fred Bramley cabinetmaker from No.2 West End Branch, the future General Secretary of the T.U.C.

Compensation Act which brought into scope many more industries and workers than the 1897 Chamberlain Bill. The Pension Bill was introduced in 1908 and enacted in January 1st, 1909, and in 1909 the Government also passed the Trade Boards Act which enabled Trade Boards to be established for the so-called sweated industries. These Boards had the power to establish minimum levels of pay that were legally binding upon the employers. Surprisingly this latter piece of legislation was not very enthusiastically received by the Trade Union Movement and not commented upon by NAFTA.

The Major reasons for this antipathy was the feeling that the minimum wages would become maximum wages, and, in the event, at its conception the Trade Boards mainly covered the work of women (and did not include Furniture work) and perhaps a feeling that legislation of this kind might be thought to render Trades Unions redundant, though it has been suggested by Bythell that it was designed to encourage Trade Unionism. (i)

The Government of the day was nevertheless one of the most sympathetic to the working classes that there had been but the industrial strife which accompanied the end of its term of office was 'the start of one of the greatest outbreaks of industrial unrest ever known in Britain'. (ii)

Prices of Commodities had been rising since 1896 and with a stagnation in wages through the period up to 1910, particularly in the high unemployment years of 1907/8/9, real wages and living standards

(i) See Duncan Bythell, The Sweated Trades, Batsford 1979  
(ii) History of the T.U.C. p.42 Lovell & Roberts 1968

had fallen. With an improving trade situation from 1910 the working classes used the opportunity to win back the losses in living standards that they had suffered. (see footnote)

Footnote The Standard of Living 1890 - 1914

	<u>Building workers</u>	<u>Engineering workers</u>	
1900	101	100	
1901	102	101	
02	102	101	
03	101	100	
04	100	99	'Real' wage index
05	100	99	1890 = 100
06	99	99	
07	96	97	
08	99	100	
09	98	99	
10	96	97	
11	95	97	
12	93	96	
13	93	93	

A.L. Bowley  
Wages and Income in the  
U.K. since 1860 Cambridge 1937 p.30

Annual Abstract of  
Labour Statistics

as quoted in 'The Edwardian age' T.R. Gourvish, Macmillan, London 1979 and 'Falling real wages were a feature of two comparatively long sub-periods 1899 - 1905 and 1908 - 13. Overall a decrease of 0.4 - 0.5% a year between '1899 and 1913' and 'Money wages in contrast were 19/20% higher in 1913 than 1896 but prices more than matched this rise. The Board of Trade wholesale price index rose by 32% over the period with food and drink 21% over the period.'

See also Frances Wood 'The course of real wages in London 1900 - 1912  
and J.R.S.S.(1937)p.37

Rufus Tucker 'Real wages of artisans in London 1929 - 1935  
J.R.S.S.(1936)p.80

both agreeing that 'real' wages fell for the London worker by 6% in the period 1899 - 1933.

NAFTA members were clear in their understanding of the problems as the correspondence in the monthly reports show and this was reinforced by statement of policy or doctrine by the E.C. and particularly by Alex Gossip. On the problems of unemployment he wrote 'The capitalist does not enter into business from any feeling of sentiment, and the hungry may die of starvation or the naked and homeless of cold and disease for all he cares if no profit is going to accrue to himself by his granting permission to the worker to use his tools and raw materials. The ability to produce, which our acquired power over the forces of nature has given us, is such that in a very short time abundance of everything is forth-coming, but as the propertyless worker has not sufficient remuneration for his past labour to enable him to buy back the things he has produced or the equivalent, he must remain idle until over-production has been consumed, mainly by those who had little, if any hand in its production'. The solution he saw was 'The Means of Production and Distribution in the hands of the people as a whole, and to carry on production for use instead of profit'. (i)

This concern was not, however, exclusive to the political left or Liberals since even the ultra Government Saturday Review commented that 'no system can be more demoralising than the present, when the poor man, self-respecting and loafer alike, knows that, whatever his efforts to save, it is a hundred to one he will end up in the workhouse', recognising that it was not enough to dismiss the unemployed as loafers. (ii)

Alex Gossip also drew the attention of the members to an article in the Engineer's paper looked upon as the organ of the Employers

- (i) Monthly Report Feb, 1908
- (ii) SAT Review March, 1908

generally'. Referring to unemployment it stated 'It is, as every works manager knows, a very bad state of affairs when there are no spare hands in his district; there are no reserves to call out, and there is the constant danger that his men may be tempted away from him by some other employer who is also short handed. Dearth of labour must be regarded as a worse evil than a fair excess of it. It will be accepted that a certain minimum of unemployed is essential to the welfare of the country. That minimum we have put at 2 per cent of the workers engaged in any trade....of willing workers 2 to 2½ per cent must always be idle'.

With such philosophies publicly articulated, it was the task of the Trades Union officers to point the pathway forward and when there was an opportunity to improve these conditions, to lead the fight for those changes.

The death of Sir Blundell Maple, head of Maple & Co., and the news that he had left a fortune of £2,153,292.19s.2d., was yet another opportunity for Alex Gossip to point out to the membership the iniquity of the system under which they laboured, and at a time when 11 per cent of the membership was out of work the point was easily proven. (i)

Yet to be an advocate of change was not without its detractors as he later notes 'And yet the finger of scorn is oft times pointed at those who feel their whole souls in revolt against this miserable soul-destroying system. Oh the pity of it! Oh the shame of it!....'In the view of the continued bad trade all over the country, the action of

(i) Daily News 20 Nov, 1908

the Government in refusing to support the Right to Work Bill of the Labour Party becomes all the more reprehensible'.

The Trades Union Leaders of the time were not, however, revolutionary in their speeches, but rather concentrated on the immediate problem of the need and the right to work, as Alex Gossip put it 'our one common need, the need of living and being happy' and, furthermore, still saw these aims as being achieved through the Parliamentary process and so when a general election was held on January, 1910, the membership were exhorted to 'strive with might and main to return only those who understand the cause of poverty, and are prepared to apply the remedy. Nature is prodigal with her gifts and we only require free access to the raw materials and means of production to banish for ever the accursed thing known as poverty'. (i)

There is a sense of impotence in such statements which trades union leaders such as Gossip felt at the time. Nearly 14 per cent of the membership was out of work and half of them had run out of benefit with the consequent misery and hardship which all too clearly followed in its train yet resolution of this continually recurrent nightmare for the working man, seemed beyond human control.

O'Grady, in his 1910 election address, stated that the road to Socialism was the way forward for the people 'After an experience of four years in the House of Commons, I am more than ever convinced that there is no real remedy for unemployment while a system of production and distribution of commodities for purposes of individual profit exists,

(i) Monthly Report May, 1909

and not until the public conscience is awakened to the brutality and immorality of the wild scramble to be rich, with all the socially evil consequences that have followed in its train can a system of national ownership and control of land and capital be substituted, and unemployment banished from our midst'. Yet this was but the rhetoric of socialism. It was being used as a substitute for well thought out programmes of legislation and action which might have had some chance of success in alleviating this suffering.

O'Grady was returned with an increased majority of 3,065 votes in a straight fight with the Conservative candidate. He was, however, in the Monthly Reports at pains to point out his independence of the Liberal Party 'I want to state that the (Labour) Party did not have any negotiations, actual or otherwise, with the Liberal Party to avoid three cornered fights'....'In East Leeds, no approach was made to the Liberals to withdraw their candidate (which they did)....although it is a fact that Liberal and Tory workmen did vote for the Labour candidate'.

The country went to the polls in a General Election less than a year later and Jim O'Grady with the financial support of NAFTA again retained the seat, albeit with a majority reduced to 925 in yet another straight fight with a Conservative candidate.

With 42 Members of Parliament in the House of Commons the Parliamentary Labour Party of 1911 was now a voice to be listened to and a voting body to be considered in any proposed legislation. This was not so much a tribute to their numeric strength but rather to the fact that with the Irish Nationalists, they held the balance of power which kept the depleted Liberal Government in office.

Yet the Labour Party returned at the December, 1910 Election, collected only 323,000 votes and was still without a clear platform regarding the solution of these problems of unemployment as is evidenced by the Conference on the Abolition of Destitution and Unemployment held in London on 7th and 8th October, 1910.

The conference was arranged by the I.L.P. and attended by 250 delegates from Trade Unions, Trades Councils, Labour Parties and Co-operative societies. Under the chairmanship of Macdonald, Barnes and Hobson the conference spent most of its time listening to papers on the problem by George Lansbury, Miss MacArthur and Sidney Webb. It was with the paper of Sidney Webb on unemployment that Gossip and Bramley (the NAFTA delegates) most strongly objected and their Socialist view contrasts strongly with the more bland Fabian view put forward by Sidney Webb. The Webb resolution stated 'The Conference declares that unemployment is a chronic disease of society, and that the Government should take steps, as far as practicable to prevent this grave social disease etc'. The Gossip/Bramley amendment stated 'This Conference declares that unemployment is a chronic disease of the present system of society; that the Government should at once take steps to prevent this grave social disease by introducing measures which must not be merely palliative, but which must contain the germs of the organisation of Socialist Commonwealth, and be the beginning of the permanent organisation of National resources, and production, industrial and agricultural, on a co-operative basis. With but five minutes at the end of the conference to move this amendment, it is scarcely surprising that it was lost and the Webb resolution passed, but this amendment does mark the emergence of NAFTA as one of the most militant Socialist Trades Unions of the period. (i)

(i) Monthly Report Dec, 1910

'True and unashamed Socialism was the only salvation for the working classes' was the message to the Union's members, and a recognition of the blandishments of the Liberals and Tories to the working classes to have seen for what they were, was repeated throughout the years.

On the industrial front the period was marked by poor trade and substantial sums were paid out in out of work support during the years following amalgamation, reaching a peak in 1908 (see accompanying graph) and industrial action was only undertaken during those years defensively in support of the maintenance of wages and hours and conditions of work.

After 1908 trade gradually improved, and there was general reduction in unemployment, and so with returning prosperity workers of all trades took the opportunity to reverse the fall in real wages that had occurred from 1896 due to rising prices.

Disputes require funding, as the executive of the Union was very well aware and NAFTA paid out of work support and dispute pay, from the same general fund and it, therefore, required a substantial reduction in the out of work support being paid before the union could undertake any action that would result in a heavy expenditure in dispute pay.

The actual disputes and the results of these disputes have been charted for the period 1909 - 1913 and it can be seen that for the first two years the results achieved were mixed. By 1911, however, a general trade movement was underway and the results achieved are, indeed, impressive. The costs, however, were high and whilst 1911 cost an overall £4,000 in dispute pay, 1912 required £16,697 and 1913 £17,248.

The major disputes were in Nottingham, Manchester, and Liverpool and were fought against Federated employers who adopted a common platform of union breaking. In each area an application to the Federation for an increase in wage rates was met with a lock out and the requirement of any who returned to work to abandon unionism and collective bargaining in favour of individual bargaining. The disputes over money becoming a fight over union recognition. In none of the three areas was any attempt made to bring in blackleg labour; instead 'they are going to play the waiting game, they are trying a new way, namely that of exhausting us by a long dispute and a return under the most hateful conditions they can impose'.

NAFTA won these battles and improved the hours and the wages of their members, but perhaps more importantly it was able to demonstrate that it had the funds, the organisation and the membership to fight long battles without being broken. This point was not lost on the employers and though in the future there would be some disputes of purely local nature where wages or conditions were threatened, the major disputes would find the Union opposed by increasingly effective Employers Federations.

Disputes and Results of the Years 1909 - 1913

- 1909      London Carvers - increased wages by negotiation.
- Wood & Seilks - wage reduction and anti-union action.  
            dispute closed.
- Ochestrelle Co.London - piecework and anti-union action.  
            dispute closed.
- Burkle London - reduction of wages. settled by negotiation
- 1910      Manchester - reduction in hours by negotiation
- Liverpool - increase in wages by negotiation
- Prosser London - increase in hours and anti-union action  
            dispute closed.
- Jones, Liverpool - reduction in wages. action succeeded
- Hatchers,Bristol - reduction in wages. Action succeeded
- Kilkenny - reduction in wages. Dispute closed.
- 1911      Clyde - improvement in wages. Action succeeded
- North East - improvement in wages. Action succeeded
- Belfast - improvement in wages. Action succeeded
- Nottingham shopfitter - improvement in wages. Action succeeded
- Liverpool polishers - improvement in wages. Action succeeded
- Swansea - All trades - improvement in wages. Action succeeded
- Rochdale upholsterers - improvement in wages. Action succeeded
- Gloucester, all trades - improvement in wages.Action succeeded
- Bristol chairmakers and upholsterers. Action succeeded
- Wellington cabinetmakers - improvement in wages. Action succeeded
- Liverpool Hebrew Cabinetmakers - improvement in wages.  
            Action succeeded
- Sheffield, all trades - improvement in wages. Action succeeded
- Glasgow piano polishers - improvement in wages. Action  
            succeeded
- Glasgow Co-operative Furniture Workers - improvement in wages.  
            Action succeeded

- 1911      Liverpool, best cabinetmakers - hours reduced to 46½ per week. Action succeeded.  
cont/
- 1912      Birmingham carvers - ½d. per hour increase. Action succeeded.  
Glasgow, all trades - ½d. per hour increase. Action succeeded.  
Edinburgh, all trades - ½d. per hour increase. Action succeeded.  
Warrington, all trades - ½d. per hour increase. Action succeeded.  
Bradford, all trades - ¾d. per hour increase. Action succeeded.  
Southampton, all trades - ½d. per hour increase. Action succeeded.  
Bath, all trades - ¼d. per hour increase. Action succeeded.  
Lancaster, all trades - ¼d. per hour increase. Action succeeded.  
Leicester, all trades - ½d. per hour increase. Action succeeded.  
Belfast, all trades - ½d. per hour increase. Action succeeded.  
Leeds, fitment shops - ½d. per hour increase. Action succeeded.  
Barrow-in-Furness Polishers - 1/3d. per week increase. Action succeeded.  
Huddersfield, all trades - ½d. per hour increase. Action succeeded.  
Hull polishers - ½d. per hour increase. Action succeeded.  
Newcastle Hebrew Shops - 10d per week increase. Action succeeded.  
Darlington, all trades - 2/- per week increase. Action succeeded.  
Heywood, all trades - 10% advance per week. Action succeeded.  
High Wycombe, some shops - 1d. per hour increase. Action succeeded.  
East London, all trades - ½d. per hour increase. Action succeeded.  
London cabinetmakers - ½d. per hour increase. Action succeeded.  
Nottingham cabinetmakers - ½d. per hour increase. Action succeeded.  
Manchester cabinetmakers - ½d. per hour increase. Action succeeded.  
Liverpool cabinetmakers - ½d. to 3d. per hour increase.  
Action succeeded

1913 London stone carvers - 2d. per hour increase. Action succeeded  
Manchester stone carvers - 1d. per hour increase. Action succeeded  
Liverpool stone carvers - 1d. per hour increase. Action succeeded  
London, all trades -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase. Action succeeded  
East London, all trades -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase. Action succeeded  
Bristol, all trades - 10% per hour increase  
Wooburn Green Chairmakers - 2d. per hour increase  
Halifax cabinetmakers -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
West Bromwich -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
Newcastle -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
Birmingham, all trades - 4/6d to 6/6d per week increase  
Chorley, all trades -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
Preston, all trades -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
Hull, all trades -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. to 2d. per hour increase  
Sheffield, all trades - 10% to 30% on weekly wage s  
Liverpool retail shops - 1d. per hour increase  
Leeds polishers -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
Bath, all trades -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
Cheltenham, all trades -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
Manchester women polishers CWS -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
Cheltenham carvers - 1d. per hour increase  
Lancaster polishers -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase and 49 hours per week  
Aberdeen, all trades -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
Gloucester car workers -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
Liverpool, all trades - 2/9d. per week increase  
Edinburgh, all trades -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase

1913      Brighouse, all trades - 10% to 20% on weekly wages increase  
cont/      Elyde & N.E. Coast shipyards - 1/- per week increase  
            Blackburn, all trades -  $\frac{3}{4}$ d. per hour increase  
            Accrington, all trades -  $\frac{3}{4}$ d. per hour increase  
            Cork, all trades - 3/- per week increase  
            Dublin, all trades - 9d. per hour minimum wage for 50 hours  
            Swansea, all trades -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
            Rochdale - all trades - 1/- per week increase  
            Burnley, all trades -  $\frac{3}{4}$ d. per hour increase  
            Shipley, all trades -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
            Dundee, all trades -  $\frac{1}{4}$ d. per hour increase  
            Sunderland upholsterers -  $9\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
            Newcastle glassworkers -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
            Bedford carvers -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
            Bolton, all trades -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
            Wigan, all trades -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. to  $1\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
            Southampton, all trades -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
            Manchester fitment shops -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
            St. Helens, all trades -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
            Manchester polishers -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase  
            Liverpool polishers -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour increase

Financially over the period the union achieved steady, if unspectacular, growth as the accompanying graphs show, but a sever shock to the Association was the failure of the Birbeck Bank in 1911. The rules of the Association had been changed in 1904 to allow deposits of union funds to be held and invested in Corporation Stock rather than in the Bank 'The ground for this proposal were first, that our funds, when deposited in the bank, could be borrowed in the ordinary way of business by employers, and probably used to fight us in a trade movement; second, the rate of interest offered by our local governing bodies is larger, and the security greater than that given by the banks; thirdly, our funds would be used in improving cities, housing schemes and extending the principle of municipal enterprise, and above all, the certainty that the employees of the municipality would be paid union wages and conditions'. The Union duly invested some £3,000 in Leicester Corporation stock at  $3\frac{1}{2}\%$  interest. At the time of the failure the Association had nearly £4,500 in the Birbeck Bank, of which they were able to recover some 50% immediately. 'Things looked black at first' wrote Alex Gossip 'and the suspense and anxiety and worry which some of us had to bear will not soon be forgotten' and, indeed, if this appears to be an over dramatic statement the reality is that the total failure of the bank would have reduced the union funds by 50% and would have left it financially impotent at a crucial stage in its development. The expectation was of a final payment of funds from the bank of 18/- in the pound but analysis of the financial records shows no loss on the accounts, and so happily the worst fears of the executive in this matter were not realised. (i)

(i) Annual Report 1904

The NAFTA had long considered the plight of the workmen in the trade, no longer able to continue at his craft due to old age. The traditional solution to this situation was family support or the poor law relief unless the member be associated with some Friendly Society which provided some form of insurance pension. By 1903, however, the Association felt itself to be financially strong enough to introduce a Superannuation scheme in addition to their normal scheme of benefits. The cost was 1d. per week extra contribution and any member either 60 years of age, or permanently ill or crippled received:-

After 25 years of membership - 5/- per week

After 30 years of membership - 7/- per week

This was a most forward looking move on the part of the union but the lack of equity in the Association at the time did, of necessity, require that the scheme run, and be paid into, for five years, to build up funds, and after that time any member of the Association who was eligible could draw upon it.

The scheme worked well but was overtaken by the Old Age Pensions Act of 1908 and to a lesser extent by the National Insurance Act of 1911. This latter Act with its contributions of 4d. a week from the workers and 3d. a week from the employer and 2d. a week from the State, included the Furniture Workers in the scope of the scheme. The Act required that workmen could, through their 'approved' Friendly Society, draw benefit in time of sickness and the NAFTA, in common with many other unions became under the overall umbrella of the G.F.T.U. the 'approved' society for the furniture workers who designated it as such 'since many of the larger employers are moving with the object in view'

of starting shop clubs, to act as approved Societies under the Act, and thus get more control over the workmen, all for the purposes of weakening, if possible, the Trades Unions'. In all some 5,000 members of the Association decided to use NAFTA/GFTU as their approved Society rather than the Post Office or a 'benefit club'.

The early years of NAFTA were important from the point of view of amalgamations and close on the heels of the link up between the Alliance and the Scottish Operative Cabinetmakers they gathered into the union a number of kindred societies. In early 1903 representatives of the defunct Glass Bevellers society sent a deputation to the E.C. of the Association. There had once been a glass bevellers union but it had failed for financial reasons and the men were currently unorganised. The deputation made the point to the E.C. that they felt that glass bevellers were a part of the furnishing trade but their difficulty had stemmed from the fact that with only 700 engaged in the trade in the U.K. it had been nearly impossible to keep together an effective organisation.

The glass bevellers did just what their name suggests in that they cut glass for such purposes as display cabinets and show cases, where the intricate and precise fitting of glass was necessary, grinding/glass to fit the required complex shapes. However, their main work was associated with the mirrors making trade where the fashion for many years was to bevel the edges of mirrors by grinding and polishing.

The E.C. was sympathetic to their requests 'We are satisfied that these men are sound trade unionists, and while their union was in existence, were good at paying their contributions, but owing to lack

of attention on the part of their officials, were apt to get out of hand'. Despite this reputation for undisciplined militancy the E.C. felt that 'with the necessary discipline imposed by the General Rules of the Association, and the assistance of our General officials' they were in favour of incorporation. In a vote taken in July, 1903, the Association agreed to admit the Glass Bevellers, voting 1548 in favour, 153 against, a majority of 1395 in favour.

Amalgamation for the NAFTA was always at the forefront of any general policy statement and particularly after Alex Gossip became General Secretary, the National Furnishing Workers union encompassing all working in the trade was an oft repeated aim. Alex Gossip was an associate of Tom Mann and there can be no doubt that the views expressed in Mann's pamphlet 'Industrial Syndicalist' regarding industrial trades union linked in National Federations under the General Federation of Trades Unions was a shared view; however, their views diverged at the point where Mann rejected the collective agreement, which he felt bound the worker to an immoral system which ought to be destroyed. This destruction to be effected by strike action, leading to the revolutionary strike bringing down the State.

NAFTA, under Harry Ham and Alex Gossip, did not subscribe to this type of industrial syndicalism. To the NAFTA the acceptance of a set of working rules for an area was a major victory in a trade which lent itself to an industrial 'free for all', and the strike, as they so often repeated, was a weapon of the last extreme, when all other means of agreement had been attempted. The Union espoused a general revolutionary aim but adopted a day to day pragmatism born of the realities

of the Furniture Trade. There was no further amalgamations with NAFTA during the early depression years of the period, however, as the Trade began to improve so also did the wish of both NAFTA and the other Furniture Trades Societies to come together.

In December 1908, the South London French Polishers Society joined NAFTA as Branch No.69, thus avoiding a vote of the major society on their acceptance. This brought another 97 members into the Association and was followed in February 1909, by the old London Society of French Polishers who with some 58 members joined the existing Branch No.20 London Polishers 'The new members being read in to hearty cheers and the evening ending with a few good songs being rendered in good style'. Neither society had any funds or assets to bring to the Association, as analysis of the financial return of those years shows and it must be presumed that the difficult trade years that had preceeded these amalgamations had absorbed such assets as they might have had. (i) (ii)

Amalgamation was the subject of a conference at National level in Crewe in February of 1909. The initiative on this occasion was taken by the Amalgamated Union of Cabinetmakers, and recognising the importance of such a meeting NAFTA was represented by the Chairman A.H. Frear, General Secretary Alex Gossip and Trade Organiser Jim O'Grady.

The representatives of the NAFTA met with the Amalgamated Upholsterers, Amalgamated Polishers, Amalgamated Machinists and Amalgamated Cabinetmakers, and sufficient common ground was established to take a vote of all members of the Association on two questions. The first

- (i) Monthly Report Dec, 1908
- (ii) February 1909

was whether they wished to amalgamate and the second on whether:  
a) they wished to see in the new society a system of uniform contribu-  
tion whilst working; and b) branches and representation on the  
management of the new union representing sectional interests. (i)

The NAFTA voted 1,701 for amalgamation, 38 against (30% of member-  
ship) and on separate branches and representative management 1,412 for  
and 141 against; however, on a system of uniform contributions whilst  
working 407 for and 1,121 against. The reason for this rejection being  
that it meant that when a member drew on out of work benefit and was  
still unable to find work, he was not allowed to pay (from his out of  
work benefit) any further contributions and so would run out of benefit  
no matter how long the enforced idleness lasted. (The rules allowed  
8 weeks of benefit at 6/- per week) and would have to find a full 26  
weeks of uninterrupted work before coming into benefit. The NAFTA  
system of paying whilst out of work reducing the period for coming into  
benefit by the 8 weeks. (ii)

Undeterred by this vote and the apparent apathy of the membership,  
the leaders of NAFTA met with other Societies in Crewe on the 16th June  
and in Birmingham on July 27, 'Splendid progress being made in drafting  
of a basis for amalgamation', but not all the societies had continued  
in the discussions since the Amalgamated Society of Woodcutting  
Machinists had withdrawn (since their records for this period no longer  
exist it must be presumed that their withdrawal was because their  
membership voted against amalgamation even as a general concept). By  
September the E.C. were ready to put forward to the membership the  
basis for amalgamation. (iii)

(i) Monthly Report February 1909 and April 1909  
(ii) May 1909  
(iii) August 1909

The new society was to be called the Amalgamated Union of Wood and Furnishing Trades and it is of interest to note the trades which it would represent. 'Cabinetmakers, Chairmakers, Carvers (Wood and Stone), Turners, Machinists, Shop Fitters and Show Case Makers, Athletic Wood Workers (makers of cricket bats, tennis rackets, etc), Upholsterers and Mattress Makers, French Polishers, Plate Glass Workers, Car and Coach Finishers and Parquet Workers. The Union was to be based in London, to be of nine districts to have a General Secretary, Assistant General Secretary, General Organiser and three District Organisers. Contributions were fixed at 10d. per week, dispute pay at 16/- per week, and out of work pay of 5/- per week for six weeks after 26 weeks of uninterrupted contribution, 10/- for six weeks after 52 weeks and 12/- for sick pay after 10 weeks of uninterrupted contributions. The benefits were thus less than NAFTA 'as members are aware we have found it necessary to compromise but we believe that the members are deeply anxious to have one united body in the Furnishing Trade'. The vote was taken and was 3,276 in favour and 1,129 against. A majority of 2,147. (63% of all members voting). The result was a disappointing one and as the E.C. pointed out 'The law requires the consent of not less than 2/3rds of the members of each Trades Union desirous of amalgamating. General branches have either not taken the trouble to vote or the officials thus neglected to forward the results'. The vote/was null and void at this point since there would have needed to be 4,000 members in favour of amalgamation for NAFTA to have entered into any new union. (i)

The other societies fared no better with their membership. Amalgamated Union of Upholsterers 198 for and 354 against.. Amalgamated Union of Cabinetmakers 787 for and 936 against and Amalgamated Society of French Polishers 332 for and 159 against.

(i) Jan/Feb 1910

Effectively only NAFTA and the French Polishers had voted for amalgamation, albeit on a low poll of their membership. In an effort to salvage something from these talks the E.C.'s of these two unions came together for talks and this resulted in the proposal that the Polishers came into NAFTA on the existing NAFTA scales of contributions and benefits. The NAFTA members voted on this proposition and agreed it by a vote of 1457 in favour and 299 against. By a process of polishers joining existing branches and forming new branches the Amalgamated Society of French Polishers joined NAFTA in January 1911. It brought only £81 to the funds but of much greater importance it brought to NAFTA as Assistant Organiser A.A.(Alf) Purcell who had been the General Secretary of A.S.F.P. (See Appendix for biography). The device of members joining the major union avoided the legal requirement of a two thirds majority for the formation of a new union and was used again in 1911 when the Edinburgh local French Polishers Society with 116 members became Branch No.121 Edinburgh Polishers and brought £287 to the general funds, and in 1912 by the Liverpool Local Polishers Society who joined Branch 89 Liverpool Polishers with 11 members and £28 in funds.

NAFTA had always professed an inclusive policy towards all furniture workers and with the amalgamation with the French Polishers society, the association gained a number of womens (polishers) branches in Glasgow, Manchester and Dublin. This policy of including women workers was extended by the decisions of 1912/13/14 to include trade groups with an exclusively or predominantly female membership, Plate glass packers, gilders, glass sandpaperers, women upholsterers, Bamboo workers, caners and plate glass workers.

This determination to organise women workers in the furniture industry was both liberal and judicious. More women were coming into the trade and unless organised were going to be used to depress men's wages or take over their work, and with the imminent outbreak of the Great War and the extensive use of women workers, the Association was organised and the members reconciled to accepting female members of the Union without demarcation problems. (see footnote)

The first real evidence of demarcation disputes effecting workers occurred in this period, despite the formation of the Association of Wood Working Trades in April, 1907. It was intended to be a mutual protection association and specifically stated in its aims 'Should any dispute arise between an employer and any society of the Association, no member of any society affiliated herewith shall do any work of the men on dispute'. It was an alliance of the three Joiners Societies, the Wood Machinists, the A.U.C.M. and NAFTA.

The Woodworkers Association was of some financial benefit to the unions involved but in demarcation disputes which occurred regularly during the period between NAFTA and the Joiners, the association appears to have been powerless. These disputes were low key, local and mainly occurred in the most depressed years of the period when work was at a premium. The examples of the problems in one month are quite typical of the period.

Footnote Female membership of the union remained low, however, until the 1st World War and figures for female membership were not recorded until 1916 with 159 women members; however, by 1918 some 3000 members in the 22,500 strong union were women. After the war these numbers fell rapidly to around 1000 members mainly in the upholstery and polishing trades. Whilst there were womens branches with female officers no woman served on any national committee or ever was proposed for an organiser role before the second world war.

"The Amalgamated Joiners are striking in Dundee Shipyard against some twelve of our members who went to fix the work on board ship which they had made in the factory".

'At Messrs Doultons our Cabinetmakers are on strike and the Amalgamated Joiners have been written to due to Joiners working with imported blacklegs, and are not assisting the Cabinetmakers as they ought to do. (i)

In both instances the matters were referred to the Woodworkers Association, but there is no record of any reply in either monthly reports or E.C. Minutes.

The NAFTA were aware that with the growing size of the association it was going to run into increasing organisational problems. To this end it decided in 1907 to appoint an Assistant General Secretary and of the sixteen members nominated Henry Urié was elected. H.A. Urié, a Carver had been a branch secretary of No.6 Branch (London Carvers) for many years, and at various times a member of the E.C. of both the Alliance and NAFTA. A somewhat quiet figure living in the shadow of his General Secretary he nevertheless gave sterling service to the union and this was recognised in that like the General Secretary he was rarely, if ever, opposed for re-election in the tri-annual compulsory re-elections for officials.

This appointment in 1911 brought together as general officials of NAFTA four men, Alex Gossip, Jim O'Grady, Alf Purcell and Fred Bramley, men whose influence on Trade Union affairs and Labour history was to become disproportionately large in relation to the size of the Union from which they emerged.

(1) August, 1908

The most prominent of the group at this time was Jim O'Grady and with his appointment as Parliamentary Secretary, and relinquishment of Trade Organising duties, he was appointed Chairman of G.F.T.U. in 1912. Jim O'Grady had, however, already established a reputation for himself outside of the union structure, even as early as 1903, when he was invited by the American woodworkers to visit the U.S.A. His report to the NAFTA membership of this visit is of interest in its contrast between America and U.K. working conditions. (The union had operated an emigration fund from 1868).

'I landed in New York, after some trouble with the immigration officials, who cannot or will not understand that there is any difference between a trades union official and the physical force anarchists'.

In the U.K. however, one American idea was causing some problems on the industrial scene and at the Federation of Engineering and Ship Building Trades conferences in May 1904, a sub-committee was set up to look into the new phenomena in industry of Premium Bonus Systems. This, a variation of the piecework system, allowed for the setting of a target output per day or per week. On achieving this target the workman was paid a basic wage. If production was above this target level then the operative was paid a bonus, but not in a straight proportion to the increase in production but rather only a ratio of between 30 per cent and 70 per cent to the increase in production. The aim of these systems was that as the employer supplied the wherewithal to produce, he should share with the worker the fruits of any increased output. Such incentive schemes were not fully understood by employers or workers at this time and most failed to grasp that the benefit to the employers using any

bonus system is a fixed labour cost and as output rises a proportionate reduction in the unit overhead cost. In other words, a factory has fixed costs whether anything or nothing is produced in a week; as the production rises the proportion of these fixed costs chargeable to a unit if production drop as the output rises. By using the Premium Bonus System the employer reduced his unit overhead costs on production and gained a further reduction in the unit labour cost of production. (i)

The sub-committee consisting of J.M.Jack, Ironmoulders, D.C.Cummings, Boilermakers, John Wiltshire, Braziers and Sheet Metal Workers, Jim O'Grady NAFTA and William Mosses, United Pattern Makers, condemned the system and made a substantial case against it to their members. They first condemned the lack of consultation between employer and workmen in fixing the time for a job. 'We recognise the right of the employer to obtain the full value of their machinery....but we claim that the workman has the right to the full value of his labour: and a system which deprives him of a proportion of that value, by compelling him to share it with his employer is economically unsound and morally unjust'.

They then went on to look at how the rate for the job was arrived at. 'The pace is set by the strongest and most proficient workmen, and with the inevitable consequence that the weaker must go to the wall. The argument that the proficient workman should have an advantage over his less gifted fellow, lacks the saving merit or originality. All recognise that degrees of proficiency exist and that the superior workman has the right to benefit by his superior skill and industry: but we strongly object to the doctrine that the excellence of one man shall be

(i) See I.L.O. Payment by Results GEN/6/R 1960

made the medium for grinding down another who is not so gifted, and we recognise that the standard which one man may reach is quite impossible of attainment by his fellow workman'. 'Whilst every Trade Union fixes a minimum rate of wages, none decreases a maximum beyond which no one of their members shall be paid'. (This last statement is not true and furniture workers had a well justified reputation for establishing 'shop limits' that is local employee agreement to limit output and earnings, indeed this was one of the employers' complaints which lead in part to the Scottish lock out of 1898). 'Employers can and do, recognise, superior ability and added responsibility by paying time rates of wages much in excess of the rates mutually agreed upon as the standard for the general run of workmen (which was also true as reference to the wage rates of 1900 shows).

The committee went on to state 'It (the system of premium bonus payment) creates jealousy and ill feeling in the workshop, and is the cause of endless bickering and misunderstanding owing to the complicated and intricate character of the calculations involved in many of the systems'. 'Far from sweetening the relations between employers and workmen, it has the directly opposite effect'.

Harry Ham, General Secretary, died in November, 1905. A founder member of the Alliance Cabinetmakers, he was President for thirteen years and General Secretary for a further twenty years. One of the five cabinetmakers jailed under the old Criminal Law Amendment Act in 1875, he was remembered as a cautious man a 'sage counsel' 'the older helmsman' in a time when such caution was not inappropriate. There is, however, a sense of events having moved past him in his latter years,

and indeed, of him, being overtaken by the new bright hopes of the executive in O'Grady and Gossip and the praise for his work and his memory in the Monthly and Annual Report hint at this, 'for so long a faithful and trustworthy servant of the Association' 'his sound advice against rash words or actions' 'an honest and devoted worker'. Perhaps Harry Ham did not, particularly in his later years, stand as an inspirational figure, but after 33 years service to the Union, from tiny local society to National Union, he was at the centre, and the very existence of the NAFTA was of his more than any other single man's making. (i)

In the nominations for General Secretary Alex Gossip was nominated by sixty-six of the seventy-eight Branches sending in returns and all others nominated withdrawing their nomination, Alex Gossip was elected to the post of General Secretary which he would hold for thirty-six years.

That the Union had acquired a new voice is clear from the first Annual Report he makes as General Secretary in 1906. A socialist determined to make his message clear in the fashion of the non-conformist preacher, he missed no opportunity to 'spread the word'. The Annual Report, not now in the measured terms of Harry Ham, has become a weapon in the war of enlightenment. 'The benefits (of increased production) do not go to the worker, and all the talk of increased prosperity simply means enhanced dividends and profits to the few, and the street or workhouse to the many. The power and wealth of the few will increase at the expense of the people generally, and ever will

(i) NAFTA Annual Report 1905

until we recognise the truth that lies in the statement that 'he who owns the things men must have, own the men who must have them' and having recognised this act accordingly and free ourselves once and for all from what is simply slavery, though not always called by that name'.

'We have reason to congratulate the members of our class on the undoubted fact, that some glimmering of light is at least beginning to show here and there in the midst of the darkness, and men are now beginning to ask questions as to the why and wherefore of the many anomalies of life, and are not so prepared to accept as gospel the ready answer of the rich, or those they pay to answer for them in high-flown language'.

This was not, however, the call to revolution that some commentators on Alex Gossip would have us believe. His was not a doctrine of taking to the street and tearing down the portals of capitalism. His was a message of self-improvement and education of the working man, that he might no longer be manipulated, and with knowledge he could decide his own destiny, as the concluding paragraphs of that report shows clearly.

'The series of lectures which several of our Branches have instituted during the past year, and the subjects chosen for discussion are all steps in the right direction, and we trust to see a further expansion on similar lines'. (i)

One aspect of this type of socialism was the recognition of the need for Internationalism. NAFTA has always had a reputation for its

(i) J.Robinson Ind. Rel. in the Furn. Ind. in the U.K.  
M.Phil Thesis Oxford

international links both in times of peace and in war, and the foundations of these ties were laid down in this period.

NAFTA sent Alex Gossip as their delegate to the First International Woodworkers Congress in 1904 in Amsterdam and to the International Socialist Congress in the same city in that year. (i)

The membership of the former is of some interest in that it indicates the relative levels of workers organisations at this time (September 1904) in the woodworking industry in Europe. (see footnote)

(i) NAFTA Report Sept, 1904

Footnote

France	4 delegates	2 societies	5,000 members
Belgium	3 delegates	2 societies	2,200 members
Germany	5 delegates	3 societies	102,700 members
Hungary	1 delegate	1 society	5,000 members
Serbia	1 delegate	1 society	400 members
Sweden	1 delegate	1 society	7,700 members
Denmark	3 delegates	3 societies	4,970 members
Holland	3 delegates	1 society	700 members
Austria	1 delegate	1 society	72,000 members
Italy	1 delegate	1 society	3,000 members
Great Britain	1 delegate	1 society	7,000 members
11 Countries	24 delegates	17 societies	210,670 members

The objective of the Woodworkers Congress was to form an International Union to protect the common interest, to prevent black-legging from one country to another, to provide financial assistance on an international scale, and to regulate the movement of woodworkers from one country to another.

The International Socialist Congress was in its turn attended by 110 delegates from the United Kingdom, and Alex Gossip, in his report to the Union, and as an avowed pacifist, seeing wars for what they really were for the working man, reports, what for him is the unforgettable moment of the Conference, of the Russian and Japanese delegates publically shaking hands (in the midst of the Russo-Japanese War) 'The present war - like all other modern wars, is a capitalist one, and the workers on either side have no quarrel with each other, they are simply used as a part of the machinery to bolster up one gang of thieves against another'.

The idealism of Alex Gossip was, however, not to any great extent shared by the membership at large, nor for that matter by the executive committee. The appeals for financial assistance received by the Union for the period 1906 - 1908 telling their own story.

- |      |  |
|------|--|
| 1906 | 8000 French furniture workers on strike £10 sent                                   |
| 1907 | German, Danish and Belgian furniture workers locked out.<br>£5 sent to each group. |

Appeals for funds to allow Russian workers to fight the elections for the Duma. No record of any funds sent.

- |      |   |
|------|---|
| 1908 | Belgian furniture workers on strike. £8 sent. (i) |
|------|---|

(i) Journal and Annual Reports 1906 - 08

Alex Gossip represented the Association at the International Woodworkers Conferences of the period in Amsterdam, Stuttgart and Copenhagen. The proceedings were, though, essentially concerned with the effective control of the movement of working men between countries but they also represented forums for the discussion of progress and problems at an international level 'I am proud of the fact that our Association is foremost in this work of Internationalism and is not prepared to look at the matter from the miserably narrow point of view adopted by more conservative unions'.

The British Delegation at the International Socialist and Trades Union Congress held in 1910 were, however, far from Conservative in approach or attitude and when the sub-committee on unemployment headed by Alex Gossip failed to construct a resolution for the Congress suitable to the times Gossip with his British and American, French and German colleagues, tabled a resolution stating:-

'Unemployment is the result of the capitalist organisation of society and cannot be disassociated from it....measures (to deal with unemployment) must not merely be palliative but must contain the germs of the organisation of the socialist common wealth and be the beginning of the permanent organisation of national resources, and production, industrial and agricultural on a co-operative basis'. (i)

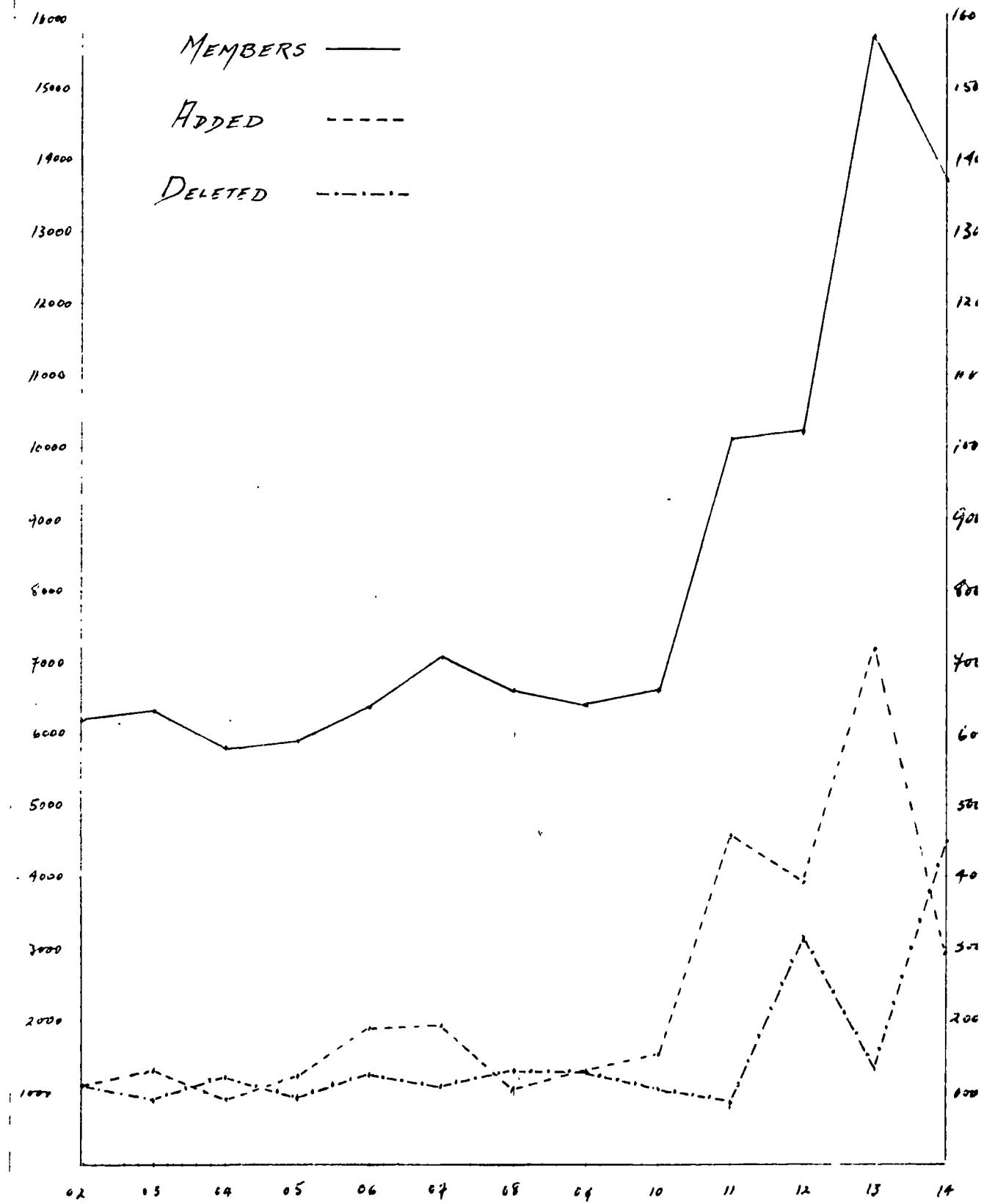
These Conferences were, however, most marked by their internal squabbling and disputes and as such were a profound disappointment to Alex Gossip. Seeing the major issues at stake he wrote in the union journal 'The sweating and grinding crew of capitalists fear, as they

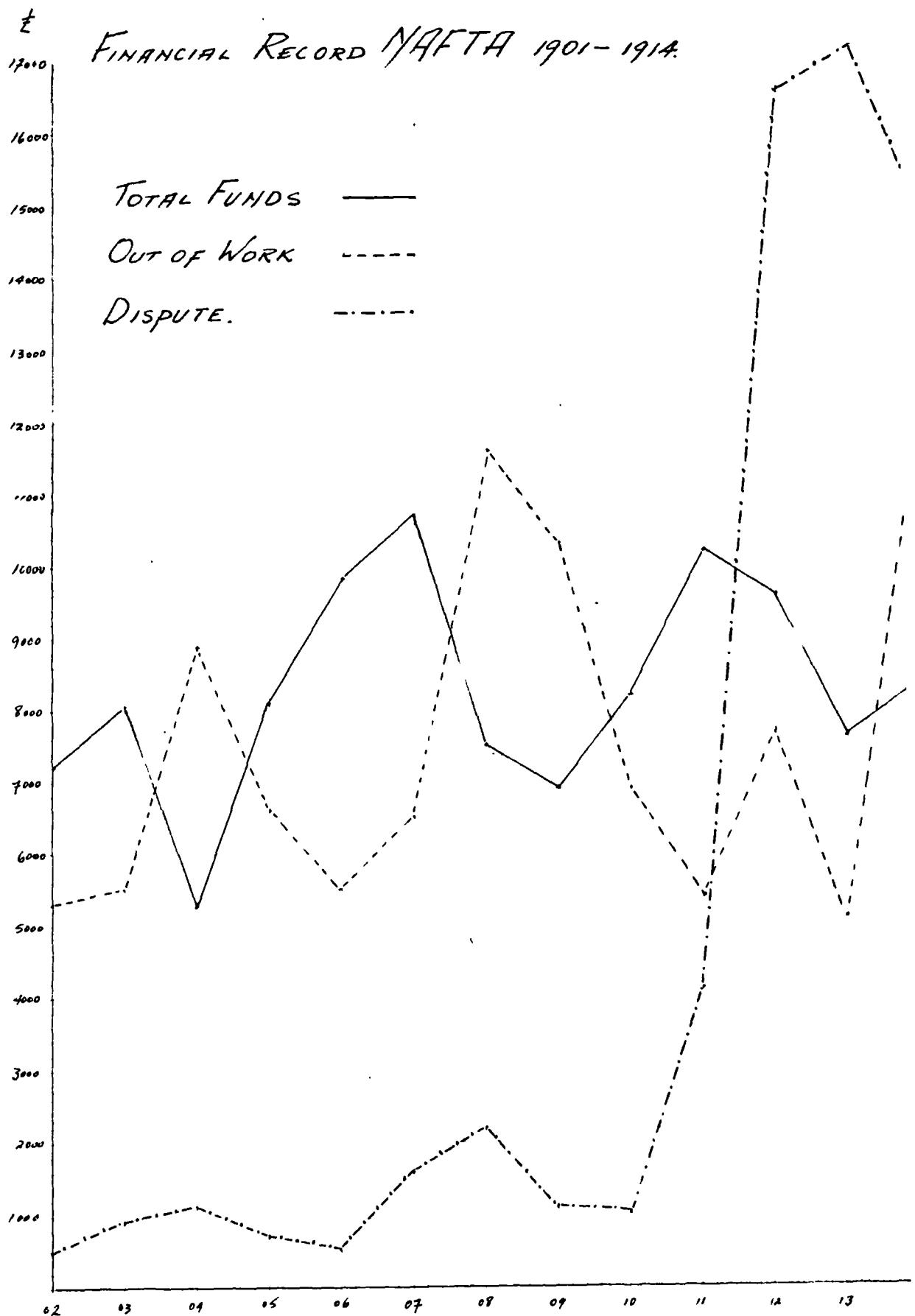
(i) M.R. Oct, 1910

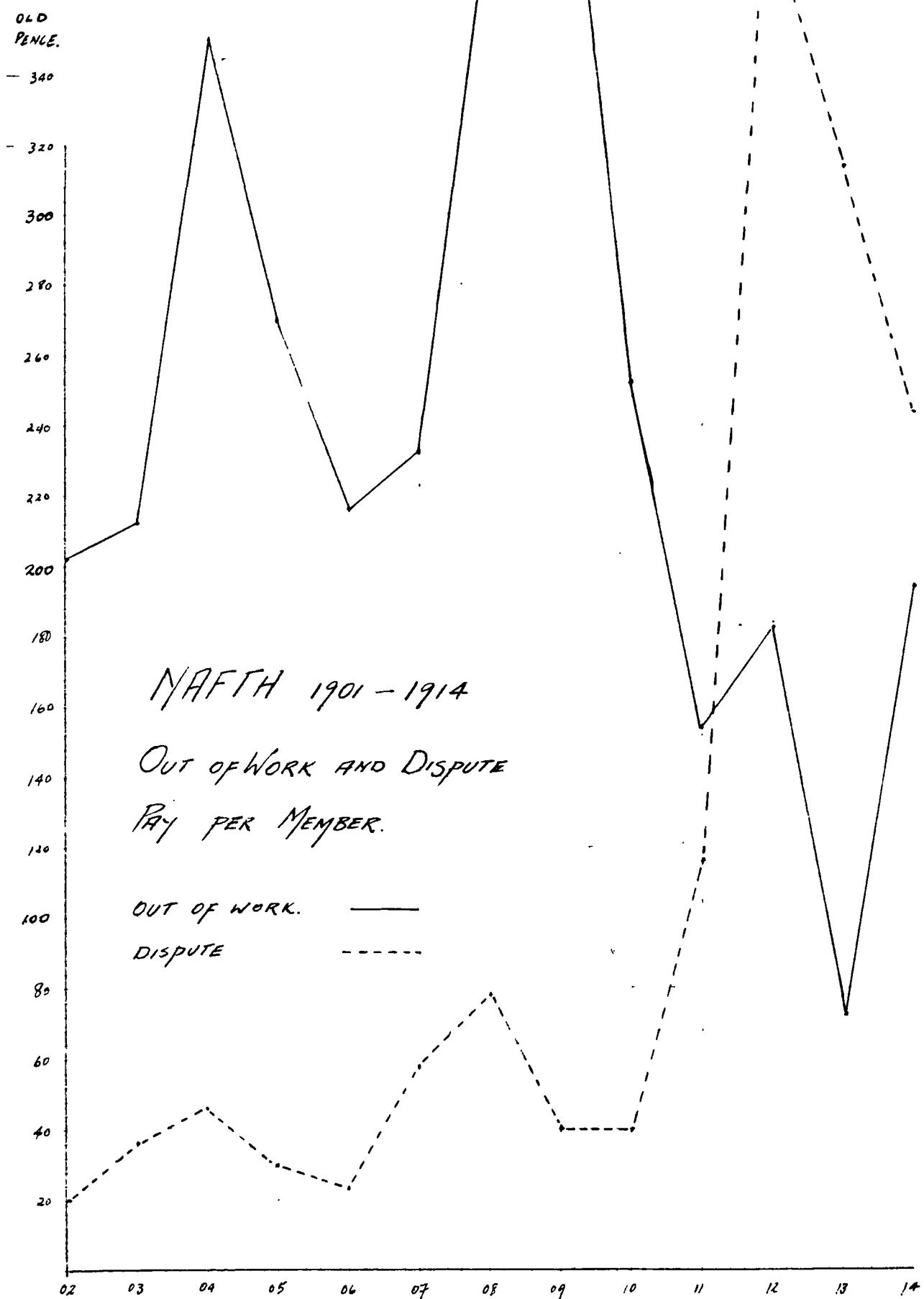
fear nothing else, the growing organisation of the workers. The employers are combined, regardless of religion or shade of politics, and it now lies with our class, if we are to be successful to give up all petty squabbings amongst ourselves and unite against this brutal tyranny'.

It was such a combination of employers, which Alex Gossip feared, which was to present the NAFTA with its greatest challenge as they attempted to organise the workers in the largest centre of furniture production in the United Kingdom, in High Wycombe, and lead to the Lock Out of 1913/1914.

# MEMBERSHIP NAFTA 1901-1914







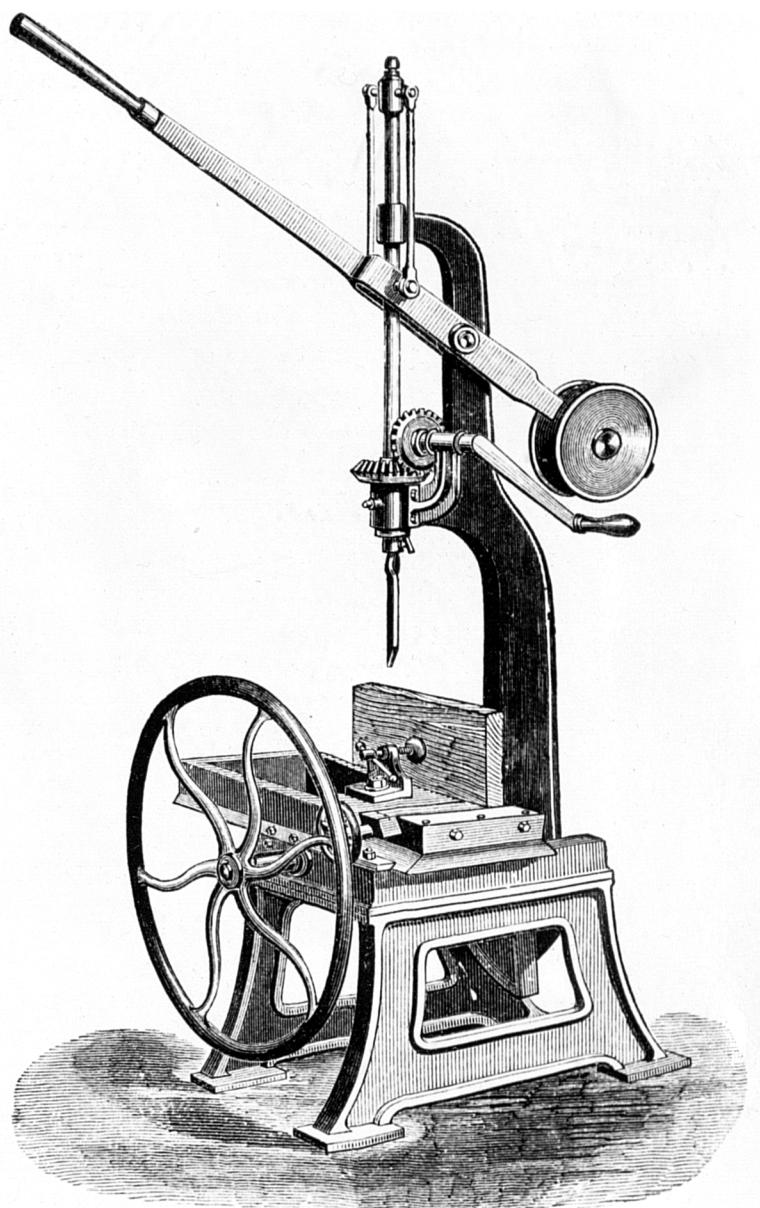


FIG. 33.—HAND-POWER MORTISING AND BORING MACHINE.

1900 HAND POWERED

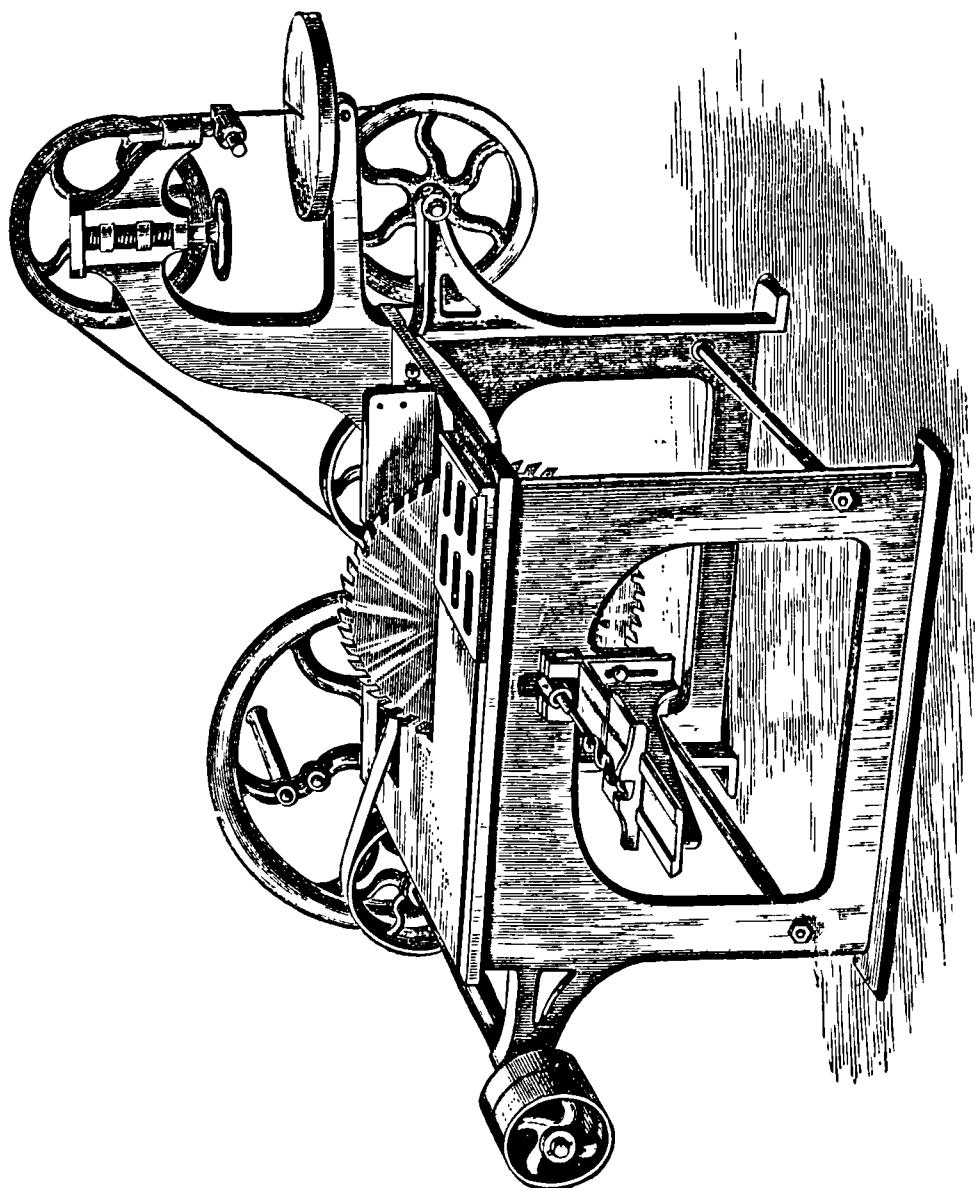


FIG. 34.—HAND OR STEAM POWER SAW BENCH AND BAND SAWING MACHINE COMBINED.

1900 HAND OR STEAM  
POWERED

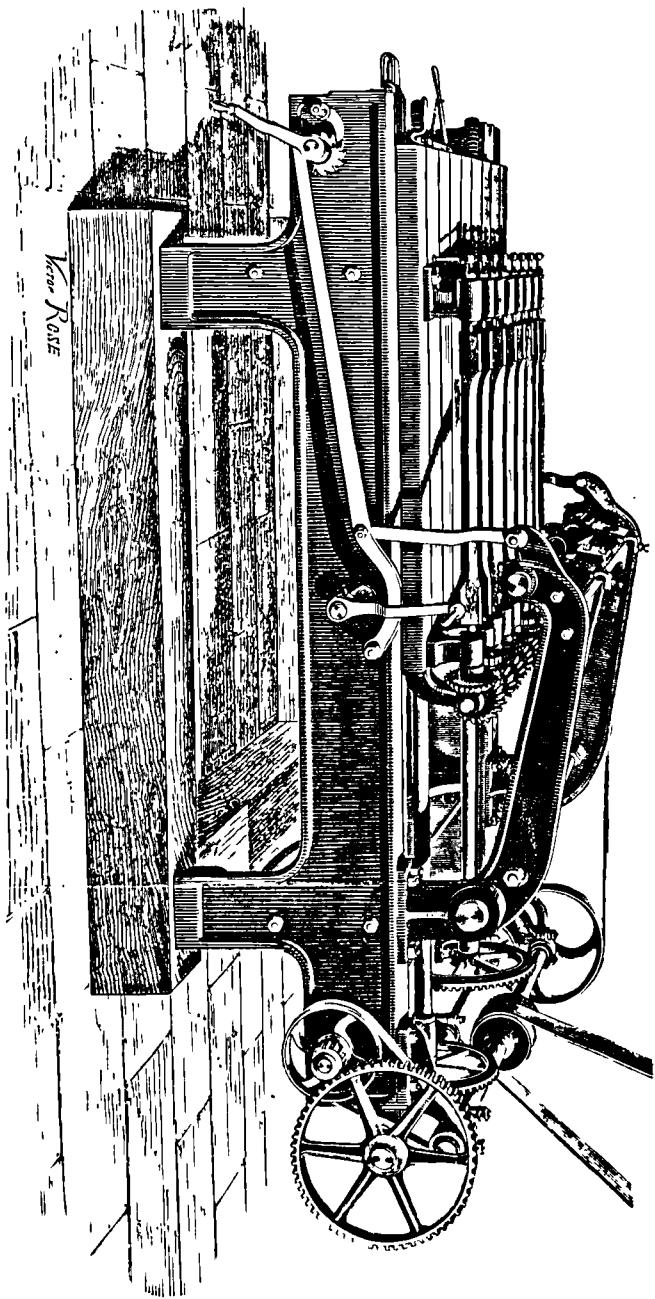


FIG. 80.—MULTIPLE COPYING MACHINE FOR DRESSING SPOKES, GUN STOCKS, ETC.

To print page 242.

1900 STEAM POWERED



CARVING PRODUCTION LINE

LEBUS 1901

LOCK OUT AT HIGH WYCOMBE 1913 - 1914

By 1913 High Wycombe had overtaken London to become, in terms of output, the major Furniture Making centre of the United Kingdom, but conditions of work and rates of pay did not, however, match this new role. Hours were long, twelve to fourteen hours per day common and Turners working anything up to a fifteen hour day. Rates of pay were poor and had not improved with the times even though the quality of work and levels of production had changed out of all recognition from the early days of furniture making in the town.

In 1913 in High Wycombe the trade of furniture making was at a crossroads. The 'Bodgers', the makers of windsor chairs and chair parts were still operating their lonely independent trades in the woods surrounding the town. In some factories conditions were merely the moving under cover of the trades practiced in the open air by the bodgers. Other factories operated extensive and punitive outworker systems with caning, rushing, carving and sewing all being 'sent out'. Some companies operated their workshops in the most autocratic manner whilst other owners saw their role as paternalistic and benevolent. The complete absence of machinery in some factories being in stark contrast to others who were amongst the most modern in the country with a heavy reliance on machinery and the workmen's subservience to those machines. Factory units were small and specialised, few employing more than 150 workers and most under 100 employees. The trade had been based on chaimaking but by the earliest years of the 20th Century cabinetmaking, upholstery and ship furnishing were becoming increasingly important and the area had gained a high reputation for the quality and quantity of its production.

An indication of wages and conditions in the area is given by the survey carried out in 1909 by a Social Services Committee reporting on rates of pay and working hours in the Borough of High Wycombe.

Chairmakers 1st grade 150 men 30/- to 32/- per week  
2nd grade 350 men 25/- per week  
3rd grade 150 men 16/- per week

Framers 1st grade 600 men 25/- to 30/- per week  
2nd grade (not known) 18/- per week

Upholsterers 350 men - some earning - 32/- average 24/-

Polishers 500 men - some earning - 28/- average 22/-

Carvers 1st grade 35 men 38/- per week  
2nd grade 50 men 20/- to 25/- per week

Turners 3 grades (numbers unknown) from 15/- to 32/- per week  
after deductions where the turner pays for the  
power used for his machine!

Cabinetmakers 60 men 31/- to 32/- per week

Benchmen & Packers 200 men averaging 18/- per week

General Machinists 200 men (largely unskilled) 18/- to 20/-  
per week

Total 2,645 men plus estimated figures for Turners and 2nd grade  
Framers - some 3,000 men

The Report states an average wage in High Wycombe for furniture workers to be 21/- to 25/- per week of 54 to 60 hours and rates in other towns were much higher. The average wage in Birmingham being 36/- and London 43/- for a fixed week of 52 hours. (NAFTA estimate 1913) As the NAFTA Trade Organiser, Fred Bramley, stated at the time - 'It is the close proximity of Wycombe to London, with the cheapest labour, long hours and bad conditions which has inspired our activity in this district. We are determined to organise and by organising improve the conditions of the men employed in the most important furniture producing centre in the country, and the desire to protect the interests of our members in all parts'. (i)

(i) M.R. Feb, 1913

Conditions were, indeed, primitive. The factories had windows 'glazed at the expense of the workers' - the employer supplying only oiled calico. Lighting was by oil lamps - fuelled by the workers. When gas came into general use each worker paid 6 pence per week from his wage for the privilege. The grindstone was available to all at a deduction of 1 pence per man per week and the boy labour in the workshop was paid for by the work groups not the employer. Bench space was paid for at 2 shillings per week, and, of course, electrical power when used was paid for by the worker.

This inequitable state of affairs was accepted particularly by the older workers as being part of the custom and practice of their trade. An old chair framer is quoted in the local paper 'I couldn't make chairs without I had a roof over my head, so it was only fair that I should pay for my bench room; likewise if I wanted to frame on after dark I needed light to do it by, and it seems to be only reasonable that a master would jib at paying you for chairs that you had made by the light he had paid for'. (i)

Another major area of discontent was over loading and unloading. The system of piece work was the most common method of payment yet the workers were expected to do all the loading and unloading of the raw materials and finished goods - without payment. The same framer said 'As to unloading well, you wanted to work indoors and that chair stuff wouldn't get up and walk into you, and when the chairs were made, they were precious little use to the master or to you till they were up on the van and away'.

(i) South Bucks Free Press Jan, 1913

This was the apathy which had in the past resulted in the failure of the local societies in High Wycombe and the difficulties which beset the small union Branch (No.72) in the town. There was a real need for organising the workforce since whilst this situation pertained in the largest manufacturing centre in the country, any and all advances gained elsewhere were placed in jeopardy.

The Furniture industry was going through a busy period in 1913 and as the Organisers report in the June NAFTA Journal states - 'the bulk of employers are afraid of any long struggle....'never before in the history of the furnishing trade has there been such a tremendous demand for furniture products, and so, a decision was made in early 1913 to attempt to 'improve High Wycombe' and in common with its practice in other towns a piecemeal, one target at a time approach .

was used. In this approach a set of guide lines was decided upon, an improvement in the hourly rate or a reduction in hours, and having set the target the trade organiser would visit a few firms. If the visit was successful all well and good, if not a meeting outside the factory gates, a lightning strike and normally capitulation. In such a way an unorganised town could be tackled quickly and inexpensively and effectively, and when a good majority of the firms had been won over sets of working rules for the area could be established as guide lines for the future. Such an approach was not only economical but with limited finance was an economic necessity, but it could only be attempted when trade was buoyant and any disruption of production resulted in a loss of orders and sales to another company. (i) (ii)

- (i) Fred Bramley Monthly Report June 1913
- (ii) E.C. Minutes Jan/Feb 1913

The need to improve wages and conditions in High Wycombe was made the more necessary by agreements reached in Bristol, Birmingham and London in 1912, which were substantially in advance of those in existence in High Wycombe, and so in January 1913 the NAFTA and the Joinery Trades Organiser took on Wainwrights of Wooburn Green, a firm some three miles from the centre of High Wycombe. After a short, sharp struggle, the firm conceded a reduction in hours from  $56\frac{1}{2}$  to 50 hours per week - a wages increase from 8 pence and  $8\frac{1}{2}$  pence to  $9\frac{1}{2}$  pence per hour with a further increase to 10 pence per hour in May 1913; overtime rates to be paid, time and a half for the first two hours, double time thereafter, a substantial improvement which undoubtedly did not go unnoticed by the High Wycombe & District Furniture Manufacturers Society which had recently reformed.

The Union, however, at this stage had neither the local strength nor the solidarity that was a prerequisite of any prolonged struggle and the incidents which followed at Wainwrights were without doubt noted by the Manufacturers Society as well as the Union. In the Trade Organiser's words - 'I have to report the most dirty action on the part of the non-union workers I have ever heard of or ever thought was possible'. (i)

The advance in wages had been paid; the reduction in hours achieved when a deputation of Cabinetmakers, Joiners and Polishers went to the Managing Director to protest the reduction in hours. The whole episode is extraordinary in that the rates had moved from 37/8d for  $56\frac{1}{2}$  hours to 41/8d for 50 hours, plus payment for overtime which had never occurred before. The astonishment of the Union Organisers

(i) Fred Bramley Monthly Report March, 1913

was matched by the Managing Director of Wainwrights who said - 'I could not help being surprised that men should oppose, and attempt to defeat the men who were fighting their battles'. In the end goodwill and good sense prevailed on both sides and the agreement was signed but this incident is a clear indication of the lack of trade union identity which was prevalent in this rural area at the time.

The Union strength in January in High Wycombe was 121 members and so a massive recruiting campaign was mounted and by June of 1913 the Unions had 2,321 fully paid up members in the town. The Manufacturing Society's Minutes are no longer in existence but we do know that they also were recruiting members; and by the time the dispute broke out they had 31 members out of a town total of over 80 Manufacturers. Furthermore, it is not unreasonable to assume that they counted on any dispute being a short one on the assumption that this anti-union group at Wainwrights was typical of all work groups in the area.

The battle had been joined in High Wycombe but in keeping with NAFTA traditions it was low key and localised. The first firm to be tackled was Parkers and the issue/<sup>at stake</sup> was the extensive use of low paid outworkers and the low rates of pay of carvers. The dispute was successfully resolved with increase in pay and increases of the factory personnel and the abandonment of outworkers.

One point of interest in this particular action was that Parkers, in an attempt to break the dispute sent an agent to France to recruit carvers in the Paris area and he duly hired ten and was proceeding back to England with them, but at the station the Paris Wood Carvers

Association agent was there to tell the men of the true reason for their recruitment. The men attacked Parker's agent who, poor man, ended up in a Parisian jail for causing a breach of the peace.

As a matter of some importance, however, was the editorial article of the Furniture Record for 10th October which spoke out most strongly against the guerilla war approach of the Trade Unions and of the need for the National Association of Furniture Manufacturers to fight this threat.

The Union had recognised that the hour was right but the employers had not been too slow in becoming organised. The October 17 issue of the Furniture Record carried a letter from Thomas Restall, Secretary of the Birmingham Employers Federation (in reply to the guerilla war article) - 'you are mistaken' he writes 'when you say that we in Birmingham are acting independently of the National Association - on the contrary, the National Association are rendering us both financial and other assistance. The Employers of the town recognise that we are fighting not only for our own city but for the trade in the country and are doing their share in helping us'. The Birmingham dispute was, in fact, settled with useful gains having been made by the furniture workers but as the Birmingham Furnishing Employers Journal commented 'the lessons of the conflict were being studied by both parties to the dispute'. (i)

Although the actual decision to fight for better conditions and wages in High Wycombe was tactically considered and agreed earlier in 1913 a formal ballot was held amongst the newly strengthened branches

(i) Birmingham Furnishing Employers Journal Nov, 1913

in the town. It was a simple, in favour or not, of a 'Trade Movement' and the results were/astonishing 2,331 for and 0 against and since this was the total furniture union membership in the town at the time it represents the clearest indication of the workers new will to fight and win in the light of the poor wages and conditions that pertained.

This decision was taken in May yet even by November the industrial relations situation was being described by the local South Bucks Herald as being 'quiet'. The NAFTA organiser, Fred Bramley, explained in the Journal - 'We have selected the lower rated (work)shops one by one, and dealt with them, in all cases with such conspicuous success as to fill the others with alarm!' (i)

In November however, this softly, softly approach was countered by an instruction from the Employers Association 'to pay no further increases in wages without the consent of all (of its members) and to refer all Union officials to the Association'. So battle was joined when it was decided to withdraw labour from the firms of Stratfords and C. Smiths - 'two shops which refused to consider improving conditions'. Union Funds were limited for such a fight so the permission to withdraw labour was given by the E.C. with the rider 'All possible means to avoid dispute however, to be first taken'. Such caution was very necessary; in June the funds of NAFTA had stood at £1,134 in current account (excess of income over current expenditure) and deposited moneys £10,595. It was agreed that a general levy of all members should be made of 3/6d payable at 6 pence per week. This was, however, the 3rd General Levy of the year and the financial

(i) South Bucks Herald 16 November 1913 and  
NAFTA Journal Nov, 1913

position worsened as the year progressed. By December the union had little more than £5000 in funds and expenditure was £2,500 in excess of income. In six months of disputes the assets of the Union having dropped by a half. (i)

By mid-November there were 400 men out in High Wycombe and at a meeting on the 21st the Unions presented to the Federation a schedule of wages and conditions desired as a pre-condition to a return to work. It was not an extravagant claim - indeed there was no figure included that was not at that time being paid somewhere in the town. This schedule was received by the Federation but they in their turn presented their own schedule and though discussion took place it was dead-locked and both retired to consider the others proposals.

At this point the employers moved on to the offensive. One cancelled the morning break of fifteen minutes (in a five hour morning shift) unless the men worked this time as an unpaid extra at the end of the day. Another employer ordered his men to parade in front of him and publicly tear up their Union cards or be discharged. In both cases the provocation resulted in the workers walking out and picketing the factory.

The Federation and the Unions held various meetings over the next few days, all inconclusive and these terminated with a Federation notice being posted in the works of all 31 of their member firms. The essence of the notice was 'the Federation will no longer continue to negotiate and will terminate the engagement of all members of the Union in this company'.

(i) E.C. Minutes Mar, 1913

'In accordance with the above resolution, all Union men employed in this firm are hereby given one hour's notice to terminate their respective agreements'. Immediately this affected 2,000 men and 300 women workers and eventually resulted in over 3,000 members of the various Furniture Unions being locked out of work.

The workers were not despondent. Public meetings were held with many thousands attending. Picketing was an occasion for singing and the playing of the workers' Brass Band and at the High Wycombe Electroscope Zola's Germinal played to packed houses every night of the week. The Band went on to tour London and South Wales to raise funds for the strikers (see photograph) and exhibition games were played at Loakes Park, High Wycombe by Wycombe Wanderers football team for the strike fund. 'Cycle parties went long distances to make collections at factory gates in towns where considerable support was forthcoming'. Homes of blacklegs were visited in an attempt to persuade the few who remained in work to come out in support. This sometimes caused intense excitement, especially so as the women-folk were as bitter as the men! (1)

The police issued notices on the penalties for obstruction and intimidation and in an atmosphere of rising social tension various attempts at conciliation were made, petitions of ministers of religion and of shopkeepers and trades people were presented to both sides calling for conciliation. The Federation Chairman, C.E.Skull, rejected these by stating that the Federation terms for further negotiations was acceptance of their schedule of wages.

(1) '40 years after' Recollections by Ted Rolfe of 1913-14 pamphlet

But not all manufacturers shared this negative stance. As evidenced by the actions of the Mayor of High Wycombe, John Gomm. He was a furniture manufacturer and member of the Federation but he resigned from the Federation, settled with the Unions on their terms and opened his factory next day hiring extra workers. There may have been a strong element of self-interest but he explained it away by stating that with the prospect of a protracted dispute he felt 'my membership of the Federation must of necessity prejudice my position as Mayor'.

The dispute and the association meetings and picketing had remained peaceful and relatively good humoured up until this stage but the Watch Committee had been informed by the local Chief Constable on 1st December that he anticipated 'disturbances arising in consequence of the Strike and it was resolved that the Chief Constable be authorised, after consultation with the Mayor to obtain the assistance of 50 Metropolitan Police. On 16th December after 2½ weeks on strike matters changed. Some 1,200 workers assembled at the West End Street factory of Goodearl Brothers where the workers were still working at the old rates, and when 'lights out' came at 7 o'clock and the men left the factory there was what the correspondent describes as a 'hostile rush'. Some injuries were sustained and windows broken and the police, when called, cleared the street with repeated baton charges. The reporter notes 'Amongst the crowd were a considerable number of women caners and upholsteresses and they encouraged the demonstrators with their approving cries!' (i) (ii)

- (i) Borough of Chepping Wycombe Watch Committee Minutes Book  
1st December 1913
- (ii) South Bucks Herald 20th December 1913

The local Chief Constable, alarmed by this development called for his reinforcements and ten mounted and fifteen foot officers arrived from London, and were quickly in action at a public meeting the following night. After the meeting the police ordered the crowd to disperse and when they did not do so to their satisfaction the mounted officers rode at the crowd to break it up. The Mayor appealed for calm - to no avail and a very serious situation was saved by the intervention of Fred Bramley, the Trade Organiser who persuaded the workers to disperse. The Times reported the incident as 'last night after a meeting of the men had been held, the police were subjected to hostile demonstrations. Further disorders are feared'. (i)

The Unions, recognising the gravity of the situation now formed an anti-violence brigade to provide 'a physical force for the workers' and whilst Alex Gossip likened the police action to that of 'the Czarist Police of Russia', clearly the anti-violence brigade were intended as marshalls as it was in everyone's interests to avoid confrontation as far as possible. Yet with only a proportion, all be it large, of the workforce on strike, tempers were rising. A striker is reported in the Daily Herald as stating "We have reached the limit of our patience. If all the non-union men were out, the trouble would be over in a week. If they won't come out quietly, they must come out by force. We're fighting, not only for ourselves, but for the women and the kids". (ii)

Christmas in High Wycombe that year was a bleak and quiet time. The effects of the strike were hitting the workers and their families

(i) Times, 18 Dec, 1913 p.5  
(ii) Daily Herald 17 Dec.

very hard. Never well paid they had few reserves to fall back on and strike pay was sufficient only to keep families from starvation. The Strike Committee opened a soup kitchen in the yard of the Swan Hotel and appealed to local allotment holders to donate what they could spare for this kitchen which was feeding the children of the strikers. Indeed, before the end of the strike several soup kitchens were operating in the town and 1,500 children were being fed in this way. Some were in schools, some, like the Swan kitchen, in local pubs, and some were run by the Salvation Army. Unfortunately due to the loss of the 'Poor Law' records the full extent of the poverty resultant from the dispute will remain a matter of hearsay.

The children were not forgotten at Christmas and toys were collected nationally and on Boxing Day the Unions, the W.E.A. and the Sunday schools of the area fed 1,000 children in the Town Hall and presented each with a toy.

The lock out continued into the New Year with no signs of weakness or lack of resolve on either side; however, on the 7th of January the Employers Federation met and it was announced that an offer had been received from Lord Rothschild, Lord Lieutenant for Bucks to convene a conference under his chairmanship. (He had also sent £100 to the Childrens' Feeding Fund). A decision on this was deferred as Sir George Askwith had, in his capacity as mediator, and representative of the Board of Trade, asked to meet the parties in the dispute.

The Metropolitan Police had left High Wycombe before Christmas but renewed agitation on the 6th of January resulted in their recall. Tempers ran high and there were repeated clashes between police and workers.

Injuries were sustained on both sides and crowds were being dispersed by charges of mounted police. In a town of chairmakers where the traditional weapon of the working man was a beech chair leg the clashes must, indeed, have been fearsome. When arrested the workers could expect scant justice since, as Mr Bramley said 'The prosecuting solicitor is a Mr A.J. Clarke - who was doing his duty as a professional man; but the bench was composed of five Magistrates. One was Mr Clarke's father, another his father-in-law, a third a personal friend of Mr Clarke and a fourth man quite prejudiced against Trades Union Principles - 'What can we expect from such a bench?' In fact sentences were light and arrests few. The Times reported the assault of a Police Inspector 'The Inspector said he was called to the recreational ground where there was a disorder. The accused, Enos George Pusey, chairmaker, threw something which struck him on the cheek with some force. He rode forward and carried him out of the recreational ground'. After conflicting evidence, the Bench dismissed the case. Two others arrested on the same night for window breaking during the disturbance were bound over to keep the peace.

Both parties to the dispute met with Sir George Askwith who only makes a passing mention of this dispute in his memoirs, on the 9th January, but with no conclusion and so the lock out continued. (i)

Support for the Wycombe workers was widespread. At a meeting in the Town Hall 2,000 people were addressed by Fred Bramley, Trade Organiser of NAFTA, Louis Keckie, General Secretary of the AUU, Mr Fear of the London Defence Committee and Mrs Lewis of the Womens Federation and their most heartening news was a grant of £1,000 to

(i) Ind.Problems and Disputes, Lord Askwith, Harvester Press 1974

the Strike Committee from the AUU and £2,000 from the Amalgamated Society of Engineers.

To ensure that all workers were still of good heart and to demonstrate this solidarity to the employers the strike committee held a ballot:-

1. Are you in favour of accepting the employers terms? - 42 votes
2. Are you in favour of accepting the committee's proposals? - 1591 votes

This result was sent to the Employers Federation, who were, in their turn, as uncompromising. 'Inasmuch as the so-called ballot taken by the men on Saturday evening last shows such disinclination on the part of the men to return to work, this Federation unanimously resolves to adjourn until the Standard Schedule of Rates of Wages, is accepted by the men'.

In fact, the deadlock was not as complete as it might have appeared. Sir George Askwith was due to visit the town in a few days, and on the streets the confrontations had diminished to the point at which the Metropolitan Police reinforcements again could leave the town. This hope for peace was, however, not realised as violence returned to High Wycombe at the beginning of February.

On Monday 2nd February, the town was as the press described it 'In a state of uproar, with the police quite unable to cope with the situation'. (We have no means of knowing now the reasons behind the violence and destruction, neither the local or national papers nor

Union records doing more than recording the incidents but we can only conclude that with the return of a period of very cold weather the patience and tolerance of the workers finally broke).

The troubles started at midday with the assault on a blacklegging employee of Edgerley's of Frogmoor. The men then went on to Randall Brothers factory in Victoria Street - broke all the windows and smashed chairs found in the factory. The crowd, now large, headed by Councillor Forward, The Workers Bank and the Anti-Violence Brigade, marched through the Western Ward of the town. The windows of William Bartlett's factory were smashed, followed by the windows of the John Williams factory, then the factory of Castle Brothers. The crowd dealt with the factory windows of Joynson & Holland, Ebenezer Gomme, Stratford & Brion, James Cox & Son, Worley Brothers and, finally, Thomas Glenister - all factories with blacklegging workers.

The crowd was confronted in Frogmoor by the Metropolitan mounted police and with truncheons drawn, two charges were made at the crowd, estimated at 2,000. Calm was finally restored by the Lord Mayor but fighting had gone on between both sides from seven till eleven that evening. Indeed, during the very troubled week that followed the crowd were quite out of the control of the Union officials despite their appeals for calm. The obdurate attitude of the Federation, the dispute no nearer settlement, and a harsh winter, had left the workers bitter and violent.

A measure of the level of the disturbances is reported in the Times;

'A crowd of about 3,000 proceeded to the residence of Alderman Birch, the head of the leading chair factory in the town, and chairman of the Employers Federation, and broke a number of panes of glass in the house. Later, a number of youths made a hostile demonstration outside Messrs Glenisters factory". (i)

'There has been renewed violence here today (High Wycombe) by strikers in the chairmaking industry. A van load of chairs was captured by a party of rioters this morning and some of the contents thrown in the river. Later a wagon load of material for chairmaking, coming from the country was attacked. At an open air meeting of the unemployed held shortly before midday the leaders advised the men to "go for a nice walk and not throw stones". After the meeting a procession marched through the town to Desborough Street. Two non-unionists leaving work for their dinner were met by the procession and were "booed and hooted", and when they were actually threatened with violence, the police intervened. Stones and bottles were thrown by the crowd at the police who had been augmented by officers of the Metropolitan force, and several constables were hit. Some of the strikers were armed with parts of chairs, and as the situation threatened to become increasingly serious, a batton charge was made. Some among the crowd were injured, one man being badly cut on the head and rendered unconscious. Mounted Police were called to clear the main streets of the town'. (ii)

A lighter side to these incidents followed in the Magistrates Courts when a number of workers were summonsed after the disturbances. A Mrs Annie MacPortland was alleged to have broken windows in Joynson & Hollands factory and, in her own defence, claimed 'she' could not be guilty of such an act - she 'was no militant suffragetist'. She was set free.

(i) Times 6, Feb p.8 (ii) Times 7 Feb, p.5 1914

Not all those charges were treated so lightly with 10 workers being found guilty of a breach of the peace and fined £5 or £10 (the fines paid by the Union) and Fred Bramley is reported as stating "After Saturday's burlesque of justice the Unions have decided not to recognise the local court as a court of justice at all. The Masters have domination over the bench and control the decisions irrespective of the evidence. In future the union will not employ solicitors to defend their men: the principles of justice are no use before Wycombe magistrates and the men would be advised not to plead, but to inform the bench that they had no confidence in or respect for a tribunal incapable of impartial administration of the law". (i)

Sir George Askwith came to High Wycombe on the 17th February and spent the day in meetings with both sides of the dispute. On the following day he visited various factories 'to ascertain the character and quality of the work being done'.

The 'informal' conference was resumed on the 19th and a draft agreement arrived at to be submitted to both sides. This was formally ratified on Monday, 23rd February, and the factories re-opened and work recommenced in the town on Tuesday, 24th February.

After 91 days in the midst of winter, there ended the most bitter lock out to be recorded in the history of the Furniture Trades. The Union and the Furniture workers had as a result of the lock out won a great victory. When the dispute started the town of Wycombe was one of low pay and with no formalised terms of pay and conditions.

(i) Daily Herald 12 Feb 1914

With the settlement came improved pay and a set of working rules not only setting out hours and conditions but also giving the area a dispute procedure whereby 'In the event of any differences arising.... this matter will be dealt with by the Employer and Employees in the shops and if still unsettled and prior to the National officials of the men being called in, shall be referred to the Employers Federation and the men's local officials. The rates of pay and conditions were to apply 'to all employees in the district within a radius of ten miles of Wycombe Guildhall' thus ensuring that the small workshops in the outlying villages around High Wycombe did not become village sweat shops, and, indeed, ensuring that no undercutting of the main town employers could take place by local village entrepreneurs.

Hours of working were set at 54 hours per week - higher than London but better than ever before, and after 54 hours, overtime to be paid. Apprentices and learners and improvers were to be limited to one for every three journeymen, this latter clause putting paid to the tradition in busy times of 'setting on' as many young men and women as were necessary and dropping them when trade was slack.

The agreement ended with the clause 'Should any difference arise... no cessation of work shall take place before the matter has been dealt with by the representatives of the Union, and failing agreement submitted to the Chief Industrial Commissioner'. This clause pre-dates the later National Labour agreement "Status Quo" clause which with its various provisions has been so helpful in containing local disputes from becoming major areas of confrontation.

The Union settled in the dispute since they had exhausted their funds but gained their area of objective. It is less clear why the employers settled since their records are no longer in existence; however, it is suggested locally that manufacturers in other furniture making centres were happily taking over the trade of the High Wycombe Federation and in a period of good trading conditions were gaining customers who would normally have their furniture needs supplied by High Wycombe.

The rates of pay were not dramatically increased but overall there was a gain against the original offer from the Federation - which in its turn was a dramatic improvement on the original situation in the town. Fred Bramley reported to the Victory meeting in the Town Hall.

'Prior to the 29th November we had working in High Wycombe 328 Machinists at 7d. per hour or less, 200 of them working below 6½d. per hour - the rate is now 8d. per hour, 282 polishers at 7d. or less, nearly 200 of them at 6½d. and several at 5½d. per hour - their rate is now 8½d. per hour. We had 187 Upholsterers working for 8½d. per hour or less and they will now receive 9d. per hour'.

In resolving the dispute NAFTA spent £3,032 and was overdrawn on the National Strike Fund of the GFTU by over £500. High Wycombe represented a major victory in the fight against regional pockets of low pay and conditions for Furniture workers and the Union now turned its attention to the West Country where Cabinetmakers paid 3/- per week for bench space, Polishers 1/- a pint for ordinary polish, 1/3d. a pint for red polish and wood machinist working bandsaws, fret cutters, Panel planers, and dovetailers earned 14/- per week of 55 hours.

The solidarity of the workers had been a keynote of the High Wycombe dispute but this resolve was necessarily/permanent requirement, as the letter to the Press during the lockout from John Collings, who, as a chairback maker, had worked in the trade for 46 years, makes very clear. 'It is most essential that every member (of the Union) shall keep up his membership. Should it become defunct, the experience of the strike of 1872 will follow. In 1872 we were receiving 8/- per dozen for regular backs; we struck for 9/- which we obtained after several weeks. This increase gave me an average increase of 3/6d. per week. That price I received for 9 years. After the local Union became defunct (Wycombe Chairmakers Union) about this time a great depression in the trade came in the latter part of the Tory Government (1891). The employers took advantage of the situation and took off the extra scales and the men had no alternative to help themselves. About ten years ago another depression in the trade occurred and several firms took the opportunity to make substantial reductions in prices. In the firm in which I worked they reduced the rates by another 12½%. I think these facts should bring home to those in the trade that if the workers do not stand united against such oppression, they will be crushed'. (i) (ii)

When the news of the dispute settlement was received in High Wycombe in the afternoon with unbounded gratification, there was singing and dancing in the streets. The Lock out Band and the NAFTA choir were on the steps of the Guildhall and gave a concert of popular melodies, and there was some wonderful community singing. When the Union delegates return to High Wycombe station, they were

- (i) Monthly Report March 1914
- (ii) South Bucks Free Press 16, Dec. 1913

met by a cheering crowd of several thousands and a monster procession was formed, led by the Anti-Violence Brigade and the Lock Out Band. Wherever it went in the town there was the same signs of rejoicing; wives, mothers and children sharing in the happy demonstration. (i)

This dispute, this lock out was Fred Bramley's dispute. Just as the Scottish lock out was masterminded by Alex Gossip, so in High Wycombe the main burden of organisation was on the shoulders of Fred Bramley, Trade Organiser and ex-General Secretary of the Polishers. The Anti-Violence Brigade, the marshalls, the peace keeping force, but above all the band of young, fit, strong and committed young furniture workers who were recruited and organised by Fred Bramley in High Wycombe, is the only known instance of the formation of a workers brigade in any dispute in this area. (i)

The actions of the local and Metropolitan Police in this dispute is well recorded in the Union Journal and the local press and their crowd dispersal tactics of mounted men with riot sticks riding at a crowd would undoubtedly have led to many more injuries than are recorded or to much more severe intimidation than occurred had there not been this band of furniture workers surrounding the crowds ready, willing and able to fight back and protect the ordinary men and women gathered together to protest their right to organise. The local police had been reinforced throughout the dispute by the Metropolitan Police. At various stages in the struggle, their number reduced at the urging of the High Wycombe Furnishing Trades Joint Committee (the Union) and at others reinforced at the urging of the Furniture

(i) 40 Years after, Ted Rolfe op cit

Manufacturers Federation. Damage to property was in reality, much less significant than local and national press reports would indicate and claims under the Riot Damage Act from some 20 firms amounted to only £45. The cost, however, of the attendance of the Metropolitan Police in the Borough was a staggering £1,600.14s.11d. but was passed and paid by the Watch Committee without comment. (i)

The events which occurred in High Wycombe in 1913 are, in themselves quite extraordinary but should be seen as the telescoping of whole epochs of industrial organisation. This in its turn meant that whilst there was a core body of sophisticated and organised workmen in the town Furniture Industry (Branch 72 NAFTA) there was a mass body of newly organised workers with limited industrial experience.

In the fight for recognition extremes of behaviour became the norm, frustration expressed itself in violent form and scenes such as have been recorded are consistent with an industrial group emerging from a primitive or repressive workshop structure.

(i) Watch Committee Minutes 23 Dec, 1913,  
14 Jan, 1914 and 16 Feb, 1914

APPENDIX I TO WYCOMBE LOCK OUT

The following are figures for the three main wages and conditions documents presented in the dispute, namely the NAFTA schedule offered at the beginning of the dispute, the employers response and the final schedule agreed. It must be understood that these figures should be related to the wages shown earlier for 1909 and which can be taken as pertaining at the start of the 'wages movement'.

For the sake of clarity substantial simplification of the schedules has been undertaken; however, even with such it is very difficult to draw absolute parallels between the agreement and conflicting parties schedules since each used slightly different groupings of workers in a given wage band.

<u>GRADE OF WORK</u>	<u>AGREEMENT 23 FEB</u>	<u>NAFTA 20 NOV.</u>	<u>FEDERATION 29 NOV.</u>
POLISHERS	8½d.	8½d.	8d.
Polishers commonwork	8d.	8½d.	7d.
Stuffed over and Square chair makers, after machinery Crampers			
Gluers up, cleaners off work of a similar character	7½d.		7½d.
Best Framers	8d.	9d.	7d.
Best Cabinet makers	9½d.	10d.	9d.
Carvers common suites	8d.	-	-
Upholsterers	9d.	9d.	9d.
Upholsterers, Pin Cushions horse seats etc.	8d.	9d.	8d.
Benchmen	8d.	8d.	8d.

<u>GRADE OF WORK</u>	<u>AGREEMENT</u> <u>23 FEB</u>	<u>NAFTA 20 NOV</u>	<u>FEDERATION</u> <u>29 NOV</u>
Machinists (Spindle and four cutter)	8d.	9d.	8d.
Other machinists	7½d.	8d.	7d.
Turners	8d.	9d.	-
In layers	8d.	8d.	8d.
Chairmakers (highest class)	9d.	9d.	8½d.
Best Chairmakers	8½d.	9d.	8½d.
Markers and Packers Sandpaperers	7d.	8d.	7d.

WYCOMBE SECTION

To comprise Windsor, Cane, Cheap rush seated chairs and other work make or finished in a similar manner.

Benchmen	7d.	8d.	7d.
Framers	7d.	8d.	7d.
Polishers (common work)	7d.	8d.	7d.

### NAFTA 1914 - 1918

The years of the first world war were a watershed for NAFTA as they were for all of the British people. Some sixty per cent of all the firms in the industry were involved in war production of some kind and experienced changes in products, methods and technology. New glues, improved plywoods and framed construction changed the philosophy of the firms using them and did not leave those firms still involved in furniture making unaffected.

In common with other trade unions NAFTA found itself involved with government and government legislation to an extent never before imagined, the result being to limit its scope as a workers organisation in some areas, whilst extending it in others.

The first action of the Trades Union movement of the country on the declaration of war was taken on 24th August, 1914, by the Parliamentary Committee of the T.U.C. acting together with the Labour Party through the Joint Board, by declaring an industrial truce. The official leadership refused to take advantage of the fact that labour now had the whip hand in this war situation. They supported Britain's involvement in the war, and took the decision not to exploit their improved bargaining position through industrial action that would have disrupted production and impaired the war effort. NAFTA in common with a number of other unions obeyed this call, and closed down all current disputes at Wrexham, Manchester and Warrington.

This support for the war effort at this time contrasts strongly with the anti-war stance adopted by the NAFTA in the latter years of

the conflict. There is no clear explanation for this initial stance in the union records but certain inferences can be drawn from the statistical returns. By 1914 total funds of the union were heavily depleted as a result of industrial action. It was prudent and opportune to call a halt at this stage to all disputes to retrieve the financial situation, and by removing the need for supplementary levies on the membership, rebuild the numbers paying into funds. The most telling reasoning, however, for this initial support for the war must be the numbers of furniture workers who enlisted in the armed forces. In 1914, 1,519 members enlisted. By 1915 this had grown to 2,086 and by 1916, 4,282. This represented an unparalleled 33% of union membership and it has not been possible to find evidence of any other trades union in which so high a percentage of the membership volunteered for the War as the Furniture workers. This image of a profoundly patriotic group is, of course, confused by the small numbers involved and 'Two hundred and fifty thousand miners volunteered in the first year of the war'. Nevertheless, even seen in percentage terms it is much higher than the national average. (i)

Population and Recruitment for the Army 1914 - 1918

	<u>Numbers</u>	<u>% of males between 18 and 50</u>
England	4,006,153	24.02
Wales	272,924	21.52
Scotland	557,618	23.71
Ireland	134,202	6.14

(ii)

(i) Modern Britain, H Pelling p.80 1968

(ii) General Annual Reports on the Army HMSO 1921 C ind 1193 p.9  
see also

Report on Recruiting, Earl of Derby HMSO Cd 18149 1916

Against such a background of patriotism, no matter how misplaced, the executive might have felt it to be there could be no other stance other than acquiescence in supporting the war effort. This action held the number of disputes for the remainder of the year and into 1915 at a low level, though there were some minor disputes during the early part of 1915 in Barnstaple, Halifax, Leeds and London.

In March, 1915 the industrial truce was reinforced by the signing of the so-called Treasury Agreement by the leadership of the Trades Union movement. This Agreement, which formally relinquished the right to strike during the duration of the war, was effectively ignored by NAFTA, but the Munitions of War Act brought in by the Government in July, 1915 could not be so easily disregarded. It required all disputes in firms engaged in the production of Munitions of War (and for the furniture industry this, in effect, meant anything produced under Government contract) to be settled by arbitration. The graphical presentation of dispute pay per member (see Appendix) indicates very clearly the effect that these Agreements and subsequent legislation had in reducing the freedom of action of the NAFTA to pursue wage movements through the war years other than by arbitration.

Nevertheless, with the rapid increase in food prices as the war continued, industrial unrest and tension grew apace and by 1916 NAFTA was taking action in the uncontrolled sector to improve wages by negotiation or confrontation as well as in the contract work area by arbitration.

By 1917 the Government was forced to raise wages over a wide area

of the economy because of steeply rising prices and the Furniture workers benefited from this change so that by the end of the war wage levels in the industry were generally some 80 per cent higher than they had been in 1914, but in real terms little better off.

Trades Union membership grew during the war period from 4,145,000 to 6,533,000 and NAFTA was part of this trend with 13,796 members in 1914 and 22,442 members in 1918, approximately 2% of all workers in the trade.

Military Conscription was brought in by the Government in early 1916. NAFTA membership in the armed forces was 1591 in 1914, 2086 in 1915, 4,287 in 1916, 4,572 in 1917 and 4,693 in 1918. By the end of the war the upper limit for conscription stood at 50 years of age, yet few furniture workers were affected by it after 1916. This was due to the vast amount of government contract work and the development of the aircraft industry, which in these early years were constructed of wood, were complex and highly labour intensive in their construction and attracted and recruited the younger craftsmen of the industry from all branches of the trade. The wood machinists, cabinetmakers and chairmakers had the obvious tasks of making, but the upholsterer was employed in the covering of the plane wings and body in doped linen, and the carvers in propeller laminating and carving. It is no slight upon the members of the industry to state that work in an aircraft factory or on Government contract was preferable to the trenches of France and both the Monthly Reports of the Union Journal of Voluntary movement and massive recruiting drives by the aircraft industry from within the membership coupled with the

low rate of entry to the armed forces after 1916 (only 400 members between 1916 and 1918) despite the upper age limit of 50 years of age, make it quite clear that those liable for conscription by virtue of being in non-munition factories moved to reserved occupations of the new industry in large numbers and that the non-Government contract furniture making was the province of the older tradesmen.

The leadership of NAFTA, in terms of its officials and its Executive Committee, was uncompromisingly pacifist throughout the war period. In November, 1914 Alex Gossip wrote that 'It is only the profiteers, landowners and capitalists who will benefit from this war'. 'We have no quarrel with our fellows elsewhere'. 'We give the right hand of friendship and comradeship to the comrades in Austria, Servia, Germany, France, Russia and all other countries who see that the war is not determined in the interests of the workers....the landowners and capitalists are the real and only enemy'. (i)

Which contrasts strongly with one of the few policy statements still in existence made by Walter Wentworth, General Secretary of the Woodcutting Machinists; 'The country is at present involved in the European war, which will have serious effects upon employment of our members'. 'This war brought the Trades Union world in to an unfortunate position - as provision was never made in our Rules for a war of this description'.

The pattern for employment in the Furniture Trades during the war period was that of initially high unemployment across all trades. The wood machinists trades were the first to recover, due to war work

(i) M.R. Nov, 1914

contracts and by the end of the first year of the war the other trades had recovered full employment and retained this situation throughout the war period.

It must, however, have taken some observers by surprise in this early period of the war when jingoistic xenophobia was whipped to an all time peak by the popular press, that a union leader could be so outspoken in his contradiction of popular opinion. In November he wrote to the membership: 'One would think that everyone was fighting for freedom, but it is exceedingly difficult to see how the poverty stricken and oppressed classes can gain its freedom by fighting for their own oppressors, and against the down-trodden and exploited classes of other countries'. This view was respected by the membership and no record exists of any criticism of these sentiments even though some 1,500 members out of a membership of 13,500 had enlisted by December, 1914. Nor shall it be thought that any correspondence stating a contrary view would have been suppressed. The Union Journal, openly and regularly printed dissenting views though in all truth these rarely involved major issues of this nature. With no evidence whatsoever to the contrary, it must be assumed that the Executive viewpoint was viewed as an honestly held, if not universally accepted point of view.

Nor was this view covertly expressed. At the Food and Coal supply conference on 13th February, 1915 it was reported that 'Mr Alex Gossip-in the course of his speech used the words "Some of us who are opposed to this war". He was stopped for fully a minute by the wild and enthusiastic applause which broke out from every part of the Conference'.

With this feeling supported in the Trades Union Movement Alex Gossip and Fred Bramley on behalf of the Executive Committee prepared a Manifesto on Peace, (Reproduced in full as an Appendix) but summarised as:

1. There should be no new racial hatreds or scores created as a result of this war. To prevent this we insist that no province shall be by military conquest, transferred from one country to another without the consent of the population of such a province.
2. No treaty, arrangements or undertakings shall be entered into in the name of Great Britain without the consent of Parliament and the people. Democratic control of foreign policy we consider essential.
3. Our Alliance with other countries should be made with the object in view of peaceful relations with all, hostility to none. They should be made in the direction of setting up an International Council whose deliberations and discussions shall be made public and with such machinery for securing International agreement as shall be a guarantee of abiding peace.
4. The Peace settlement should embody a plan of armament reduction and an attempt should be made to secure the general nationalisation of armament manufacture, and the control of export armaments from one country to another. We have no quarrel: we have no conflicting interests with the workers of any country, of such a nature as would in any way justify or prove the necessity of the reckless slaughter now going on as a means of settling a dispute

we have not created, concerning issues we do not understand, and affecting interests not ours. Humanity should, in future, be protected against such crimes and calamities. If organised labour will not work with this object in view, who will? We desire in your name to declare war on the causes and consequences of war. (i)

The Manifesto was endorsed by the E.C., sent out to the Branches and accepted and endorsed by the membership with a majority vote of two to one, all be it on a vote of only 10% of membership. This declaration corresponds to the majority tendency in the I.L.P. (of which Alex Gossip was a prominent member) yet it has not been possible to discover any other organised group of industrial workers in Britain who adopted this position at such an early stage in the course of hostilities.

Not all of the membership was totally convinced of this point of view and a strong protest was expressed to the E.C. of NAFTA by No.2 Branch (London West End - 400 members) over the pamphlet 'Class Cohesion versus Spurious Patriotism' issued by Fred Bramley. However, the E.C. took the view that in publishing it he acted in his individual capacity, and took no action on the protest.

That the war was coming closer to home in 1915 is clear from the Monthly Record of the NAFTA 'No.87 Branch (Walthamstow) and No.135 Branch (East Dulwich) have been informed that the Tool Insurance Premium covers the case of possible damage by Zeppelin raids'.

Though the 1915 Trades Union Congress held in Bristol in September endorsed overwhelmingly the policy of support for the war

(i) M.R. Feb, March, April 1915

effort, the votes of NAFTA and their delegate Fred Bramley were in opposition. This opposition was presented in more concrete form in the Executive's moves against conscription. Alex Gossip put forward the view that conscription represented the ultimate enslavement of the working people, as pawns of the Capitalist Classes. He quotes from the Daily Telegraph "When the armies pile their arms and the navies resume the peace routine, the old competition of the factory, the mart, and the counting house, will be resumed with an intensity unknown before....In such a contest there can be no armistices, no surrenders with all the honours and no peace treaties; the industrial war must continue to an end without respite and without mercy". (i)

This, states Alex Gossip, is the reality, this is the real war, and the conflict in europe and elsewhere is but 'a temporary halt in the continuing battle and the protagonists of the working people have not forgotten this, neither should the workers of all lands'. In order to establish the feelings of the membership on the question of conscription, a poll was held at the instigation of the E.C. on the question "Are you in favour of conscription?". The result published was one of the lowest polls recorded (% of membership) on a matter of such consequence, being 784 against conscription and 303 for conscription. Nevertheless, the E.C. view was endorsed and in common with a number of other societies put forward a resolution to the Trades Union Congress which was accepted and became official Congress policy, namely "We affirm all our previous opposition to conscription in any shape of form, and resolve to do everything in our power to defeat all attempts to enforce compulsory

(i) Daily Telegraph 4 Jan, 1916

Military and Industrial Service, and RECOMMEND the Labour Party to prevent if possible, the passing of the Government Bill". (i)

Alex Gossip, recognising the necessity for the practical, when the exhortation is over, counselled members to push hard to become members of their local committees on conscription and on War Pensions. He deplored 'the mute aspect of Trades Unionists on these committees when faced with problems which warrant a Socialist and an Internationalist viewpoint. Those coming before the committees being 'bullied and insulted by the Chairman and other members of the Tribunal, and the so-called Labour representatives sitting dumb'.

Conscription, and its consequences, were seen by the Executive from the outset, as an anti-working class weapon 'It will be used as elsewhere to break the strength of organised labour, so let us be warned in time - never let us forget that these folk hate us and fear us, when they do not despise us'. And conscription was the area over which the Union and its Member of Parliament first publically and acrimoniously disagreed. Initially Jim O'Grady's attitude was in line with that of the E.C. on the question, especially as the 1915 T.U. Congress at Bristol had rejected conscription 'by acclamation'. O'Grady was not a pacifist but initially he saw the war being fought by volunteers; indeed, he suggested that 'recruitment was down as the War Council had decided upon conscription and that he had evidence to show that they (the War Council) had deliberately closed down the work of recruiting committees, indeed quoting a retired Colonel who received a specific order issued to him to the effect that recruiting must cease'. Nevertheless, when the Military Service Bill was set

before Parliament, James O'Grady voted for the Bill at all its various stages. In defence he wrote 'I felt that the opposition to the Bill from the working classes of the country came over the possibility that it would be used not only for Military Conscription but also for industrial conscription'. He goes on 'I, along with a number of other Labour members, agreed to vote for the Bill based upon the written assurances given by the Prime Minister that the Bill was never intended to allow an employer to exercise coercion over the free action of his workmen'. (i)

O'Grady was obviously very conscious of the fact that this support would alienate him from the officers, the executive and, indeed, many of the members of the Union. 'For myself, I have to say, my vote for the Bill was only given after much thought and deliberate consideration of the national and wider issues involved. I gave that vote at the risk of breaking personal friendships that are very dear to me. There are other risks as well; but these are always with the men who have an opinion of their own, and ought always to be taken, unless the man be craven'. In essence the continuing parliamentary dilemma, should a sponsored M.P. reflect the views of his constituents, his sponsors or his conscience? The relationship of James O'Grady was at a watershed and after this vote was never again as cordial or intimate. (ii)

The opening shots in this new war of attrition with their M.P. were fired by the E.C. "The E.C. is very concerned over the position taken by their Parliamentary Secretary James O'Grady on the vote in the House of Commons on Conscription; this being necessary in view of the number of branches who had written us on this matter".

(i) M.R. Feb, 1916  
(ii) M.P. Feb, 1916

It was decided that the Standing Order of 1st February, 1912, would decide future action. It stated 'It must be definitely understood that delegates to Congress etc., must act in accordance with any mandate which may be given by the Association'. James O'Grady did, of course, cast his votes for the Bill before the final results of the conscription poll of the Union members was known, though he knew which way the vote would go, and he certainly was well aware of the attitude of the E.C. and more specifically the attitude of the officers of the Union with regard to conscription, indeed his mention of 'the risk of breaking personal friendships' must allude to this fact. Nevertheless, by calling into effect the standing order, and pointing out that at the time of the vote in the House there was no Union mandate, the quarrel was patched over and James O'Grady stayed as Parliamentary Secretary. It is, however, worth conjecturing as to whether if James O'Grady had been told to vote against the Military Service Bill by the NAFPA it would have been a matter referred to the Parliamentary Committee of Privilege. What, however, is a matter of fact, is that such pressure as the Union could bring to bear upon him on this vote was as nothing compared to the pressure that could be brought to bear upon him by the pro-war groups within Parliament and the media. (i)

Glasgow was the biggest single centre of opposition to the war in mainland Britain and so it is not surprising that Branch No.23 (Glasgow) were not satisfied by James O'Grady's explanation for his votes on the Conscription Bill. The E.C. record their resolution and published it in full for the membership and the discomfiture of James O'Grady. "Whereas organised labour in this country had with

(i) M.R. March, April 1916

no uncertain voice, declared its intense opposition to the Munitions Act, and through its conferences, declared its intentions to actively oppose both military and industrial compilation and whereas Mr James O'Grady, M.P., Parliamentary Secretary of the NAFTA has, in supporting those Acts, acted against the best interests of those who made it possible for him to enter Parliament".

"Be it resolved that this Branch No.23 urge upon our E.C. the advisability of asking for the resignation of Mr J.O'Grady, M.P., from the position of Parliamentary Secretary of the NAFTA". James O'Grady replied 'I considered the censure expressed is harsh and unjustified.... I have only supported a Military Service Bill which is a measure of compulsion. Conscription and compulsion are not the same thing'. (Though the world was never informed by J.O'Grady as to where this distinction lay). 'At least that is my view. I would point out to this Branch that I am not in Parliament solely as a representative of our Association but of a Constituency, and together with my colleagues of the Labour movement generally'. He goes on 'The constituency and the general Labour movement allow me to have an opinion of my own and to use my judgement. I have insisted upon that liberty on all questions not vitally detrimental to organised labour and shall continue to do so'. O'Grady then went on to point out that Branch No.23 had paid political levys of 1913 - 2/9d; 1914 - 16/4d; 1915 - £2.15s.3d. 'So some 53 paid the levy, but 184 members who presumeable assisted in carrying the resolution want to call the tune, and refuse to pay'. (i)

Had this matter been pursued to the point of instruction to O'Grady, as has been stated this would then have been a Parliamentary

(i) M.R. March, April 1916

Privilege question, raising in its turn the most profound questions as to how to reconcile the claims of workers democracy with its traditions of mandated delegates with those of Parliament with its insistence on the autonomy of members. One thing is clear, however, and that is that this lack of sympathy with the membership shows very clearly the transformation of a workers representative from the Union Headquarters to the 'best club in Britain'.

The Executive Committee of NAFTA were so disturbed by the situation that had developed that a special summoned meeting of the E.C. was called in June to discuss the problem. Protests over the stand of James O'Grady on conscription had been received from a number of branches and an attempt was made to discuss the question. However, 'It was agreed in view of all the circumstances and differences of opinions, that the next business to be proceeded with'. By this use of a constitutional device, what had amounted to an insoluble problem had been resolved without proceeding to a vote which would have been possibly close and certainly divisive. As a result of this move Messrs A.Barker and C.F.Hawkins, both anti-O'Grady men, resigned from the E.C. and for the time being the matter was closed. -(i)

NAFTA in its stance against conscription endorsed Alex Gossip's and Fred Bramley's positions on the National Committee of the No Conscription Fellowship and agreed to vote as a Union on joining the Fellowship for a fee of £3 per annum. (ii)

The President of N.C.F. at this time was R.Smillie of the Miner's Federation, Alex Gossip was a member of its E.C. and

- (i) E.C. Minutes 29th May, 1913
- (ii) E.C. Minutes 29th May, 1916

Fred Bramley a member of the General Council. The NAFTA voted 742 for affiliation and 252 against a majority of 490. The vote made the position of James O'Grady even more difficult but at a time when the membership stood at approximately 12,000, it did mean that only 5 per cent voted in favour of affiliation and the total votes cast represented just under 9 per cent of the membership. (i)

'O'Grady himself could not understand 'the point of view of the conscientious objector, either from a religious or a social standpoint. I have tried earnestly to do so, and have to confess that I cannot yet see or appreciate their views. I do not intend to put the argument from my point of view but I repeat the vow stated by Lord Hugh Cecil - a supporter of conscientious objectors 'If the conscientious objector refuses to help the State, in its hour of need and danger, by refusing to perform work of a character that does not involve the taking of life, and which is allocated to him by representatives of the State, then he ought either to be interned or deported'. O'Grady goes on to state 'That is a Socialist doctrine that I venture to assert few Socialists can logically controvert'. 'The solution to the problem is near at hand and the genuine conscientious objector will be dealt with by the Civil Courts and Civil Authorities'.

O'Grady returned to the attack on pacifism in his report to the membership on the Dardanelles campaign. 'This was a gross blunder and the Mesopotamia campaign - a hell'. He was most solicitous over the care of the wounded and goes on 'Yet I would say to my pacifist

(i) M.R. July, 1916

friends - these men fought from no lust of bloodshed, suffered for no vain glory of conquest, died for no personal vanity that their deeds may be recorded in the pages of history. They fought, suffered and died for an idea'.

O'Grady had been on the Commission of Enquiry into the Mesopotamia campaign but 'was jockeyed out of the appointment by the Mandarins of own Party' which tends to suggest he enjoyed no greater popularity in the Party than in the Union.

The Union and its officers took an active part in the Anti-War demonstration in London in April of 1917, and No.1 Branch (Central London) sent to the E.C. a strong protest 'against the cowardly and brutal attacks upon the demonstrators' by some elements of the crowd - 'the police doing nothing to prevent this hooliganism'. Alex Gossip and the E.C. members of the demonstration were subjected to these physical assaults. Typically, he reports 'they are not evil but poor dupes misled by the gutter press'. Nevertheless, the matter was pressed by the National Council for Civil Liberties and raised in the House of Commons and at the L.C.C. (1)

An interesting side comment on the matter of the conscientious objector arose at the Conference on Education attended by the General Secretary. Alex Gossip got a resolution carried against military drill in schools and on the question of the shortage of school teachers suggested 'open the prison doors of the many school teachers incarcerated in goals at present for conscience sake'. It should be remembered

(1) M.R. May 1917

that the fate of the conscientious objector if he came from the working classes could be appalling as is evidenced by one of the members of the union. G.E.H. (full name not given) was a wood carver. He was arrested in April, 1916 sent to Harwick Circular Redoubt, lodged in a dark cell, put in leg and arm irons, fed on bread and water and on 8th May, 1916 - his resolve unbroken - was sent to France, court martialled at Boulogne on 19th May, 1916 and sentenced to death by shooting. He refused to abjure his principles, and sentence was commuted to ten years penal servitude. He was transferred to Dumfries in the South of Scotland to serve his sentence 'beyond the reach of visits from friends and relatives'. (i)

The E.C. took up the case, writing to the Prime Minister 'strongly protesting against the repeated imprisonment, and pointing out 'that this is a violation of the Military Service Act intended to safeguard the historic right of individual freedom of conscience and opinion, and further demands that in all cases where there is evidence of genuineness of conviction, such conscientious objectors be set at liberty'. Sadly there was no response to their pleas. Nor to the others sent over the latter<sup>war</sup>/years from various Branches to the E.C. and to the Government over individual cases and it is noteworthy that the treatment of the members of the working class who were conscientious objectors was in so many cases so different from those of the middle and upper classes. The treatment of the Bloomsbury group being the most obvious example. (ii)

Perhaps the final words on Pacifism should be those of Alex Gossip at the 1918 Conference of the National Council for Civil

(i) M.R. May 1917

(ii) See also Clifford Allen Marwick p.28 and House of Commons Debate 26 Jan, 1916 and Objection Over-ruled D.Boulton MacGibbon & Key 1967

Liberties. 'We view with a considerable amount of alarm, for the safety of real democracy, the various insidious attempts which are being made to perpetuate this hideous thing (militarism) and to foster and develop it amongst the children attending our Public schools'. The resolution he carried through Conference stated 'This Conference declares its opposition to the military training of children under the age of eighteen, to the introduction into schools of special lessons on the authoritative view of patriotism and other political matters, and to the application of any political or religious test whatsoever for teachers'. 'We demand such revision of political histories used in our schools as will eliminate the undue influence given to wars, and enlighten our children on the extent to which cooperation between groups and nations has been the greatest factor in the development of civilised communities. This Conference further holds that children in all schools shall be trained in independent thought on public questions, national and international and in the exercise of their capacities as future voters in local and Parliamentary elections'. (i)

Throughout the war Alex Gossip kept the vision of workers' Internationalism alive within the NAFIA bringing events on the International Trades Union stage to their attention.

(i) Minutes of Nat. Council for Civil Liberties 1918,  
May 18. London

Footnote This Council for Civil Liberties was active during the First World War after which it became inactive. The present National Council for Civil Liberties being founded in 1934. The papers of the earlier Council are held in the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

In 1915 as the year closed Alex Gossip was informing the membership of the conditions of the trade unionist in other countries involved in the war, in particular the German Woodworkers Trade Union which had some 80,000 fighting on various fronts and some 4,000 of their members having been killed in action. 'We note the intense desire for peace expressed by the various unions (affiliated to the International Woodworkers Association) and trust the time will soon come when the organised workers, the world over, will be powerful enough to prevent war'. (i)

In 1917 Alex Gossip drew the attention of the membership and the Parliamentary Committee of the T.U.C. to the Banning of Trade Unions in the British West Indies. Appalled at this and the penalties allowable under the ban he exhorts the P.C. to take action on this matter. (ii)

The E.C. records show the general secretary sending protests to the American Government against 'the grossly unfair discussion of the American Courts in sentencing Trade Unionists in San Francisco, one to death and the other the life imprisonment for an alleged bomb incident, with which they clearly had nothing to do'. He comments in the monthly report 'The Capitalists of Western America have been moving Heaven and Earth to destroy the forces of Organised Labour'. (iii)

Internationalism was as important in time of war as in peace, as Alex Gossip wrote.

- (i) M.R. Nov, 1915
- (ii) M.R. May, 1917
- (iii) May, 1917

'The industrial workers in all nations must be linked together if ever we are going to get rid of the slavery and oppression of our class'.

'The property and the power which came from conquest always find their way into the hands of the few. A continent may be added to the Empire tomorrow, and the worker and his fellows will remain homeless - and will remain the slaves of Capitalism until they become its master.'

'The Capitalist fears nothing so much as the very idea that workers and toilers of all countries may come together and discuss their own affairs, heaven and earth are being moved to keep them separate and apart, and if it suits for the moment, they are flung at each others throats'.

'To teach the workers of the various countries of the world that the workers in countries other than their own are their enemies is the deliberate policy of plutocracy....to perpetuate the enslavement of the toilers of the earth'. (i)

As has been already stated, NAFTA observed the initial industrial truce, however as the war progressed and the Government did nothing to control the cost of living or war profiteering, proceeded with 'dilution' and 'direction' of the labour force; so the unions' disenchantment with Government involvement grew and was centred on the new Munitions of War Bill.

The Officers of NAFTA, in the company of other trade union leaders, were involved in the discussion called by Lloyd George on the Munitions Bill in June, 1915. The provisions of the Bill were summarized for the members as:-

(i) M.R. Aug, 1918

1. Government control of munition factories.
2. Limitation of profits on War Work.
3. Suspension of Trades Union rules restricting output of munitions.
4. Enrolment of volunteers for a mobile corps of munitions workers.
5. Special courts to deal with refractory workmen.

The NAFTA delegates voted against all the proposals and as Fred Bramley reports 'The rush and absolute careless haste to support the Government in this matter, regardless of the consequences involved, made one wish to see, in some Trades Union leaders, the recovery of their ordinary reasoning powers'.

Alex Gossip raised a specific question at the Conference regarding the safeguarding of the post war employment of the man who left a job to undertake war work elsewhere. Lloyd George replied 'that such cases could be safely left to the force of public opinion.' Alex Gossip comments 'We venture to express a doubt on this reply!'.

The effect of the Munitions Bill was to reinforce the problems that the NAFTA had suffered from the earliest days of the war due to dilution. Dilution by women workers but initially by Belgian Refugees, in a trade notorious for the number of employers willing to find any excuse or means of reducing wage levels. As early as December, 1914 Alex Gossip was warning the membership that 'Attempts are being made by so-called patriotic employers to take advantage of Belgian refugees and to employ them at rates far below those paid in the district - these people should be treated as guests and not used to displace Britishers and reduce wages'.

Fred Bramley had found some such employers, and had sent reports to the War Office proving 'without a doubt that several of the most notorious sweepers in the East End are using Belgian labour, are engaged in Government work and in every way violating the fair contracts clauses'.

The other Trade Organiser A.A.Purcell reported the situation in Manchester; 'Here refugees put up in a shop - none of them know what they will be paid - In Sheffield refugees in one of our shops paid £1.00 and £1.5.0. less than the weekly rate for the district'.

Yet the tide of opinion was at this stage of the war unsympathetic to such views. The Manchester Guardian notes 'If Belgian refugees were paid below the Trade Union rate, it would be undesirable, but it would not be a very crying evil'. (i)

The War Refugee Committee made a clear statement on this matter; 'There is no charity in taking work from an Englishman and giving it to refugees, if the refugee accepts lower wages. Such employment is selfishness masquerading as charity'.

It was, however, in High Wycombe that the problem of exploitation of refugee and women workers was most acute. The Belgians were being paid two pence per hour below the rates established after the 1914 lock out and the women were being paid just over 2½d. per hour for work which men would have to be paid 8d. or 8½d. per hour.

(i) Manchester Guardian Dec. 31, 1914

The High Wycombe Polishers Branch had 170 men enlisted in the colours and the employers during their absence are making an effort to fill the places with cheap labour, with the probable result that on their return they will be met with the cry 'not wanted' notes Fred Bramley. The Munitions Act had become a tool of the unscrupulous employer to break unionism and reduce wage levels and there are numerous reports through 1915/1916 of unemployed craftsmen being rejected for Munitions work whilst women and boys were 'readily taken on' and when these matters were raised at Tribunals they were brushed aside as being of 'no moment'. Thus the NAFTA leadership committee,<sup>and</sup> for example, the Engineering Workers Leadership adopted an aggressive stance on dilution. Alex Gossip warned the membership 'You will be approached by Government officials, with a view to holding joint local conferences with employers, to discuss the introduction of women into the trade. You are asked, if such a conference is held, not to commit yourself to anything but to report proposals to the E.C. at once. We are endeavouring to get a conference with the Home Office, with our kindred trades, with a view to discussing the matter nationally, and securing a uniform policy as to safeguard, etc.'. (i)

The conference was called at the Home Office in January, 1916, between the Employers Federation and the Trade Unions in the Furnishing Trades on the subject of the employment of women. The attitude of the NAFTA was not completely sexist but rather protective. It is summarised in the statement of Fred Bramley, Trade Organiser. 'We must act with caution, in the interests of our men, in the interests of the nation, and also in the interests of women, to prevent the sweepers of our trade using the War period, and the plea of patriotism,

(i) E.C. Minutes, Oct, Nov, Dec, 1915  
Jan, Feb, March, April, May, 1916

to further their own ulterior motives to secure cheap female labour, to the detriment of the trade, the men employed in it, and the thousands of our members fighting their country's battles in all parts of the world. If one doesn't want these men to come back and find their places taken by women at one half of the rate. Innovation may be necessary, women may have to be employed, but to secure proper safe-guards is a duty imposed on us all! Indeed, the eventual agreement reached destroys any charge of sexism which might be levelled at the Furniture Trades Unions. It states:- (i)

'If it is found necessary to employ female labour, that this be permitted, provided that a suitable agreement is entered into between the Employers Association and the Operative Union in the district'. (ii)

This was an important move insofar as it made such negotiations at a local level, mandatory, between both side of the industry, and paved the way for better working relationships and consultation on issues other than female labour.

The agreement went on to specify that no piecework shall be permissible for female labour, (one sees the hand of NAFTA in this clause) and further, and most far reaching, that all females introduced into a factory must join the appropriate Trades Union. By the end of the war period NAFTA had 3,000 women members, and women's wages and conditions became part and parcel of any trade agreement from this time forward.

The amended Munitions Bill went through Parliament early in 1916 and the Union's Parliamentary Secretary, James O'Grady, was responsible

- (i) M.R. Dec, 1915 and Jan, 1916
- (ii) M.R. Jan, 1916

for getting an amendment to the Bill which had a useful bearing on the question of dilution in the post-war period. In the original Act, Union men could not strike against the introduction of non-union labour. Under the new and amended legislation, the introduction of non-union labour in a shop during the war would be considered a change in working conditions, and would have to be restored to the original situation at the termination of hostilities. After the war the non-union labour would have to go, or join the union, so ensuring that unscrupulous employers could no longer 'dilute' to break the union in a work place. Attitudes to women workers, however, were not completely liberal. In a trade plagued with recurrent unemployment and substantial seasonal variation, it would have been astonishing if some of the membership, at least, were not looking towards the post-war period with disquiet. A.A. Purcell, Trade Organiser, wrote 'To prevent the introduction of female labour, unless we have men unemployed, is out of the question: however, as men return from the war, first preference should be extended to the men who were previously employed'. He then went on to urge members to ensure that the return of members from the war should not be used as an excuse by firms to reduce the quality of the terms and conditions established with such difficulty over the years. He made the point that is still being made sixty years later. 'A thirty hour week with all our members in work will be preferable to a fifty hour week with a third of our members out of work and recurring unemployment benefit. If you share your blood to defend the life of a nation, then just share the work (and the wealth) at all times in order to render the nation worth the fighting for at any and all times'.  
(i)

(i) M.R. Feb, 1916

Such anxiety over the introduction of female labour was justified as future events were to show, and as management attitudes at the time made clear. Alex Gossip quoted the following from the trade magazine Engineer; 'The introduction of female labour might be used so as to lead to a lowering of the rate of payment for services. The fact of the matter is, not that women are paid too little, but that men are paid too much for work which can be done without previous training. It is only the Trades Unions which after the war, will stand in the way of our realising the anticipation that we might be able to reduce our workshop costs by the employment of women. (i)

'Much depends upon the attitude of the women themselves. If they can be brought to see the economic advantages to the country, to recognise the facts we have put forward, and to agree to accept a lower scale of wages than skilled men, they may, by their preponderance of numbers, be in a position to defy the Unions'.

Precisely to counter this situation, and to take into account the new role of women in the Furniture Industry, the NAFTA changed its rules. The normal work for women in the trade, had been in polishing and upholstery, but now they were being recruited as drivers (horse drawn), packers, labourers, timber yard workers and the like. The NAFTA rules at this time limited women membership of the union to those tasks which had traditionally been women's work. The changed (and accepted) rules of women in the industry were recognised by the union and in consequence the E.C. asked the membership to change the rules to allow these women into emergency membership for the duration of the war period. This was agreed, 770 for, 305 against, majority 465. (ii)

(i) Engineer, Dec, 1915; M.R. May, 1916

(ii) E.C. Minutes May, 1916; M.R. June, July, 1916.

Refugees were being exploited as well as women workers, and not just by British employers. In High Wycombe the Union had to battle with a Belgian employer who had set up a factory employing Belgian men and women refugees. The employer had imposed an 84 hour week without overtime payment and paid his workforce at 7d. an hour for men and 3d. per hour for women and was using the threat of military service to keep his labour force together and in line. Happily, local and union pressure brought the matter to a swift and satisfactory conclusion but it was presented to the membership as a reminder of the excesses possible without the vigilance and organisation of the union officials.

Despite the Munitions Bill the pressure for improvements in wage rates grew as the war continued, and with this pressure demands from the membership for trade movements. A substantial help in making any trade movement more effective was taken by the signing of a joint agreement in December, 1915 by NAFTA, the Amalgamated Union of Cabinet-makers, the Amalgamated Union of Upholsterers, the Amalgamated Society of Woodcutting Machinists:

1. That in the event of any section of the Furnishing Industry contemplating trade action (trade movements), notice shall at once be given to the parties to this agreement, locally, and where members of more than one society are involved, or likely to be involved, no dispute shall take place prior to the Executive Committee being consulted and have opportunity of discussing the full situation in the district affected.
2. When a joint movement is agreed upon, each society shall pay its share of the joint expenses in proportion to the number of members

either brought out on strike, or employed in shops dealt with under the auspices of Joint Committee, and working under the Rules and conditions dealt with during the dispute where a Society has no members so involved or effected no claims for joint expenses to be made.

3. Each society to be responsible for the payment of dispute support to its own members, and a joint understanding be arrived at in the direction of adopting a uniform policy of dealing with new members of the respective Unions.
4. Should any dispute take place in a shop where less than the whole of the section is involved in the first instance, and no satisfactory settlement can be arrived at after endeavours have been made to do so, the various societies agree to withdraw, all other members if necessary, with the consent of the Executive Committee concerned.
5. A weekly detailed statement of Joint Income and Expenditure shall be supplied to each executive committee during times of joint dispute.
6. The question of the apportionment of the expenses of the official or officials in charge, shall be raised and dealt with at the termination of the joint dispute.

This agreement had been under consideration for some time and was made a practical proposition after the help given to NAFPA by the other Unions during the High Wycombe lock out. Just as the Scottish lock out had brought the English and Scottish Unions together so the dispute at High Wycombe provided the catalyst for the joint action agreement of 1915.

Essentially, therefore, there was to be a joint approach on Trade Movements and a separate funding of members in dispute. A 'one out all out' policy was adopted to give strength to sectional interests. The funding and expenses of disputes were to be closely controlled and discussed to avoid premature, forced return to work by the less affluent member unions, and the Full Time officials were to be used on a joint basis.

This agreement was one of the most important steps along the road to eventual amalgamation, and whilst it was at times shaken by accusations of poaching and by differences in interpretation, it provided a basis for a concerted union policy in the Furnishing Trades for the future. Despite a steeply rising cost of living, attempts were being made through 1916 to keep a lid on workers demands by issuing authoritative statements from establishment figures. Alex Gossip brought a typical example to the notice of the members. The Bishop of London wrote 'There should be an industrial truce for the next five years and the Church should teach the working men that they are to do a fair days work, and that we have to produce more and more in this country to enrich all classes'. (i)

The realities of working life were to be found not in such crass statements but in the East End of his own Bishopric. Fred Bramley was attempting to organise the East End in conjunction with the General Secretary of the United Furnishing Trades Society, Jack Cohen. They were attempting to increase the basic rate by 1d. an hour and experiencing enormous difficulty. Piecework was rife and rates varied between 6d. an hour and 1/7d. an hour dependent upon speed and type of work. Bramley and Cohen succeeded in their task and without need to revert to the strike weapon. Typical of their relationship with

(i) M.R. Oct, 1916 - 176 -

the owners of these businesses in this reported exchange 'In one case the employer in resisting our demands stated that the advance would put 5/- increase on a bedroom suite. Said he, "My customers have refused to pay it". "What shall I do?" "Well" said we, "What they refuse to pay for, they cannot have. Knock it out of the job". "Oh" said this particular employer "that sounds alright, but I assure you we could/make our stuff any worse than we make it now". (i)

But the East End of London furniture trade was a running sore in the standards of the industry as a whole: as Fred Bramley reports 'Perhaps some time we shall have our men on strike for sanitary conditions in the workshop, for more air, more light, and the opportunity of being able to breathe whilst getting a living'. 'After the war we shall have to do something big in the East End of London. A revolution in Furnishing Trade is needed. The sweater must be driven out. Our industry needs purifying. The comparatively decent employer suffers, our men and women suffer, and the community is left to deal with the evil effects of a bad system'.

The ground swell for improvement in wages built up during 1916 but 'the shackling of the powers of organised labour have prevented us from forcing up the wages of our members to meet the ever-increasing cost of living....our only consolation is that as far as we were concerned we had no hand in this shackling...the standards of comfort of our members generally has been reduced, whilst the profiteers have been allowed to ride rough shod over the workers'. In Bristol the workers not on Government contract work and not covered by the

(i) M.R. Oct, 1916

Munitions Bill struck for a 12% increase after negotiations had failed and after four weeks achieved their aims. (i)

By 1917, however, the pressure mounted on the E.C. to support Trade Movements in High Wycombe, Liverpool, Manchester, Hull, Leeds and elsewhere. These improvements were, in the main, achieved without any token strikes but by negotiations alone; however, in August the Swansea Employers refused to give way and were supported by the Employers Federation. The NAFTA fought the dispute with the aid of the A.U.U. and the Women's Trade Union Federation and this dispute which affected only the firms not on Government contract work in this area was not settled until October, when the firms in dispute settled on the terms agreed with the other employers on contract work who had settled by arbitration. The trade movement in Manchester had achieved a 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ % increase in wages in the early part of the year but by the end of the year the Manchester workers struck for a forty-eight hour week. The dispute was settled in three weeks and was of particular importance on two counts. For the first time the rates of pay of unskilled and ancillary workers to the Furniture making trades were part of the package of demands from the workers. The group which constituted the Partial Benefit Section of pre-war years and the war time emergency membership were now an organised group and, as such, their wages and terms and conditions of employment were part of the package of negotiations. (i)

Manchester Settlement //

(i) Annual Report 1916

Manchester Settlement	48 hours per week	
<u>Trade</u>	<u>August 1914</u>	<u>January 1918</u>
Cabinetmakers, Chairmakers, Carvers, Polishers	10d	1/2d
Upholsterers	7½d	1/2d
Machinists	7½d to 9d	1/2d
Glass workers	9d	1/2d
Fitters, Framers	6½d	1/-
Packers	5½d	11d
Women Polishers	4½d	9d
Upholsteresses	4d	9d
Labourers	5d	10d

A.A.Purcell noted in his report on the dispute 'I cannot stress the importance of the shop stewards in this dispute. They collected subscriptions from those shops with members still working (having settled separately or on Government work) to such good effect that dispute pay was never less than 15/- per week for those on strike'. (i) and footnote.

The Furniture makers struck twice more in 1918. In Redhill in Ireland the workers were working 56 hours a week for 25s. to 30s. There was 'no electricity or gas in the town so the workers were compelled to pay for the oil for the lamps, for the polishing

(i) M.R. Jan, 1918. See also 'The First Shop Stewards Movement' James Hinton 1973

Footnote Up to this point the elected leader in a department or small workshop had been referred to as shop secretary or shop leader. This January, 1918 is the first use by the executive officers of the new title of shop steward.

materials, rags, spirits, wadding, brushes, varnishes and glass paper used'. One hundred and twenty work people were involved and all that town produced was exported to Liverpool. The strike lasted 24 weeks before victory was obtained and the full demands of the workforce met - one hundred per cent increase in wages. High Wycombe workers came out in November, 1918 but it only required a week of picketing before the dispute was settled with an increase of 12½% across the board. (i)

Despite the benefits gained by the Union through the war period the 'Largest Furniture Manufacturing Factory in the World' remained unorganised, that of Lebus in Tottenham. Not only was it the largest, but it was 'as bad as the worst in this country' wrote C.F.Hawkins, Trade Organiser who had taken on the task of organising this group. The Union opened a branch in Tottenham but despite their best endeavours it would remain unorganised for many years to come. (ii)

The General Officials of the Union also benefited from the movement in wages and on an E.C. proposal to increase their salaries the membership voted 2,247 for and 40 against an increase. At the end of 1918 the General Secretary received £5.10s.0d. per week and Trade Organisers, Organising Secretaries and Assistant General Secretary receiving £5.0s.0d. per week.

The most important development on the industrial relations front for NAFTA during the war years related to the work of the Whitley Committee in 1917, this in its turn resulting in a conference on 13th February 1918, held at the Ministry of Labour with both

(i) M.R. March, 1918  
(ii) M.R. Dec, 1918

Employers and Unions on the advisability or otherwise of setting up a Joint Industrial Council. Alex Gossip represented NAFTA, stated that he 'had reservations in this matter, but equally had no mandate from the membership to agree or disagree'. (i)

In essence the J.I.C. for the Furnishing Industries would:- consider wages, hours etc., in the industry as a whole, the regulation of production and employment, consideration of the existing machinery for the settlement of differences, collect statistics and information on materials and the distribution of timber, markets, costs, rates of wages, and average profit or turnover, study processes and design, health matters, education and press statements on matters affecting the industry and make such representations as were necessary to Government departments. (ii)

Alex Gossip in placing the matter before the membership wrote 'In submitting this matter to the members for their consideration and keeping in view the type of some of the firms represented on the employers side, the E.C. and the General officials desire it to be clearly understood that on no account could they have dealings with those employers who do not employ trades unionists and do not observe and pay the proper conditions and rates'.

The statement is curiously lateral to the main objectives of the Joint Industrial Councils and the objections to them. Roberts (History of the T.U.C.) suggests 'For the left-wing elements (in the unions) Whitleyism appeared to be an attempt to wean the workers away from

(i) M.R. March 1918

(ii) Document submitted to E.C. by Min. of Labour Feb, 1918

demands for real workers control, and to fob them off with insubstantial schemes of joint consultation'. (i)

The union was asked to vote on the question 'Shall the association assist in the formation of a Joint Industrial Council'. The result was 1,343 in favour and 803 against, a majority of 540. Alex Gossip expressed himself 'extremely surprised at the result' but nevertheless he and C.F. Hawkins of the E.C. attended a conference in May, 1918 to set up the J.I.C. for the Furnishing Industry. 'We are not sanguine' wrote Alex Gossip to the membership 'as to the beneficial results and already have crossed swords over such matters as refusing to recognise employers who do not observe trade union conditions or employ trade unionists. We successfully opposed, even in the teeth of the opposition of some on our own side of the table, an attempt to get us to assist with the organisation of the employers, even though it was accompanied by a similar proposal that the employers should help in making trade unionists. Frankly it is not part of our business to aid in organising those we have to be continually opposing, and it is our business as organising workers to deal with those in our own class who do not care about paying their contributions, though they are always prepared to accept all benefits'. (ii)

The NAFTA had reservations about the J.I.C. but at its first formal meeting in December, 1918, the union tabled the following resolution. 'In view of the end of the war and demobilisation, that a 44 hour week be established from 1st January, 1919 throughout the Furnishing Trades without reduction in wages from the standard rate, and should it be found that after three months there are still men

(i) Roberts Hist. T.U.C. p.61 1961

See also 'Homes fit for Heroes' P.Johnson 1977

(ii) M.R. March, 1918

available for employment a further reduction in the hours to 40 per week shall take place'. In industrial relations the post-war battle lines were being drawn up by NAFTA and the employers association. (i)

For the leaders and membership of NAFTA the event of the war years which captured the imagination and gave promise of a possible light in those dark days was the Russian Revolution. Alex Gossip wrote '1917 has been a year of gloom....the Russian Revolution was the one bright spot'. He went on to commend to the membership the Russian Charter of Freedom produced by the Provisional Government after the first Russian Revolution. It proclaimed:-

1. Immediate amnesty for Political and Religious offences.
2. Freedom of speech, press, association and labour organisations, with freedom to strike even in the Army.
3. Abolition of all Social, Religious and National distinctions.
4. Universal suffrage.

'Compare that with what was taken, and is taking place here' James O'Grady, M.P., Parliamentary Secretary, informed the membership that with Will Thorne, M.P., he had been chosen to visit Russia as part of an Anglo-French delegation and to take the congratulations of the British Parliament to the <sup>GOUVERNEMENT</sup> at Petrograd. He goes on to state 'Though my views on the war and my support for the Government are at variance with some members, they will all be with me, I am sure, in my congratulations of the Russian people. It is significant and indicative of the changes in attitude of politicians and Government at Westminster when two Socialists are appointed on such a mission'. (ii)

(i) M.R. Dec, 1918  
(ii) M.R. April, 1917

It was not just the officials of the union who welcomed the Revolution, but also the membership. Typical of the many branch resolutions sent via the E.C. to the new Government was that from No.18 (Birmingham) 'Hearty congratulations to our Russian fellow workers and comrades, the leaders and the Members of the Russian Social Democratic Parties, on their accomplishment of the first steps in the overthrow of their tyrannical governing class, and we wish them God Speed in the establishment of a truly free and democratic system of society and hope - also that all countries will soon secure the fullest measure of freedom and that all international barriers are swept away'.  
(i)

At the Scottish Trade Union Congress the NAFTA delegate William Leonard was one of the prime movers of the message of congratulations to the Provisional Government and more importantly to the Council of Workers and Soldiers Delegates.

James O'Grady made his report to the membership on his return from Russia. He had gone with Will Thorne 'To carry the unanimous congratulations of the British Labour and Socialist movements and the congratulations of the British people on the success of their Revolution. (ii)

(NOTE: This visit of O'Grady and Thorne is ill-documented compared to the visit of Arthur Henderson whose visit under Government auspices, as a member of the war Cabinet, convinced him 'that the Russians were in no mood or condition to follow Lloyd George's "fight to a finish" exhortations....' An extraordinary series of confusions, cross purposes and mutual recriminations followed his return, including the celebrated

(i) M.R. May, 1917  
(ii) M.R. June, 1917

'doormat incident' of 1st August, 1917, culminates in his being forced to resign from the War Cabinet'). (i)

O'Grady refers in all his writings on the trip to being accompanied only by Will Thorne yet 'Henderson was instructed to get a "suitably composed British Labour Deputation (to) accompany the French party with the same object". The party of French Socialists were in England en route to Petrograd "to persuade" the Russian socialist party "to do all in its power to bring the war to a satisfactory conclusion" and 'W.S. Sanders, Will Thorne and James O'Grady agreed to go and the two deputations proceeded to Russia'. (ii)

Whilst this was the explicit purpose of the visit the implicit reason was to try to persuade the Russian Government to stay in the war. Unfortunate insofar as this was known and understood from the outset and exposed both himself and Will Thorne to charges of duplicity, indeed O'Grady complains of 'others who in Congress and at the annual Conference of Socialist Parties (I.L.P.) passing resolutions declaring Will Thorne and myself to be renegade Socialists'. (iii)

In defence, O'Grady states 'The second purpose of my visit was to urge on the Workmen's and Soldiers' Council to save their revolution from reaction and counter-revolution by participating in the Government of Russia'. 'Can anyone in these islands except those who cry "Peace,

- (i) G.D.Cole-Hist. of the Labour Party from 1914 pp.34-36 London 1951
- (ii) Cabinet Papers 23/1 no.104(5) 26 March 1917 P.R.O. AND Cabinet Papers 23/2 no.107(9) 28 March 1917
- (iii) See also Arthur Henderson - The Russian Revolution and the reconstruction of the Labour Party J.M.Winter Hist. Journal XV 4 1972 pp. 753-773

peace, where there is no peace" find fault with our mission? The only persons in Russia who used the resolution of the I.L.P. and the speeches of former comrades, against us, were the physical force anarchists and the extremist of one political party (the Bolsheviks)'.

'True it is - and I admit it - we did in the course of addressing the Workmen's and Soldiers' Council at Petrograd, Moscow, Minsk, Devinsk and Psor, and when addressing the troops on the North and West battle-fronts, urge them to take care that having got rid of the despotism of the House of Romanoff, that of Hohenzollern did not fasten its shackles on their new won liberty. This also may be accounted to our mission as a crime. If so, I shall be proud of the appellation. Did our mission do any good it may be asked, in particular by the pacifist? It is not for me to say. I simply point out facts. The Workmen's and Soldiers' Councils have sent six Socialist members of their body into the Provisional Government which now, let it be said, is known in Russia as the Coalition Government. The result is to save their country from anarchy and to inspire their armies in this war of liberation until the only military despotism in Europe is defeated'.

The statement - and he makes it clear it is not a report to the membership of the union - but a statement, is angry and unrestrained, but the full fury of his anger is, at the end of the statement turned on the Parliamentary Labour Party and on the officials of NAFTA who had throughout the war taken a consistently pacifist line.

'Some of my Parliamentary colleagues, have been spluttering on platforms and writing kind, brotherly articles to a certain type of weekly newspaper decrying our mission. However, these do not count, except with those hitherto enemies of labour now pacifists'.

The statement marked the parting of the ways between NAFTA and James O'Grady. Relationships had been strained and a measure of patching up would occur over the next few years, but with this mission he isolated himself from the executive and the membership in a manner which could never result in reconciliation.

Yet, in defence of O'Grady, and viewing the events without the benefit of hindsight, his position and his attitudes were honestly consistant with his pro-war stance. James O'Grady believed the war had to be fought and in its turn this did mean the prosecution of the war by the maximum means available to ensure a speedy and satisfactory conclusion.

There was very good reason for the British Government to attempt to keep the Russian Army in the field. Facing them were eighty Divisions of the Central Powers. Their removal from the Russian front and subsequent transfer to the Western front before the American Army could be assembled and trained, swung the balance heavily in their favour in terms of manpower in the early months of 1918. (i)

The NAFTA was represented by Alex Gossip at the Convention held in Leeds on the 3rd June to congratulate the Russian workers on their revolution. Some 1,150 delegates were present and 'One left that vast conference with renewed faith in the glorious ideals of Internationalism'. The recognition of the solidarity of labour of all lands and the oneness of interest was the dominant feature of the vast assembly....and amply repaid us for all the abuse which has been hurled at those who all along have opposed the forces of Capitalism

(i) J.Toland - No Man's Land, London 1980

masquerading in the guise of so-called patriotism. The vituperative language of the Gutter Press and of some Labour men is sufficient to convince us, if that is necessary, that we are on the right path, the fear and trembling of the Government at the mere idea of the soldiers and workers forming a joint committee shows clearly how they realise the true inward feelings of those who are in the Army, and are afraid of them'. (i)

The General Secretary, with C.F.Hawkins of the E.C., were the NAFTA delegates at the resultant District Conference for London and Home Counties of the Workers and Soldiers Council held in Hoxton on the 28th July. Seven branches sent delegates but as A.G. reports 'The meeting was broken up and many of the delegates injured by an organised mob of hooligans, well primed with drink, and incited to passion by a lying and misleading circular spread broadcast through all the pubs in Hoxton by a party which is well-known to us under a high sounding Labour name! (Fisher/National Socialist Party)....some of our personal friends being brutally kicked and injured severly by the very people they have worked so hard for, all their lives'. 'These poor misguided dupes and tools of the Capitalists had not the slightest idea that they were being used by the enemies of their own class'. 'One can feel sympathy for them but not towards those who knowing better, have deliberately espoused the cause of the exploiters and oppressors of the poor and have vilely misrepresented the only movement in the interests of the people, both in Parliament and out of it'. (ii)

Access to the Home Office and Metropolitan Police files on the Meetings of the Workers and Soldiers Societies has been refused

- (i) M.R. July, 1917
- (ii) M.R. July, 1917

but the reports in the Times were in themselves illuminating.

'The meeting to form the Workers and Soldiers Societies was prevented by the activities of an angry crowd. The church premises in which the meeting was held was wrecked and some of the conference delegates injured.

The speakers were expected to be Mr W.C.Anderson, Mr John MacLean, Mr J.Finchley and Mrs Snowden. Miss Sylvia Pankhurst also attended. The meeting was broken up by men and women including Australian and New Zealand troops, with extreme violence and without the interference of the police. The attack occurred at 3 o'clock and about half past four the police were able to draw a cordon round the premises and hold the people in check. One arrest was made of a railway porter, charged with a breach of the peace'.

'This action was repeated in Newcastle where again Colonial Troops were at the forefront of the attacks on the delegates present'. 'In Swansea the meeting was broken up and the delegates chased from the building'.

In a final broadside attack aimed at amongst others James O'Grady  
R.G.W.M.  
'We absolutely refuse to be bought, either with money, praise, flattery or any other method adopted by the Capitalist class'. (i)

The October Revolution was greeted by the NAFTA 'with enthusiasm' and Fred Bramley as delegate to the Trades Union Congress moved the resolution:-

(i) Times, 30 July, 1917 p.3

see also Jack, Tommy and Henry Dabb, The armed forces and the Working Class; David Englander and James Osborne - Hist.Journal 21,3(1978) pp. 593/621

also The revolutionary movement in Britain 1900-1921  
Walter Kendall 1969

'This Congress welcomes the declaration of the Russian workers in repudiating all proposals for Imperialistic conquest and aggrandisement. We also sent to the workers of Russia our wholehearted congratulations on their magnificent achievement in securing the downfall of official tyranny, persecution, and despotism of an autocratic Government and expressing the hope that the Russian Revolution will hasten the coming of a peace based upon, not a dominance of tyannical monarchs, militarists and diplomats, but by the principles of nationality, democracy and justice maintained by a league of Nations'. (i)

The Russian Revolution continued to be an area of contentiousness between O'Grady and the Union. When Maxim Litvinoff, the Ambassador of the Bolshevik Government of Russia attended the Labour Party Conference O'Grady writes 'His speech would have been a success had it not been that he went out of his way to speak in terms of contempt of Kerensky and of the elected constituent assembly in Russia.' (ii)

Reporting on the special conference of this Labour Party held in London on 26th June, 1918 O'Grady said that 'Some of the delegates and members of the public in the gallery made a demonstration against our Russian comrade Kerensky. I felt the matter very keenly, knowing the man's great work in the revolution and how heroically he tried to save his country from a relapse into anarchy and despotism'.

Not only was this a frontal assault on the views of the officers and members of the union of which he was Parliamentary Secretary, it also disregarded the fact that Kerensky was in the United Kingdom as an enemy of Soviet Rule in Russia and in favour of continuation of an

(i) M.R. Aug, 1917  
(ii) M.R. Feb, 1918

imperialist war. Notwithstanding this, O'Grady goes on 'his (Kerensky's) mission to Western Europe cannot fail of good results. Its purpose has no other motive than a resurrection of the ideals that brought the great and wondrous change to Russia, buried in centuries of oppression'.

With this support of the anti-Soviet movement the final parting of the ways between NAFTA and O'Grady had occurred. A relationship between the Union and its Parliamentary Secretary remained for the time being, but it was conducted in an atmosphere of icy formality and often disdain.

Typical of such an exchange between them occurred in 1917 when O'Grady supported Lloyd George and 'his most effective choice of the labour members who have been given Government posts' which elicited the response of Alex Gossip's condemnation of 'those Labour M.P.'s like G.H.Robert, who are doing their best to bewilder the workers in the interests of the capitalists'. This particular exchange opened the door to public criticism of O'Grady within the Monthly Reports. The Scottish branches had questioned the sum of £40 spent by the union each year in O'Grady's East Leeds constituency. He explained this by advising them of the need to retain an agent on registration work and he also stated that being a member of Parliament for East Leeds cost him, at least, £1 per week from his M.P.'s salary for travel, etc. 'I am tired of the bounders in our movement ever seeking to pull down to the ground one of their own class'. (i)

O'Grady had, however, decided at this point to protect himself for the future. 'I am glad to inform the membership (of NAFTA) that on 17th July, 1917 I was elected as General Secretary of the National

(i) M.R. Jan, 1917

Federation of General Workers. This is a new Federation of Labourers Unions and is a salaried post. I shall have the support of a membership of 500,000. The salary will keep the roof over the wife and kiddies heads should anything happen politically. I mention this because I have been attacked bitterly and unscrupulously by a small section of our members, and life as a consequence since 1914 has been a rougher journey than one should expect, even in war times. I have tried to do my duty as I saw it, but persecution knows nothing of obligations or of the humanities. One of my foremost persecutors has taken a Government job, another has been after such a job for years. Hail to consistency'. (i)

This last remark was taken by those inside and outside the Union to be an attack upon Fred Bramley whose only Government connection was as a member of the National Service Committee on the Aircraft Industry for which he did not receive any salary and O'Grady had, in consequence, to publish a fulsome retraction of this implied slur in the next Monthly Report.

James O'Grady was the 1917/18 Chairman of the G.F.T.U. but such was his lack of popularity within NAFTA that in the election of delegates for the G.F.T.U. Conference, he lost his seat as delegate to C.F.Hawkins of the E.C. The resultant conference was an open battle between the NAFTA delegate and O'Grady. As Chairman, O'Grady opened the battle with a speech which ended 'I declare in the name of the Federation our determination to carry on the war, and I condemn those pacifists who would seek to disrupt the Labour movement'. Public battle was joined when at the election of the Management Committee

(i) M.R. Aug, 1917

it was stated that O'Grady was representing the Dockers and Hawkins countered this by objecting that as O'Grady was not a bona fide delegate he was in fact ineligible to be Chairman and that as Ben Tillett of the Dockers was on the Management Committee, no other member of his organisation could act on it. This in its turn resulted in a long and acrimonious complaint by O'Grady against the NAFTA for not electing him as delegate and eventually the matter was put to the vote. The delegates endorsed O'Grady's position (and so avoided a further scandal).

The row spilled over into the Monthly Reports with O'Grady describing Hawkins' report of the G.F.T.U. Conference as 'contemptible, I do not complain about not being elected by the members but against the methods that were adopted in the matter of the election (lobbying against him whilst he was in Russia).

The row between O'Grady and Hawkins now centred on a battle for the vote as NAFTA delegate to the Labour Party conference to be held in January, 1918 in Nottingham. O'Grady received 1,020 votes and Hawkins 774, which effectively defused the situation for the time.

Yet there was between O'Grady and the NAFTA too much bitterness for any opportunity of scoring points to be missed and so, when in the Monthly Report O'Grady thanks the membership for electing him as delegate to the Labour Party Conference, he points out 'In that position I cannot, of course, hope to represent the views of the minority except, perhaps, in one particular of political activities, and that is the need for the Government of the Allies to make a clear and simple declaration of their war aims. O'Grady stated these to be

Restitution, Reparations and the right of people to live their own National lives, and the establishment of a League of Nations. (It should be noted with his inclusion of Reparations he was adopting a stance quite contrary to the policy of the Labour Party which was strongly against any indemnities.)

'Whilst I was in Russia I considered their aims of no annexations, no contributions and the rights of peoples to National Self Assertion to be too vague and I and my fellow delegates to Russia tried earnestly and repeatedly to persuade them to change these to Restitution and Reparations. I further consider the statement of war aims issued by the Joint Committee of the Labour Party and T.U.C. as too academic and verbose, as all academic expressions of view must be' (echoing the ouvrierism of Fisher). 'In answer to my pacifist friends - I protest with all my soul, against their assumption that I wish to continue this war an hour longer than is necessary to safeguard the future'.

Yet the ambivalence, the bankrupt idealism and hyperboly, which had so infuriated his union colleagues is clearly seen when this January statement is contrasted with his next statement to the Union on the War. 'Not until the German military Idol is destroyed can the world rest in security' and referring to a visit as part of an M.P's delegation to Verdun 'a journey to the depths of Hell' (500,000 German dead and 300,000 French dead in the battles for Verdun) 'God that men should be so insane'. O'Grady then goes on to state that the reported speech of the German minister for Foreign Affairs - Von Kuhlmann setting out peace terms 'was unacceptable'. 'Those of us supporting the Government are resolute that there shall be no German dictation of peace terms, but will watch ceaselessly and keenly for opportunities to end this terrible war by the establishment of a "clean peace".

The end of the relationship between NAFTA and O'Grady was nigh and he was finally and utterly discredited in the eyes of the Union when at the 'Coupon Election' of December, 1918 he was returned unopposed by the Coalition as a 'National Democratic' Labour candidate.

The other candidate that the NAFTA had put forward for that election was Fred Bramley who came second in the Ballot behind the coalition candidate and in front of the Liberal candidate; 'I did, however, keep the Labour Standard clear of the intrigue which secured success in other places'. (i)

Fred Bramley had, however, left his position as a Trade Organiser for the Union (though retaining his union membership) since, when the T.U.C. moved into new office premises in Eccleston Square, it appointed him as full time Assistant Secretary - the first full time official appointed by the T.U.C. The correct and full title was Assistant Secretary to the Parliamentary Committee of the Trade Union Congress, insofar as the term 'T.U.C. still referred to the annual conference rather than a central trades union organisation. The parliamentary Committee maintained this continuity from one year to the next and was composed of union officials who devoted part of their time to T.U.C. business, indeed the P.C. Secretary combined his work with the job of being an M.P.'.

Fred Bramley wrote that 'In accepting this position I am inspired by a desire to take part in dealing with questions of a general nature affecting all trades unions alike and having had an opportunity of realising the potentialities of more effective national action, I have

(1) M.R. February, 1919

decided to take some responsibility for the development of the Parliamentary Committee and its functions with that object in view. I am not leaving the Trade Union movement. I am getting more completely involved in it. I shall still be serving you in another capacity'.

A profile of Fred Bramley is presented as an appendix but the task he had set himself on his new position is summed up in a speech made at the Bristol T.U.C. of 1915. 'After this war is over, there will be greater events in the industrial field, the problems of re-adjustment, the increased necessity of preventing the rich from imposing the burden of war consequences upon the poor, and the vital necessity of increasing industrial solidarity will command our special attention'.

Fred Bramley's departure left a gap in the organisation, and his place was taken up by C.F.Hawkins, Polisher, No.20 Branch (London Polishers), a long serving member of the E.C., avowed pacifist, socialist and protagonist of James O'Grady.

The Union had earlier elected D.Thorn as their Scottish Trade Organiser, a cabinetmaker from No.23 (Glasgow) Branch and as a result of an amalgamation Jack Cohen, Cabinetmaker, joined the full time officials as Organising Secretary.

Amalgamations were not a major feature of the war years as they had been prior to the conflict. However, some progress was made in this area. In 1916 the old West End Cabinetmakers Society joined the NAFTA. Its days of glory long since past with only 28 members

of which 7 were on a retired list. They joined No.2 Branch West End Cabinetmakers thus avoiding a vote of the Association. The Association did, however, have to vote on the amalgamation with the United Furnishing Trades Union (sometimes referred to as the Independent Hebrew Society). Fred Bramley and Jack Cohen (General Secretary of the U.F.T.U.) had worked together to 'improve the East End Trade' and a vote was taken for amalgamation with 2,178 for and 38 against. This was quite insufficient with a membership of 16,000 of which nearly 5,000 were in the armed forces, and the Registrar General objected to the amalgamation going through and a re-vote was called for. In December, 1917 the membership voted 6,610 for and 85 against amalgamation, however, still not sufficient to satisfy the Registrar General who demanded that a 50 per cent of the membership vote, this in a war time working situation was extremely difficult and in consequence and with the assistance of C.W.Bowerman, M.P., Secretary of the P.C. of Trades Union Congress, the amalgamation was allowed to come into effect in April, 1918.

One group of workers who joined NAFTA in 1918 were the London Piano workers. C.F.Hawkins and Jack Cohen devoted a considerable effort to organising this group and by December, 1918 had 1,375 members enrolled in two new branches, No.62 Holloway and No.113, Barnbury N.7 and these efforts were capped in December by the signing of a comprehensive working Agreement on wages, hours and conditions of employment, including the abandonment of piecework and sub-contracted work.

The most important amalgamation negotiations of the war period were between the NAFTA and the Amalgamated Joiners. The two E.C.'s

met on 28th February, 1918 and agreed a proposed basis for amalgamation, which was to be put before the respective membership after it was cleared by the General Council of the Amalgamated Joiners. The Joiners however, decided that they wished a vote of NAFTA before going to their General Council and this was duly taken in June with 8,747 voting for amalgamation and 251 against.

The Joiners, however, were slow to take action on the matter and at the end of 1918 their General Council still had not met to consider the amalgamation. It is a matter of record that the amalgamation never took place but it is an indication to the extent of the belief of the officials and the membership of NAFTA in Industrial Trades Unionism that they were prepared to dissolve their own Association and join up with this other society to achieve this end.

The Union did, however, view with some disquiet the post-war world. There were 'too many barriers of self-interest in the way of progress' was the way Alex Gossip put it, and quoted from a pamphlet circulated to all Trades Union officials by Sir John Pilter, President of the British Chamber of Commerce in Paris. (i)

'Labour must learn to look upon capital not only as a necessity, but also as his best friend; further, Labour must rid his mind of the thought that Capital finds life easier than he does, Labour is freed of all anxiety as to bad seasons, bad debts, errors of judgement, which give Capital many a sleepless night'. (ii)

Alex Gossip notes 'the grammar is also Sir J. Pilter's'.

- (i) M.R. April, 1917
- (ii) M.R. Aug, 1918

The General Secretary also brought to the attention of the membership the statement of the Chairman of Cunard Shipping at its A.G.M., who predicted 'stormy days ahead' due to the variety of factors but principally 'Labour unrest due to the false hopes held out of a new heaven and a new earth after the war. The disillusionment would be very bitter when it came'.

One piece of legislation which promised, if not a new heaven, then at least a better Britain in the post-war year, was the Fisher Education Act of 1918. The NAFTA attitude to Fisher was enthusiastic. 'The promise of being the most sympathetic and practical educationalist that has occupied the office for a number of years'. 'Wisely carrying out a policy of going to meetings of Trade Unionists with a view not only of trying to understand the work peoples claims to education, but of persuading them to back up his efforts in the House of Commons' wrote Alex Gossip. (i)

This enthusiasm was shared by James O'Grady, and writing to the membership on the second reading of the Education Bill, notes, 'The opposition centred on the raising of compulsory education from twelve to fourteen years. The arguments centred round the extra costs and the fact that the abolition of the half timer will ruin the cotton trade. 'Mr Fisher has done what no other Minister of Education has done. He has come to workers at their conferences and meetings, found their point of view and their desires, in the matter of their children's education and attends the discussions in the House of Commons, fortified with his experience and strengthened to resist any attempt to destroy

(i) M.R. Nov, 1917

the purpose of the Bill'. 'He loves children and glorifies education, in that it will develop in the child all the latent genius and beatitudes which "we as a nation in our race for wealth and power have foolishly overlooked".

The war had produced thousands of disabled servicemen who were by reason of their injury unable to return to the war or to their former employment. A number of solutions to this problem were put forward including that of introducing them into the Furniture Industry. The initial reaction of the Union and its leadership to this idea, was quite hostile, as is evidenced by the report made by Alex Gossip to the Board of Trade enquiry into the Training and Employment of Disabled Servicemen. 'The Furniture Trades have had one of the highest records for unemployment of all trades....whilst the union had great sympathy for the victims of the war....one in every four of the union members was in the armed forces and the work of furniture making becomes highly subdivided, which as a Union we are opposed to; it will be impossible to train a man quickly in this Trade. The NAFTA would also bring to the attention of the Board the problems of noise, dust and fumes which are a part of the furniture making process and which we cannot but feel will be injurious to the disabled'. (i)

Handcraft industries and, specifically, the Furniture Industry have suffered recurrently from the misfortune of those who would place the handicapped or disabled in such employment, as being seen as 'anyone can do it' industries. Moreover, the splitting down of the production of furniture into elemental tasks was opposed by the Union

(i) Evidence presented to the B.T.Enquiry into the Training and Employment of Disabled Servicemen. Jan, 1917

right up until the Second World War. It was in use in the East End factories and in the largest firms but was regarded as de-skilling or de-humanising an essentially skilled trade. In a period when such craft skills were on the defensive and the prospect in the post-war period of a return to pre-war unemployment loomed large, to allow the introduction of elemental task working by the disabled in a furniture factory would have been unacceptable. Fred Bramley commenting upon the inquiry in the Monthly Report states 'Pensioned labour is dangerous. It must not be used to lower the standard wages and conditions in our industry which is the approach which will be used by the unscrupulous employer in our industry'. (i)

In January of 1918, however, the NAFTA decided that they would cooperate in the setting up of Local Joint Committee, known as Local Technical Advisory Committees, in the selection and training of the disabled ex-servicemen for the Furniture Industry. The Union had made its points well at the discussions at the Board of Trade and the new Committees gave them the power to avoid dilution and wage cutting by the dishonest employers use of the disabled and it also ensured that those who entered the industry in this fashion were properly trained to earn their living.

The full text of the instruction is set out in the appendix; however, it effectively ensured that none would be selected for training without the consent of the local branch of the union. The instruction and training was to be an agreed schedule. The standards to be achieved in the training were to be established by the Trades Union, and the

(i) M.R. Feb, 1917

Trades Union branch were required to have a knowledge and control of the wages paid whilst in sheltered employment and training. (i)

On the face of it this was a highly protective and exclusive measure of control over the employment of the disabled. In practice this was not the case, since comparatively few of the disabled who were unable to take up their pre-war employment because of their disability, were capable of entering the Furniture Industry at this time because of its high demands of manual dexterity. It was still a machine assisted hand production industry. The unexpected benefit, however, was that the terms of the instruction required the setting up of technical training centres with schematic and progressive training programmes. These very rapidly became technical training establishments which took on the role of apprentice training and the technical college courses in High Wycombe, Bristol, Manchester, Liverpool and Leeds and London owe at least, in part, their genesis to this legislation.

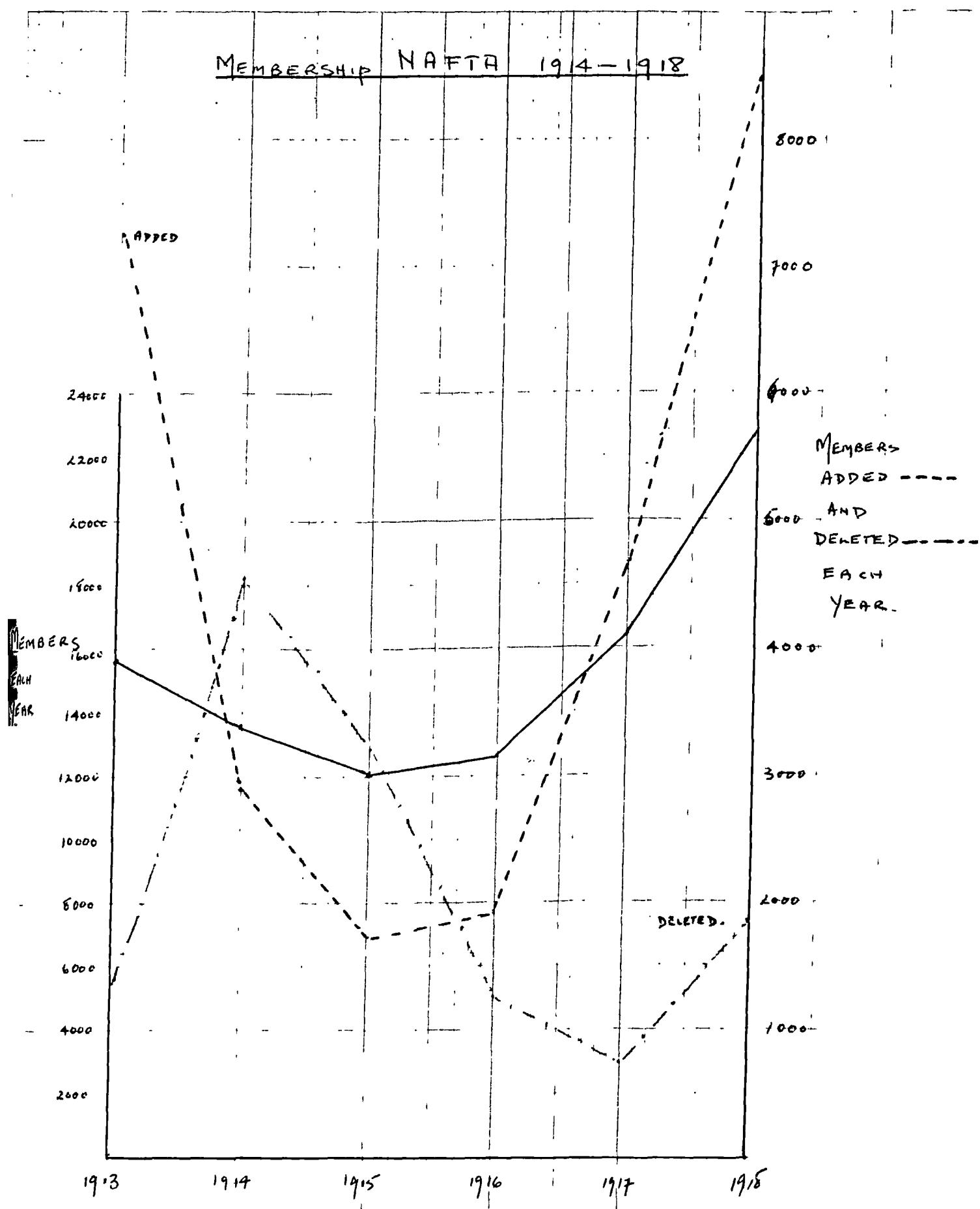
The war years were over. Over 4,600 members had served in the armed forces and 272 had died in action. The Union had grown wealthy in members and capital. The organisation was strong and its officials were amongst the finest in any union in the country. Yet it was with pessimism rather than hope that the NAFTA viewed the approaching post-war years. 'As far as one can judge there would appear to be every probability of the usual capitalist Peace being introduced with its inevitable evil consequences for the future. Whether the final result of the war will be that the world has been made safe for Democracy or safe from Democracy depends on the working class in all the countries

(i) M.R. Jan, 1918

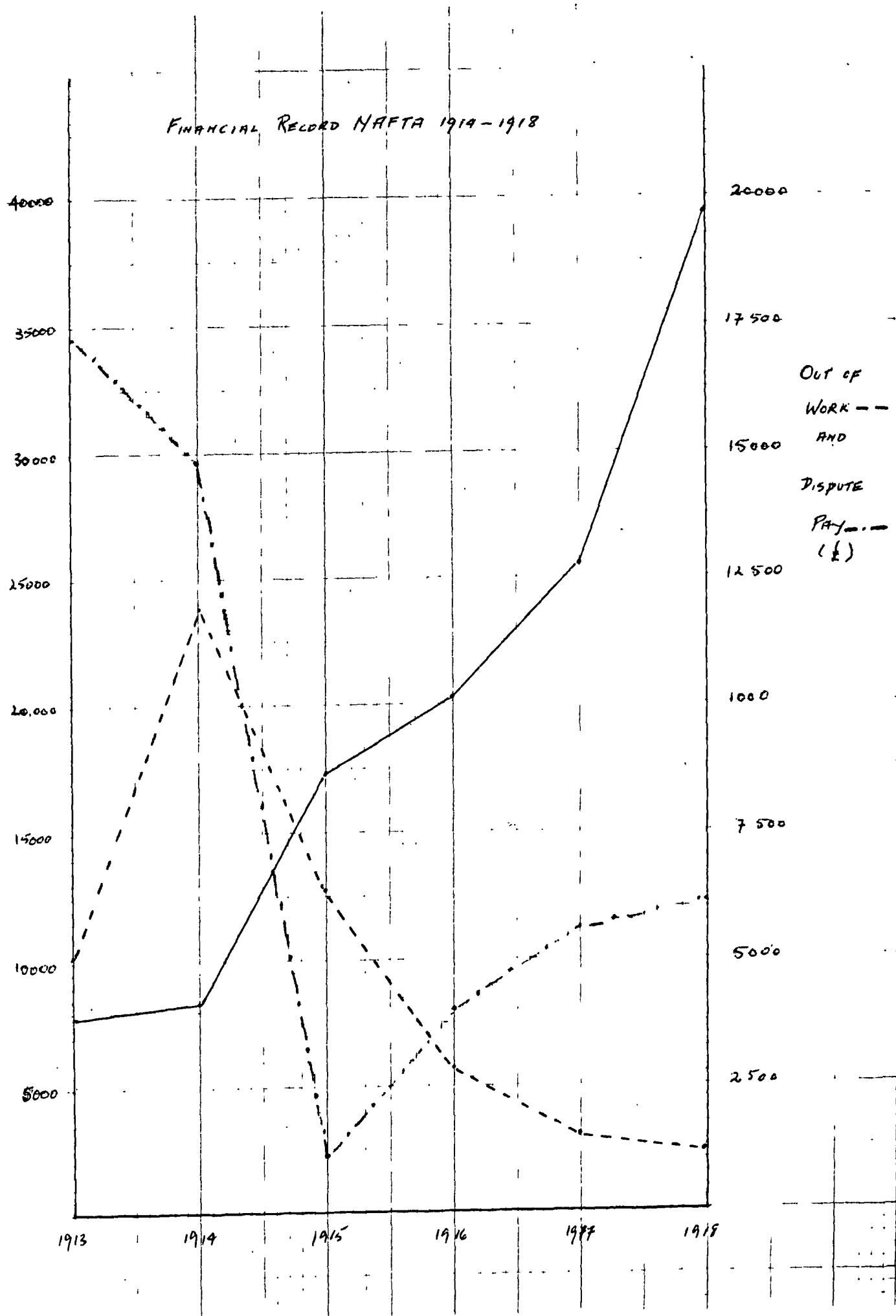
concerned. Let us remember that if poverty and misery, long hours of toil, and a more firmly established capitalists system are to be the reward of the workers of this country, then we the workers will have, indeed, lost the war with a vengeance'. (i) (ii)

- (i) Annual Report 1918
- (ii) M.R. Dec., 1918

MEMBERSHIP      NAFTA      1914-1918



FINANCIAL RECORD NAFTA 1914-1918



N.Y.A.F.T.A.

1914 - 1918

OUT OF WORK AND DISPUTE PAY PER MEMBER.

OLD PENCE  
(d)

350

300

250

200

150

100

50

1913

1914

1915

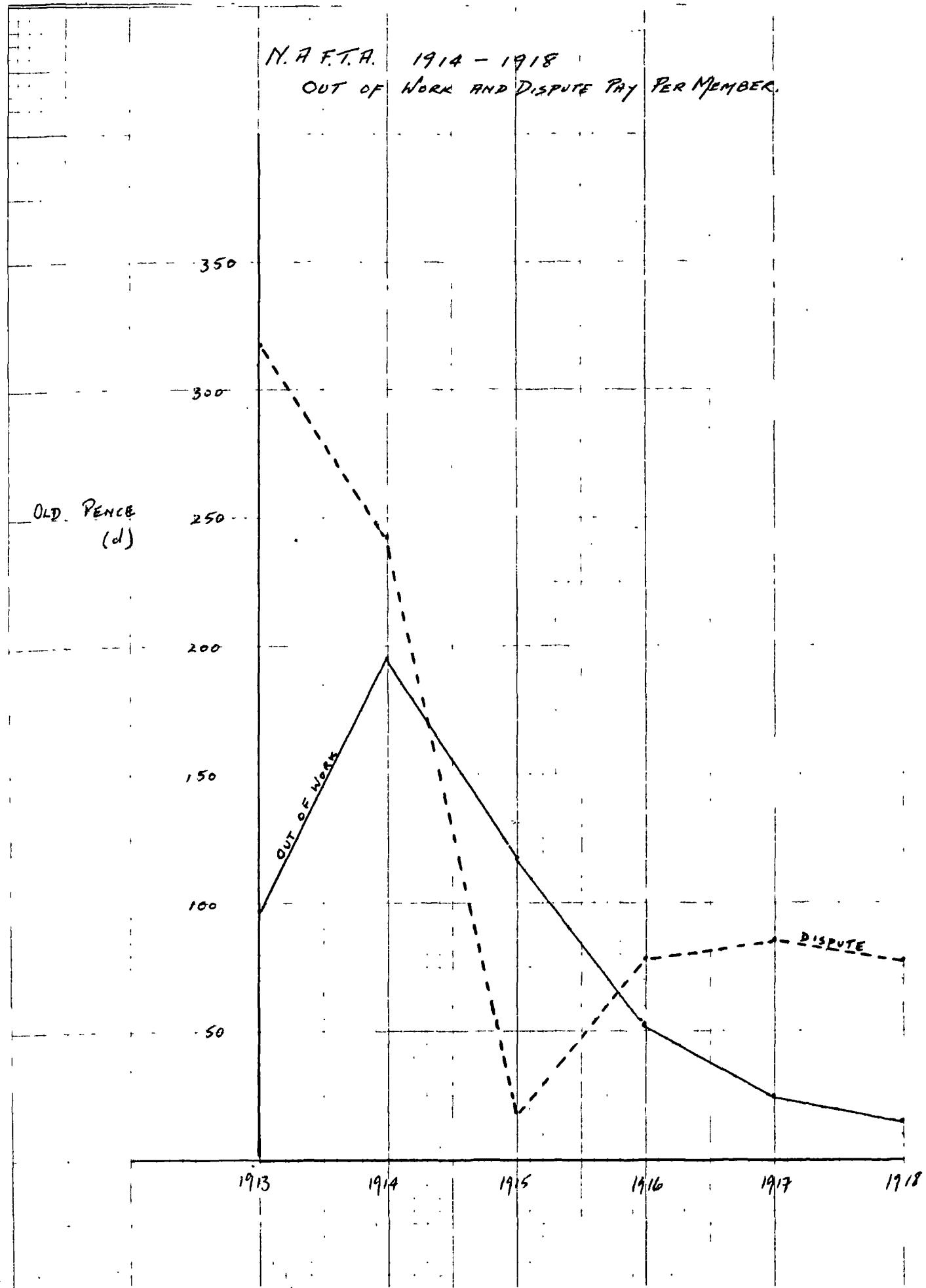
1916

1917

1918

OUT OF WORK

DISPUTE



1919 - 1926 - FROM OPTIMISM TO DEFEAT

The immediate post war years, were for NAFTA, a period of 'defiance for defence'. With membership rising to nearly 33,000 in 1920 (N.B. See Appendix) the Union fought and won a National lockout of the Cabinet Manufacturers Federation and a strike against the Piano Manufacturers Federation. Hours of working were reduced to 47 per week from 51 hours, wages rose to an average of 1/11d per hour and a national ban on overtime to absorb the returned servicemen into the industry was imposed and sustained.

The collapse of the post war boom in 1921/22 brought massive unemployment to the Furniture Industry and the Union was forced to accept a sliding scale of wages tied to the cost of living index. The remaining years of the period were highly defensive, yet with an underlying offensive outlook on the part of the executive and officials. The Furniture workers played a crucial role in the events of these years and the exact nature of their contribution to these events is still a matter of great controversy.

Using the JIC, NAFTA had proposed a national 44 hour week for the Furniture Industry at the meetings in 1918 and by February, 1919 the employers responded with an offer of 48 hours. The Union side replied with an offer of 46½ hours which the employers agreed to consider, whilst in the meantime the union side placed an immediate ban on all overtime. The employers response was to offer again the 48 hours week but with a National set of working rules and conditions, and with wage rates to be set on a regional basis, but relegated on a national basis

against a sliding scale tied to the cost of living index. All these points were acceptable to the Unions except for the 48 hour week and at the March JIC meeting it was agreed to put this question to a National Conciliation Board which was set up with five representatives from each side. (i)

In an effort to precipitate action in these very slow negotiations the union took matters into their own hands by signing a separate agreement with the Liverpool employers for a  $46\frac{1}{2}$  hour week and 2/- per hour. They then turned their attention to Manchester and here they were resisted. To encourage the employers to settle NAFTA called out 1,000 members in the Manchester area but this was countered by the National Wholesale Employers Federation, who 'locked out' some 4,500 union members on 1st July, 1919. The lock out thought referred to as National was effective, only in Manchester and High Wycombe. In London, Liverpool and Scotland the manufacturers did not respond to the Federations call so allowing NAFTA to levy (4/- per member) the working members to finance the dispute.

This lock out was serious for the Union but it lacked the crusading fervour of the Scottish and High Wycombe disputes of earlier years. This was not a movement to improve inhuman working conditions and starvation wages; it was a trial of strength between the Union and the employers fought against a background of high demand for furniture from the domestic consumer. The discrediting statements made by the organiser in charge of the dispute, Alf Purcell, reflect this new situation. 'To fight back is our game. The lying and filthy dogs who form the great part of the Employers Federation must be exposed. We must say openly

(i) Monthly Report Feb, Mar, July, Sept.

and avowedly how they are daily fleecing the public with furniture rubbish; say how the public is buying oak which was never near an oak tree. Then there is the great Jacobean and antique furniture swindle...' (the manufacture of instant antiques). (i)

The dispute was finally settled on the 22nd September, 1919 with an agreement on a 47 hour week, 1/1d to 2/- per hour, and no payment by results. This statement, however, suggests a tidy and satisfactory picture of what was an untidy and acrimonious end to the dispute. The agreement was arrived at in London between the Employers Federation and the E.C. of the Union but without reference to Alf Purcell and the strike committees in Manchester and High Wycombe. Alf Purcell was duly incensed at this apparent backing down on the part of the union and the lack of consultation and would have adopted quite different tactics. 'We should call out all our members up and down the country - that would solve it in days'. The reality was, however, that the union was effectively under siege from other quarters as well as the National Federation and their first priority was to get this particular dispute settled on the best terms that could be achieved in order to meet the new challenge from the Piano manufacturers. (ii)

Alf Purcell was bidding to don the mantle of the crusading spirit of NAFTA of the earlier years. However, his firebrand approach was divorced from the reality of the precarious financial state of the union. The dispute had cost the Union £60,758 from funds and £6,123 from donations from other unions. The London Piano Manufacturers Federation had taken advantage of the dispute and had threatened to

(i) Monthly Report July, 1919  
(ii) Monthly Report August, 1919

lock out its employees (4,500 NAFTA members) on 20th August, unless they accepted non-union working and Payment by Results 'This notice gave your E.C. and General officials a harrassing time since it would have brought the membership out of work to over 10,000, but the matter has been got over for the time being'. Alex Gossip stalled for time calling meetings with the Piano employers and the notice was temporarily withdrawn allowing the union to fight this battle when they were ready and financially able.

By April of 1920 NAFTA was ready to do battle with the Piano Employers. A demand on improvement in wages and the abolition of Payment by Results where it existed was turned down by the employers and on April 10 NAFTA withdrew its membership from all factories. The recruitment of members in the trade had been very successful and 6,500 men and women representing 95 per cent of the workforce were called out. They had to stay out for thirteen weeks before the Employers conceded the union terms but the victory was complete.

The hours were regularised at 47 per week, wages were increased by 4½d per hour, a complete code of working rules and conditions was accepted. Shop stewards were set up in every department of every factory and recruitment of labour for the Piano Industry was placed in the hands of the union, the branch offices becoming in effect the labour exchanges for piano workers and employers. It was a magnificent result achieved by careful planning of men and finances and backed by a loyal and organised membership. It was, however, a 'good times' agreement and with the return of 'poor trade' the piano industry would become a constant source of anxiety for the NAFTA

The refusal of Payment by Results was a central tenet of the NAFTA philosophy at this time and cost them dear in disputes and in members who were expelled for accepting P.B.R. It is helpful to our understanding of this apparently intransigent position to quote the letter to Alex Gossip from the Secretary of London Cabinetmakers and Upholstery Trades Federation. 'We cannot dare to ignore natures law of the survival of the fittest, and provided the rates are fairly fixed in joint agreement, and the slowest man can make sure of a minimum wage; so long as he does a fair average weeks work, and the employer has guaranteed that an improvement in effort shall never again only result in a cutting of the rate, I do not think Labour will wish to deny a keen man the fierce joy of doing his best for a fair pecuniary advantage as a reward'. (i)

'Pious expressions of opinion and beliefs that men are working or normally work their hardest, are not a sufficiently stable basis on which to run a business. Statistics both general and individual exist to show that output per man per hour, has decreased enormously until it is hardly too much to assert that under the hourly rate system, the more money a man gets the less he does'.

In refuting this argument Alex Gossip clarifies and defines the union stance against P.B.R. 'What the employer wants from a workman is more and more hard work, more and still more output of goods during a time of abnormal demand, but this is no new thing, and the same doctrine has been preached time and time again during periods of booms in trade, and the inevitable glut in the worlds markets after a time, with all that means for the worker thrown out on the streets, after he has produced more than there is an effective market for'.

(i) Monthly Report Jan, 1920

'Whilst thoroughly agreeing with the demoralising effects of the work shirker (and we can see its evil effects in the so-called upper classes every day of our lives) and always having advocated that those who are physically and mentally fit ought to do their fair share of the necessary world's work, but what is needed is not more work but rather more real leisure for the real worker and more real work from those who live off other people's labour'.

One other dispute which occurred in this early period was particularly important in its effect upon the thinking of Alf Purcell. He spent the early months of 1919 in Belfast helping with the General Strike in that city. 'My memory ranges right back to the London Dock Strike of 1889 and I can see the many episodes right up to the great Liverpool hold up of 1911, but these were not so complete as the solidarity of Belfast in the early weeks of February (1919). No trans, no electricity, no gas. The town shops in all branches of industry at a positive standstill'. (1)

'The Strike Committees Daily Bulletin the only official city newspaper, A General Strike Committee absolutely united and determined to be loyal to every section rendering support. The Lord Mayor hawking for the military, and the workers pickets supplementing the policing of the city in its darkened hours. Everyone urging the 44 hour week since it would minimise unemployment. As a movement it admitted of no side issue, it kept to the reduction of hours every time and all the time'.

'This dispute had won before it started. It had won complete Working Class Solidarity in Belfast and as such it contributed an illuminating page in the history of the world's greatest industrial

(1) Monthly Report Mar, April, May 1919

struggle. If twenty big cities in the United Kingdom would do simultaneously and with Belfast completeness a similar act of solidarity, the final emancipation of the working class would be within a years distance of accomplishment'.

This wish was to be father to the deed, yet in its fulfilment, this early lack of definition, this inability to recognise that a major strike in one industrial town does not, no matter how complete in its effect, constitute a threat to State Power, and the failure to think through the consequences of a United Kingdom General Strike; this avoidance in rhetoric of what in real terms, the emancipation of the working classes meant suggest that for the furniture workers central participant in the events of 1926, the seeds of that defeat were sown in Belfast in February, 1919.

The years of 1919 and 1920 had been prosperous years of good trade for the furniture industry but the seasonal down turn in trade normally associated with January and February was particularly marked in 1921 and as the year progressed trade did not pick up but stayed at a 'poor and dull' level. The J.I.C. for the furniture industry had been abandoned by the unions in February, 1920 and with it the associated National Conciliation Board but as demand grew from the employers side for cuts in wages and changes in working conditions, and with short time working effecting almost all furniture workers, the union recognised it was in no position to defend itself against a concerted attack from the employers.

Prices had been falling dramatically in 1921 in an effort to find buyers. Harrods catalogues for the two years illustrates this clearly:-

	<u>May 1920</u> £	<u>May 1921</u> £
Oak Dining Table	15	8.15s.0d.
Oak Chest of Drawers	12.10s.0d.	6.15s.0d
Oak Bedroom Suite	35-50	22-39
Oak Sideboard 5 ft.	22-40	12.15s.0d. to 18.18s.0d.
Three piece suite	38-45	29-36
Easy Chairs	7-16	4.15s.0d. to 14

(i)

The National Conciliation Board was resurrected at the Union's request and after a series of meetings, the union was forced to accept a 5 per cent cut in wages and a subsequent fixing of wages to a sliding scale based upon the cost of living index. For every  $6\frac{1}{2}$  points change from an index figure of 128 on 1st September 1921, the wages rose or fell by  $\frac{1}{2}d.$  per hour with a revision monthly till January 1922, and thereafter three monthly.

The union held on to the 47 hour week but with short time working the rule, this was at this time merely a sop, however they were able to contrive to have 'no P.B.R.' written into the agreement, at least as far as NAFTA members were concerned.

Effectively wages and working conditions had been taken out of the bargaining situation for the foreseeable future for NAFTA and the problems of unemployment and resistance to P.B.R. became their main

(i) Harrods Furniture Catalogues May 1920, May 1921

industrial concerns. This gave NAFTA an opportunity to look to its own organisational structure, and it also gave the officials time to look at other than the industrial scene to find solutions to economic ills that beset the workers.

The examination of itself that NAFTA undertook had been prompted by two events. The National lock out in the Cabinet Trade of 1919 had shown strong resentment of the centralised, London dominated nature of the Executive Committee, and its apparent failure to communicate with and respond to the needs of the regions. All of the criticism levelled by Alf Purcell and others at this time was not completely justified but it was sufficiently merited to be considered. The final catalyst for change was the failure to conclude the long running negotiations with ASCC & J on amalgamation by a failure of that society to agree to merge. NAFTA had been very keen to amalgamate even to the extent of voting to dissolve their own union. The disappointment that came with such a reversal was grasped by the advocates of change and turned to their own use. (i)

Once again it was Alf Purcell who took the centre of the stage. 'We have failed to bring about the amalgamation that we all had hoped for, since this is not to be we must take this opportunity to re-model our own Association to make it stronger, more representative and able to face the future. I propose:

1. Open the Association to all furniture workers skilled and unskilled.  
(NOTE: There were unskilled members especially during the war years but as a floating workforce the unskilled rarely sustained their contributions and were erased for non-payment).

(i) Monthly Report May 1920

2. Adopt a National Executive Committee elected by districts (at this time the E.C. was elected on a national mandate and all E.C. members were normally drawn from the London Area).
3. Adopt a system of District organisers and so recognise officially what was effectively already happening with organisers specialising in particular areas.
4. Adopt a uniform rate of contributions at a higher rate to avoid too frequent levies.
5. Allow districts autonomy within the national structure.
6. Call annual or biannual conferences of district elected delegates.
7. Abolish the Branch fund and establish a scale of branch officers salaries'. (i)

The proposals were discussed in the E.C. and at Branches for some months and a delegate conference called in October, 1921 on a regional basis. This rules revision conference met in London and agreed to divide the United Kingdom into eight districts for NAFTA organisation. Each <sup>elected</sup> district was to have its own organiser/for a three year term of office and paid £10 per week as was the General Secretary and the assistant General Secretary.

Each district was to elect one representative to the E.C. except London who were allowed two. Branches were to hold back for their own expenses 2d. per member per week from the new scale of contributions.

Section 1. 1/6d per week with 18/- out of work and 36/- dispute pay per week.

Section 2. 1/- per week with 12/- out of work and 24/- dispute pay per week.

Section 3. 6d. per week with 8/- out of work and 18/- dispute pay per week.

(i) Monthly Report April, 1920

Support to be paid for twelve weeks in any fifty-two weeks period. Levies on an E.C. mandate of 6d., 4d. and 2d. per week per section for a maximum of twelve weeks when necessary.

There had been a broad and general acceptance of Alf Purcell's ideals, and whilst the call for a wider membership from the unskilled was apparently ignored, effectively they could be organised in Section 3 with its reduced levels of payment.

The membership then set about the task of appointing organisers for each district and after some months they were elected.

District No. 1	London	C.F. Hawkins
District No. 2	Glasgow	William Leonard
District No. 3	Dublin	Jack Collins
District No. 4	Manchester	Alf Purcell
District No. 5	Birmingham	H. Parsons
District No. 6	Bristol	A. Rowe
District No. 7	High Wycombe	Ted Walton
District No. 8	Sheffield	R.F. Robinson

The district organisers in common with the General Secretary and Assistant General Secretary received £10 per week and this democratic position had been achieved by Alf Purcell. In September 1919, he objected to the increases then being mooted as inequitable in that Alex Gossip as General Secretary was being offered £1 a week extra and the organisers 10/- a week extra. 'If an advance is to be given at all, it should be equal to all'. 'This is just what we demand in the

workshop - equal treatment to all and no favouritism'. The highly embarrassed E.C. put it to the vote of the membership who endorsed Alf Purcell's sentiments 2337 votes to 953 - a majority in favour of 1384. (i)

The union had established its organisation, modernised its functions and in doing so, contained its dissident sons and in an adverse economic climate this served to effectively hold the membership together at around the 21,000 mark after a fall from the high of 33,000. What these changes did not do, nor organised labour achieve, was to change the economic situation in which this and other unions fought to survive.

NAFTA had in the early years of the Century looked for reforms through Parliamentary representation of the working classes, and at considerable cost and effort played its part in this movement with their own sponsored M.P. from 1906. Disenchantment with their own M.P. in particular and in the Parliamentary Labour Party in general had set in during the Great War. The NAFTA therefore sought solutions to the apparently intractable problem of the improvement of the conditions of the working classes through other organisation as well as by the more obvious vehicle of Parliamentary representation. That they continued to sustain and support Parliamentary candidates in view of their disenchantment with O'Grady is perhaps a comment upon the ~~inert~~ conservatism of the working classes and a triumph of the inertia imposed by the received view of the democratic process.

The final rift with O'Grady took place after his unopposed candidature in 1919, finally sealing his reputation as a turncoat.

(i) Monthly Report Sept, 1919

His own Branch No.1 Central London refused to accept his weekly membership payment after this election, despite instructions to do so from the E.C. The matter was put to a vote of the whole membership of NAFTA and Jim O'Grady's letter to the membership in his own defence was both bitter and controversial. 'I have ever paid my own expenses as an M.P., at a cost of £36 per year....I venture to state you will find a strong Hebrew vote against myself (this is the first and only note of anti-Semitism in the union records, and no apparent reason can be found for it)....If an employer treated his employees as I have been treated during these past four years by a minority of members I would have told that employer to go to hell and claimed victimisation pay'. (i)

The membership upheld the E.C's decision that O'Grady should be allowed to retain his membership of No. 1 Branch by 1819 votes to 1014 but No.1 Branch countered this vote by proposing to the membership that M.P.'s whether prospective or sitting Members of Parliament, should submit themselves to the re-selection process each year. The membership agreed this proposal and voted 2986 for 701 against and O'Grady resigned as Parliamentary Secretary and from all contact with the Union rather than submit to this re-selection process. (ii)

O'Grady was M.P. for East Leeds and it is an indication of the fragile state of the Labour Party's finances that following this split the local party had to come to the NAFTA cap in hand and plead with them to continue their financial support for the local party even though they had split with the M.P. NAFTA voted 1586 for 605 against, and continued to give support for the East Leeds party until the end of the current Parliament at a cost of £60 per year.

- (i) Monthly Report Jan, Feb, Mar, 1919
- (ii) Monthly Report July 1919

This money came from the Labour fund and NAFTA's record of internal support for the fund was not good. Other commentators on the furniture unions have suggested that this is indicative of a politically conscious leadership and an apathetic membership. This, however, disregards the seasonal nature of the employment of furniture workers, the underlying spectre of unemployment, the numbers of members erased each year through arrears of contributions and above all the unions prominent role in the Parliamentary and political developments of these years, all of which were enthusiastically supported by the membership by voting and by participation. (i)

There were, however, some dissenting voices within the union and when the E.C. proposed and the membership voted to transfer £2,000 from the General Funds to the Labour fund by 4572 to 1626, a member from Dublin wrote complaining to the Registrar General. Alex Gossip commented 'We have another Osborne in our midst' (referring to the judgement given in a case brought by W.V.Osborne against the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, which even though modified by the Trades Union Act of 1913, prevented Trades Unions from using any funds other than a separate Political Fund, to pay for political expenditure) so blocking this transfer. (ii)

The post-war years of Labour's offensive on the industrial front came to an end in 1921 with the return of poor trade and though nationally 85.9 million working days were lost in disputes there were 2,000,000 workers without jobs. This led to the setting up of the National Unemployed Workers Committee Movement at a conference of some

(i) Robinson, Ind.Rel. in F. Industry M.A. Thesis Phil. op.cit.  
(ii) Monthly Report June, 1920

eighty unemployed workers committees in London in April of 1921. Alex Gossip was initially National Secretary of this movement. Very much a Socialist movement, all members took an oath 'Never to cease from active strife until capitalism is demolished; this alone will end the horrors of unemployment'. However, it very rapidly became a Communist led organisation, particularly after Wal Hannington was appointed national organiser at the conference in Manchester in November, 1921. Indeed, by the Fourth Congress of the Communist Party in March, 1922, the executive committee reported that the leadership of the unemployed was firmly in the hands of the Party. (Except in Scotland where the I.L.P. was for the time in command). Alex Gossip continued to be a supporter of the Movement but when by 1923 the Red International of Labour Unions British Bureau had become responsible to the British Communist Party for its control, his support was verbal and moral rather than participative.

Another left-wing movement to alleviate unemployment that was actively pursued by NAFTA during these years was the setting up of Socialist Furniture Guilds. Guild Socialism had its origins in the pages of New Age, a weekly review edited by A.R. Orage. In 1912 S.G. Robson wrote a series of articles in the magazine in which he advocated the replacement of the wages system by the organisation of the countries industries in a series of self-governing guilds. These ideas attracted a number of intellectuals led by G.D.H. Cole and they founded the National Guilds League in 1915 with William Mellor as Secretary. Their aim was the application of syndicalist and industrial unionist conceptions to British conditions (In place of the revolutionary strike of syndicalist theory, capitalism was to be gradually

replaced by encroaching on the functions of the capitalist, thus giving an ideological framework to the conceptions of workshop control developed on the Clyde and elsewhere during the war'. Instead of setting up industrial unions, by the build up of Guilds, the guilds would become the industrial unions. (i) (ii)

By 1920 the Guilds movement had attracted considerable Communist Party membership and with it intense discussions as to the role of the Guilds. This caused a split of opinion into those who saw it was necessary to overthrow capitalism before setting up the Guilds and those who saw the Guilds as an alternative to the capitalist society. This latter view was that which attracted NAFTA, and in particular, Alf Purcell. More importantly, in view of the oft stated view of communist sympathies of the officials of NAFTA at this time, the Guild movement became a purely Socialist movement as a result of this split. William Mellor, now a prominent member of the Communist party writing in Labour Monthly stated 'The National Guilds League has failed to give a clear answer to the question posed by the Russian Revolution, of how to bring about the change to the new Society' (this despite the fact that the policy of the Guild League had been drawn up by leading communists in the League after consultation with the communist party) and in the League elections of 1922 no communist candidate stood for the executive. 'The communist party had dropped the League'. (iii)

NAFTA put theory into practice in Manchester in 1922. In the February Alf Purcell asked the membership to support the concept of a

- (i) New Age 1912 Various Issues
- (ii) MacFarlane p.33
- (iii) MacFarlane p.36

Furniture Guild 'pledged to make furniture on a basis of no profit and no interest'. The Manchester branches raised £200 by local levy and the NAFTA raised a further £500 by general levy. A warehouse was rented from the A.E.U. fitted out and 30 unemployed furniture makers set on, initially doing repair work; soon the guild was tendering for new work and within three months over £1,000 of furniture had been produced. (i)

The success of the venture led to the setting up of a London Guild but the E.C. could only grant £30 for this venture and asked the London Branches to carry out their own local levy for further funds. Moves were also made in Warrington and Bristol to set up Guilds but no moneys were forthcoming from the Unions general funds and so a National Loan was organised calling for some £10,000 as working capital for the furniture guilds. There is no record of the actual amount subscribed by the membership to this loan. However, NAFTA did make a significant contribution to the future of the Guilds by seconding Alf Purcell for three months on full pay to help organise the Manchester Guild, from June to September, 1922.

Unfortunately the Guilds were desperately under-capitalised and by November of 1922 both the London and Manchester Guilds were in difficulties. The cause of the financial problems lay in the close ties between the Furniture and Building Guilds. The failure to obtain sufficient working capital from the Union caused the Furniture Guild to borrow from the Building Guild. When this latter group ran into difficulties it pulled down the Manchester Furniture Guild with it. (ii)

(i) See Building Guilds, Frank Mathews, Briggs & Saville  
Essays in Lab.Hist. Vol.2

(ii) Guildsman and Guild Socialist 1920 February  
1922 March, April, Dec  
1923 February, March

S.G.Hobson writing in the Guild Socialist makes it clear that the problems of the Building Guild stemmed from a basis of inexperience 'labour costs have got out of hand' 'mis-management on some sites ruined the others' 'men are being paid for doing nothing, in one instance payment being authorised for all to attend a race meeting'. He sums up with the understatement 'The Guild structure, while good, had some flaws of organisation'.

The membership refused on a national vote to levy for more funds and in January of 1923 the Manchester Guild failed leaving only £43 go after payment of debts, to/back into NAFTA funds. London failed later in the year and the only success story was the Piano Guild which struggled on for nearly three years before finally fading away.  
(See advert in Appendix).

It would be easy to discuss these efforts as naive. The attempt was brave, the workers were unemployed; the losses incurred were substantially less than the sums which would have had to be paid out in unemployment support, and for some time working class solidarity and socialist concepts had achieved a significant result.

This wish to strike out in a new direction, to formulate a new working situation for furniture workers was encouraged by the growth of the large firms in the industry. NAFTA found itself at odds with these firms over their attitudes to working conditions and P.B.R. Meredew was the first firm to clash with NAFTA over their refusal to recognise the union, to observe any reasonable set of working conditions or to pay overtime and a running battle was fought on an intermittent basis from 1920 to 1925.

This culminated in a Mr. Hard, the owner, posting notices of increasing hours to  $54\frac{1}{2}$  per week and the three members of the union who protested being sacked. The factory was picketed from March to June, 1925 to no avail but success came in July from an unexpected source. The Employers Federation objected to the 'unfair conditions' being applied in Meredew's factory and he had to reduce the hours to 47 per week in line with the rest of the industry. Interestingly, he re-employed the three sacked cabinetmakers, but resolutely refused to recognise the union in any way. (i)

This was not the only instance of joint action. In Liverpool NAFTA, A.U.U. and the Liverpool group of the National Federation of Furnishing Trades all agreed to 'black' chairs and frames made by the firm of Christopherson. The Federation reported to their members 'the conditions exist in Messrs Christopherson's shop, such as to allow them to enter into unfair competition with the Chairmakers members of the Federation.' (ii)

The most significant battle, however, that NAFTA fought with a large firm in this period was with Lebus. The largest furniture factory in the United Kingdom (and later in the world) had presented a direct challenge to the union for many years. Prior to the first World War the Lebus factory had worked a payment by results scheme (P.B.R.) but during the war and after, it had operated on the basis of 'day work' (straight wage with no incentive scheme). The company was unhappy with this position and taking advantage of the high local unemployment in the Tottenham, Edmonton and Ponders End area (continual reference to unemployment in local Tottenham and Edmonton Weekly Herald)

(i)(ii) Monthly Report June, July 1925

took the decision to return to Payment by Results. The works manager stating 'For the past 4 years since we re-started furniture making (after the war work) we have been working on plain time at the dictation of the union (NAFTA) who would accept nothing else. Restriction of output has been so appalling in all departments that we have come to the conclusion that the only way in which we can carry on business is by introducing a system of payment by results or piece work. Of a workforce of 3,500 some 600 have withdrawn their labour'. The Union spokesman, Mr G Bracken, was reported as stating 'There is a working agreement between the employers and the Union. Last Thursday the management told the cabinetmakers that payment by results was to be introduced. We objected that this was contrary to our agreement. The firm replied "either accept P.B.R. or seek work elsewhere". The paper goes on to note 'We understand from Messrs Lebus that they have been inundated with applications for employment and that all vacancies are filled'. (i) (ii)

The situation was a stalemate and with the 600 men including the works secretary (convener) and 4 shop stewards the NAFTA picketed the factory. 'The Labour troubles at Messrs Lebus, Tottenham continue .... the premises having been continually under observation by pickets.... the vacancies have now all been filled by new hands....there are some reports of intimidation being directed towards some who have been taken on'. 'The local Trades Council held a protest meeting in the Municipal Hall, Tottenham 'at which the 1,200 present unanimously supported the strikers'. 'A notice was also read from a number of Cooperative Societies who promised to boycott Lebus goods'.

(i) Monthly Report Jan, Feb, 1923

(ii) Tottenham & Edmonton Weekly Herald Jan 12, 1923

A further attempt to force Lebus to negotiate the problem was made by way of a court action. 'At Edmonton County Court an action was taken by Mr Samuel Hart, a member of NAFTA against Lebus and Co., over wrongful dismissal and one hours wages of 1/9d. The applicant had worked for the company for 22 years as a cabinetmaker, working piece-work before the war and time work since'. In the event, the claim failed and costs were awarded to the company. (i)

NAFTA found itself isolated in this dispute since the upholsterers refused to fight over P.B.R. which they had always accepted as a wage system, and so with 300 still out (the others being employed elsewhere) the dispute had to be closed down in September. This was a major and humiliating defeat which effectively soured inter-union relationships and hardened NAFTA's stand against P.B.R at a time when a modification to this stance would have been both judicious and farsighted.

It must not, however, be considered that large factories and heavy capital investment were axiomatic precursors of profitability. The industry was still at a transitional state and would remain so till the second world war. Those who failed to recognise this were doomed to failure as C.F.Hawkins reported. 'I visited a large firm in our trade the other day. It was run by a financial corporation with Directors on full time fees, and was complete with up-to-date machinery, power produced on the premises, jig systems, staffs of engineers, draughtsmen, elaborate offices, time cards, clocks, and every known device for mass production, increased output and all that.'

- (i) Tottenham & Edmonton Weekly Herald 19 Jan, 1923  
26 Jan, 1923  
23 March, 1923

They were involved in all kinds of 'on costs', overheads and expenses. They were discharging a number of men because in their plan they had overlooked the fact that there were not sufficient customers for the goods they were making. They were trying to get fresh work but were concerned with the difficulty of high wages. After examining the details closely we were able to show that even without any wage costs, at all, their 'on costs', were such that they were 2/- in the pound too high to get any work'. (i)

The opportunity for the working classes to record their disillusionment with this post war world came with the General Election of 1923. NAFTA supported financially three candidates; a nominal support for O'Grady in their financial commitment to the constituency party and a small financial and membership support for J.P. Gardner in North Hammar<sup>9</sup> smith (Gardner was a stone mason and/such was a member of NAFTA but out of the main stream of union activity). The main thrust of the union support was for Alf Purcell in Coventry. As many full time officers as could be spared including the General Secretary were drafted in to the constituency, Alf Purcell himself is recorded as addressing 83 meetings in 18 days.

It was not a clean fight and in a Tory seat the word was spread that to elect a Labour member of Parliament would double unemployment, but if a Conservative were returned, one employer at least would start another 500 men in a new factory. Alf Purcell reports 'The mystery of it, how so many factories on short time for months, went on to full time for the four weeks before the election'. (ii)

- (i) Monthly Report November, 1921
- (ii) Monthly Report Dec, 1923 and Jan, 1924

All three candidates were elected (O'Grady included) and took their place in a Parliamentary Labour Party with 191 seats. The Conservatives with 258 seats had secured the highest poll and the Liberals 158 seats. 'The Liberals could either keep the Conservatives in power or turn them out thus offering Labour as the single second largest party the chance, if it would, of forming a minority Government. The Liberals opted for the second course, and the Labour Party under Ramsay MacDonald decided to accept office, though they realised that they would be liable to be turned out whenever the Liberal Party felt minded to vote against them'.

(i)

The election was seen by the establishment as apocalyptic. 'We stand now at a moment when the sun of England seems menaced with final eclipse. For the first time in her history the party of Revolution approach their hands to the helm of state, not only as in the 17th Century for the purposes of overthrowing the Crown, or of altering the Constitution, but with the design of destroying the very basis of civilised life' wrote the English Review. (ii)

NAFTA were much more restrained. The District officers expressed their pleasure at Alf Purcell's win in Coventry and Alex Gossip took an even more sanguine view, noting the death of a great leader in Russia rather than the advent of a minority government at home, albeit with three of the members of the union within that Government. He wrote 'Lenin is dead'. 'That great Russian leader'. 'We put on record our deep and sincere sympathy with the relatives of Nicolai Lenin, as also with the nation as a whole and not only the Russian Republic but the world as a whole'.

- (i) R.W.Lyman The First Labour Government 1957.  
(ii) English Review January, 1924 pp 3-4  
(iii) Monthly Report January, February, 1924

The reason for this lack of enthusiasm lies in the disillusionment that beset Alf Purcell when he entered Parliament with such great hopes and found it smothering them 'I am bound to say that neither the <sup>\*ed</sup> show part of what is term<sup>ed</sup> the business part impresses me, except in a very depressing way. The processions are childish in the extreme and the foolish proceedings of listening to someone (the King) read what someone else has written belong to a past age. Similarly, the awful parade of pomp, jewels is a frightful and disgusting mockery when taken and compared with the terrible conditions now prevalent amongst so many of our fellow workers. Similarly, with the debates - 'they are so rural. It is all a case of what have we said, not let us do'.

'There are too few fully fledged Trades Unionists and really well tried working class representations for my liking, in the Ministries'.

Nevertheless, Alf Purcell persisted in Parliament and NAFTA voted him an extra £200 per year to support himself and to keep up the constituency and his position as Parliamentary Secretary to the NAFTA.

For NAFTA though, it was in the field of Trades Union organisation that the brightest light shone in 1924. Fred Bramley was General Secretary of the TUC, Alf Purcell was President and William Leonard was President Elect of the Scottish TUC.

The Congress held in Hull from the 1st to 6th September, 1924 was a triumph for NAFTA. The resolutions empowering the General Council to press for an amalgamation of the two existing Trades Union Internationals was agreed as was the reorganisation of the Trades Union

\* termed

movement by Organisation by Industry - Industrial Trades Unionism - a long carried banner of NAFTA. In relation to the events to come, the NAFTA resolution - in composite form, giving more power to the General Council of the TUC, to mobilise all the available forces in any industrial struggle, was of fundamental importance.

NAFTA supported and lost and re-admission of Trades Councils to the TUC as was a motion to accept the affiliation of the National Unemployed Workers Committee Movement.

On balance it was a good Trades Union conference for NAFTA, but the Labour Party Conference in October, 1924 was not as satisfactory. Alex Gossip was the NAFTA delegate and the whole of his report concerns the question of the affiliation of the Communist Party. 'Your delegate spoke and voted against all three separate proposals aimed against the Communist Party and individual members, believing as I do in one common united front against the common enemy. It is quite true there are differences in opinion, but if we can work with war mongers and imperialists, half baked Liberals and Tories etc., who have joined the Labour Party, possibly in all good faith, it is incomprehensible to me why we should refuse to work with those, who whatever may be said about them, by some, have proved their loyalty and devotion to their class, which is also ours'..

The Conference was closed a day earlier than scheduled due to the dissolution of Parliament and in the election that followed Alf Purcell lost Coventry - voting A.A.P. 17,888, Conservative 22,712, Liberal 12,953.

J.P. Gardner lost Hammersmith, J.P.G. 10,970, Conservative 12,925 and James O'Grady did not contest East Leeds as he had been appointed Governor of Tasmania and Knighted.

The minority Labour Government had been ham strung through all its short life. Labour supporters had hoped for a radical Government, prepared to grasp the problems of unemployment and poverty, a Government on the offensive. The realities of political life as a minority government, and as the first Labour Government meant that the Government's uninspiring record was 'partly the result of caution, and the desire to create confidence at home in Labours moderation; partly it stemmed from the old difficulty, a lack of time in ten crowded months, to develop bold new policies'.

The Labour Government had lost the General Election and if it was a case of 'the great opportunities we have wantonly and recklessly thrown away by the most incompetent leadership which ever brought a Government to ruin' as Philip Snowden wrote to F.W.Jowitt then the Government did, indeed, deserve to fail. Yet the critics of this government with their reliance on Socialist cliches could offer no other viable course of action and Alex Gossip and Alf Purcell must be seen to be in this group. The suggestion that the party could have taken office, formulated a truly socialist manifesto, and gone to the country to have it accepted at the ballot box was not only an avoidance of responsibility but was to assume that the British public thirsted for a social and economic revolution. This was patently untrue and union leaders such as Alex Gossip and Alf Purcell knew this, yet maintained

the illusion to the end. Alf Purcell's comments upon the Government are indicative of the lack of specific alternative policies, of the lack of any practical proposals. 'A bold policy will win them miles and miles of support. Hesitation will let them down. Attack should be the watchword. To dare to do should be the attitude. The Government must assert themselves as a working class Government. Anything less will bring them down'.

The change of Government, however, intensified the dilemma of trades union leaders such as Gossip and Purcell. Since they were no longer represented in Parliament then their vehicles for pressure and change must be external. That these groups were Communist dominated or inspired is rather more a comment upon the vitality of that Party than an indication of the underlying political allegiance of the Trades Unionists who joined them. (i)

NAFTA's leadership had ever been on the political left of the Socialist movement and it was natural that Alex Gossip saw 'the Russian Revolution is the one bright spot' in the first quarter of the 20th Century. It was equally appropriate that as pacifists and left wing socialists they should be prominent in the formation of the 1919 Hands off Russia movement, with Alf Purcell as President and Alex Gossip on the executive. (ii)

Alf Purcell visited Russia in 1920 as a member of the T.U.C. delegation. 'It will enable a working class judgement to be formed of the situation in Russia'. He returned enormously enthusiastic over their achievements and wrote at length to the membership of his visit (see appendix)

(i) Monthly Report June, 1924  
(ii) Annual Report 1917

In 1923 Alex Gossip visited Russia as a fraternal delegate to the All Russia Woodworkers Federation Conference in Moscow. His invitation had come as a result of his strong plea for the inclusion of the Russia delegates at the 1922 International Conference of Woodworkers in Vienna. He was defeated 54 votes to 19 but from this time was regarded by the Russians as a sympathetic Trades Union Leader. He wrote of his visit at less length (see appendix) but referred to his visit on numerous occasions over the years, lectured to Branches on conditions in Russia and for many years held up to the membership the vision of Russia as an example upon which to model. Yet Alex Gossip knew that NAFTA was not a revolutionary union with revolutionary members, but by looking for change through pressure groups and the raising of the workers' consciences, he was inevitably involved with many organisations that were later to be proscribed by the increasingly middle of the road Labour Party.

Alex Gossip was a prominent member of the Minority Movement formed in August, 1924 on the instructions of Executive Committee of the Communist International, and seen by the Communist Party as a means of gaining control over the Trades Union movement. This was to be achieved by drawing in the large number of left wing trades union militants who were dissatisfied with the existing cautious leadership. The militant trades unionists in the Minority Movement were to act through minority movement groups at union branch level to enforce policy along lines determined by the Communist leaders of the movement. How effectively the movement achieved this is difficult to discern as far as NAFTA was concerned, but the Minority Movement policy on internationalism, whereby the movement was to exert pressure for International

Trades Union unity, was quite in line with existing NAFTA policy. As proponents of this philosophy the Furniture workers union was an honoured and honourable member of the Minority Movement. (i)

Alex Gossip wrote in defence of the Minority Movement 'Its function being one of trying to link up all left wing elements so that the opinions of thousands of organised workers may have the influence they deserve to have, in the shaping of the policy of other bodies'. This appears to place Gossip and NAFTA in too prominent a light in the Minority Movement. Roderick Martin puts the position succinctly; 'Harry Pollitt was the lynch pin of the Minority Movement. Although prominent supporters like Arthur Cook, Alex Gossip and Sam Elsbury were important in winning union support, they played only a marginal role in the internal development of the movement'. (ii)

Alex Gossip was more specifically involved with the Greater London Left Wing Committee - later renamed the National Left Wing Movement. Communist dominated it nevertheless matched in its ideals Alex Gossip's political philosophy. It was set up by South West Bethnal Green party on 21st November 1925 with the aim of 'Bringing the Labour Party back to the idealism and fighting spirit of Kier Hardie and the host of unremembered'. The initial leaders of the movement were James Maxton M.P., Alex Gossip and William Paul, editor of the Sunday Worker. Their first pamphlet 'The Left Wing and its programme' - referring to the ever growing concern of active workers in the labour movement at the drift of the Right Wing Labour leaders towards Liberalism. (iii)

- (i) MacFarlane p.117 and 153 oP C.T
- (ii) Sunday Worker 16 August 1925 AND  
Roderick Martin Communism and the Brit. Trade Unions  
Clarendon Press Oxford 1969 p.53
- (iii) MacFarlane p.149 oP C.T

Imperialism was another target for the Movement. It saw imperialism as the source of the British workers' troubles. In a programme of action clearly edited by Alex Gossip it demanded 'The transformation of the League of Nations - now a weapon of imperialism, into a real League of People recognising 'rights of full and free self-determination for subject races'. It called upon the Labour Party to hold periodic conferences of representatives of peasants' and workers' organisations throughout the Empire and to assist native peoples in their struggles for freedom and 'independence'.

The main vehicle for propaganda used by Alex Gossip and Alf Purcell other than the union journal was the Sunday Worker and it has to be recognised that this paper was launched by the C.P., was under C.P. control, and dependent for funds on the Communist International (it received a C.I. subsidy of £4,000 p.a.). Nevertheless, its most prominent contributors were not exclusively communist but drawn from the whole of the left wing of the Labour movement. (i)

In May 1925, the Sunday Worker pulled off a considerable coup, in the campaign for Labour Party affiliation of C.P. members by bringing together, at a meeting, A.B. Swales, Chairman T.U.C., Alf Purcell, Vice Chairman T.U.C., Ben Tillet, John Jagger, Ben Turner, John Wheatley M.P., James Maxton, M.P., David Kirkwood, M.P., Ellen Wilkinson, M.P., George Buchanan, M.P., J. Campbell Stephen M.P., S. Saklatvala M.P., Tom Mann, Willie Galacher, and Mrs Helen Crawford. Letters of support came from A.J. Cook, John Bromley and Alex Gossip. 'The Sunday Worker' is understandably proud that it has successfully brought together the

(i) MacFarlane pp. 143/5/6/7/8 op. c.t

advance group of both the Parliamentary and industrial organisation with the members of the Communist Party'. No statement was published after the meeting but it was assumed that some sort of basis was found for a united platform of left wing action. (i)

Such hopes were, however, dashed by the failure to influence the 1925 Labour Party Conference to allow Communist party members to affiliate. The failure was particularly severe insofar as the left wing leaders so carefully cultivated failed to speak out for this motion. The Sunday Worker group having met to discuss the question decided to support the executive on the matter. This leaves an open question as to why this course of action was adopted in view of the individuals involved.

MacFarlane suggests that it was cowardice in the face of a largely hostile Party conference but this is to disregard the character of the members of this group for whom such a suggestion is out of the question. Postgate takes a more acceptable view that the executive line was adopted in the absence of a tenable alternative policy. (ii)

The problems of direction, the fight for ascendancy between the right and left wings of the labour movement, left a vacuum instead of policies in a critical period in the history of the labour movement. This problem was made all the more pressing by the knowledge that after Red Friday the Tory Government were inexorably locked into a trial of strength with organised labour.

(i) Sunday Worker March 15, 1925; May 17, 1925

(ii) R. Postgate Lansbury Labour Weekly 17 Oct, 1925

The return to the Gold Standard in May, 1925, by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Winston Churchill, formed the foundation of the build up to the General Strike. By returning to the old parity of the pound sterling, the export of goods was restricted by the high value of the pound against other currencies. Exports could only be sustained by a forcing down of prices and it was implicit in the move that the effect would be to force down wages, and though all sectors of the economy suffered, the coal industry was more affected than most by a high valued pound.

The invasion of the Ruhr in 1923/24 had reduced German coal production and export, and British coal mining had prospered in this artificial situation. The evacuation of the Ruhr and subsequent substantial increases in German coal exports to pay the reparations of the Dawes Plan, a general world recession, coupled with a reducing demand for steam coal, resulted in a substantial slump in coal exports.

The coal owners saw the solution to this problem in longer hours and lower wages; however, the miners faced with this ultimatum responded by rallying support through the Trades Union movement and 'the General Council of the T.U.C. was empowered to call a strike on any scale deemed requisite, in the event of a continuation of the deadlock'. The subsequent climb down by the Government and the accompanying nine months subsidy was greeted with rejoicing as the 'Victory of Red Friday' but Alex Gossip warned his members 'The Prime Minister has just told the Miners' representatives, that not only must their wages come down, but those of all other workers in all other industries, so we know what is in store for us if we do not all stand together'. (i) (ii)

- (i) G.D.H.Cole Hist.Labour Party p.182 1947  
(ii) Monthly Report July, 1925

The Government had bought time and in the ensuing months, through both official and unofficial bodies, especially the O.M.S. in the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies, it prepared to combat a General Strike threat.

The Trades Union movement was not unaware of these moves and strengthened its own organisation by giving much wider power than ever before to the General Council of the T.U.C. and its Industrial Committee. By contrast with the Government, however, the preparations made for the prosecution of such a strike were quite inadequate, inspite of warnings and pleas from within the Labour movement for preparation.

The National Left Wing Movement called for a Labour Co-operative commissariat for the maintenance of supplies in anticipation of interference from the O.M.S. and other organisations of a Facist character. It called a conference - a special National Conference of Action, at Latchmere Baths, Battersea, on 21st March, 1926, attended by 1,500 delegates. With Tom Mann in the chair Alex Gossip moved the resolution on the Defence and Maintenance of Trades Union Rights. Amongst other points he urged the formation of 'workers defence corps in order to protect the working class speakers from bourgeois terrorism, to protect trade union headquarters from fascist incendiaryism, to defend strike pickets against police interference and as a powerful working class force, capable of defending the political and industrial rights of the workers'.

This appeal was harking back to a time when industrial conflict was for industrial ends. In this speech, the implications of such

a workers fighting force are ignored, as are the relationships with the apparatus of the State and the Workers relationship to it.

In 1919 Alex Gossip had written 'Organised workers in this country need a plan of campaign, carefully thought out beforehand and the weapons of industrial warfare ready at hand, before we go over the top'. (i)

Yet over a period of five years that call for a carefully orchestrated revolution to bring the workers state had had to be modified. The reality was now of defence; here was not, in fact, a call for a workers and soldiers corps to take over the role of policing the new State. This was a statement advocating a defensive corps, an Anti-Violence Brigade, to defend Trades Unionists, in an industrial dispute. One of the most vehement critics of the failure of the General Strike was in effect refusing to recognise even now that a General Strike could be a Revolutionary and evolutionary weapon. If it was used there had to be a winning side in such a conflict and if it was the Trades Union and Socialist Movement, what sort of world, what sort of structure would they put in place of the existing order?

to  
As/the imminence of a general strike the membership of NAFTA was well warned. As early as November, 1925, Alex Gossip was writing to members 'The press is full of the desires of the capitalist and governing class to organise a force of scabs and blacklegs with which to defeat the workers should those employed in vital industries be forced at any time to strike. We sincerely trust that no member of our Association will have anything to do with any O.M.S. or Fascist movement. The same

(i) Annual Report 1919

applies to Special Police or similar bodies which may be got up. Let us stick to our own class, the working class, and refuse to be led away by any specious promises to play the traitor to organised labour'. (i)

In July, 1925, Alf Purcell stood for Parliament at the by-election for the Forest of Dean. It was a difficult campaign, not helped by the refusal of Ramsay MacDonald to support his candidature but with the help of most of the full time officials of the union and Labour M.P.'s and 98 speeches in the 14 days by Purcell himself, he won an unexpected victory. Unexpected insofar as the losing Tory commented at the declaration of the result 'This result convinces me of the need for a restriction of the franchise'. As Vice-Chairman of T.U.C., General Council member, Member of Parliament for a mining community, Alf Purcell of NAFTA was to be at the centre of events in the coming year. (ii)

On 29th April 1926, A Conference of Trades Union Executives met at Farringdon Hill in London. The Government subsidy for the miners ran out on April 30th, and the mine owners had posted notices in most pits to end the existing contracts on April 30th. All parties had felt that somehow the situation of confrontation would be avoided and that a settlement would be reached. Indeed, so strong was this sentiment that the first T.U.C. plans for a national strike were only made that week when a plan of campaign was drawn up by Purcell and Bevin. 'Even this was a tentative draft plan since no-one knew what the attitude of the various unions would be, and because of the lack of enthusiasm amongst the majority of the General Council for any militant action'. (iii)

- (i) Monthly Report Nov, 1925
- (ii) Monthly Report July, 1925
- (iii) J.Symons The General Strike p.41 1957

The strike plans were produced by a General Council torn by conflicting objectives. They wanted to make it effective but they also wanted to make sure that control did not pass into the hands of revolutionary agitators, and so it became in plan, at least, a partial general strike with the electricity workers and woodworkers held back as a second line of attack if necessary. (i)

Symons comments upon the confusion is echoed by Phillips; 'On 5th May in the face of mounting confusion and frustration, the original committee arrangements at T.U.C. Headquarters were dissolved and a new apparatus for the conduct of the Strike set up. This was to be named the Strike Organising Committee and was dominated by Ernest Bevin and Alf Purcell (Chairman). From this time on the General Council became increasingly less concerned with the running of the strike and more absorbed with the negotiation of prospective terms of settlement with Sir Herbert Samuel'. (ii)

In the event the mine owners offered a 13 per cent cut in wages and an 8 hour day. The offer was refused, the miners locked out and the individual unions agreed to hand over their autonomy to the General Council for the emergency period. The Baldwin Government forced the issue to a strike on the refusal of the Daily Mail printers to allow a reactionary anti-miner's article to be printed, and the General Strike had begun.

What, perhaps, more than any other factor, caused the failure of the General Strike, was the realisation of the General Council, that

(i) Symons p.52 °P CIT

(ii) G.A.Phillips The General Strike p. 138/9 1979

they had unleashed a political and revolutionary weapon. Faced with the enormity of such a step, they drew back mentally and materially in their prosecution of the strike, and in so doing created a situation of inevitable failure.

The resultant sense of betrayal of the strike activists was overwhelming. It has been argued by Symons that at a local level the strikers were over-optimistic, that they 'interpreted their own solidarity as a portent of victory, whereas it was merely a foundation on which victory might be built' 'That such local and partial pictures were wholly misleading and took no account of the Government's activities'.

Yet it is difficult not to feel that the workers were indeed betrayed. Not wittingly, but betrayed nevertheless. They were led to the barricades by a leadership who failed to recognise that once the barricades were manned they were in a political and revolutionary movement. When they saw what this required the leaders retreated and the workers were lost.

For the furniture workers their experience of the General Strike was unsatisfactory; in the place of organisation they found confusion. It was the avowed intention that the furniture workers, in common with many others organised, should be held back as a second line of attack and to be heavily levied to support those actually out on strike. In the event these instructions were never received or misinterpreted and all members of NAFTA joined the strike on the first day, and the confusion resulting from union orders to return and local orders to

stay out was demoralising. Nationally, the Furniture workers were controlled by a special Action Committee of the General Secretary and the E.C. taking instructions from the T.U.C., but the difficulties of communication, the overlap with unions such as A.U.U. and the Wood machinists who were acting on local initiatives caused bitterness and recriminations.

In the event, all furniture workers returned to work at the end of the strike in remarkably good order and with little victimisation. Waring & Gillow in Lancaster threatened to sue the NAFTA for break of contract but did not pursue the claim. The West of England Employers Federation and the London Cabinet Trades Employers demanded an apology from NAFTA for breaking their agreements by coming out on strike and further demanded a guarantee that they would never again call out their members as part of a general strike. The E.C. refused to give such an undertaking and these demands were dropped. (i)

A more insidious move was combatted in Middlesbrough. The employment exchange in this town required the unemployed to sign a document 'I hereby declare I did not leave work in accordance with T.U.C. instructions or in sympathy with those who did, and I would have continued work after May 4th, if work had been available'. Without such a declaration they refused to pay any benefit, and a number of NAFTA members were affected. Alex Gossip himself dealt with this matter and forced the withdrawal of the document. The final accolade to the NAFTA membership for their stand was that the Russian Woodworkers Trades Union sent a congratulatory telegram to NAFTA commending them on their solidarity during the strike and on their refusal to apologise for their actions. (ii)

(i) Monthly Report August, 1926

(ii) Monthly Report September 1926

Perhaps the strangest aspect of the General Strike as far as the furniture unions were concerned, is the silence of Alf Purcell on the failure of the strike. He was a General Council member, and the General Council was bitterly attacked in the union journal by Alex Gossip and by the District Organisers, yet Alf Purcell did not reply in the union journal but rather in the Sunday Worker. Alex Gossip had already written a bitter article of recrimination. 'Why did it fail - why was the second line of strikers not called out on May 7th? Why was defeat accepted without the miners? This was a betrayal!' Alf Purcell replied what has to be seen as a direct attack; 'The recent General Strike must be regarded as being in the nature of a preliminary encounter and more as a demonstration than anything else. It had never been tried before in this country. It was something new. We were all moving in a new and wider field of activity. It was only natural that the weapon should prove difficult and unwieldy under the circumstances. Whether we like it or not, the class struggle itself, the inexorable urge of economic forces is going to create the conditions for other and more formidable General Strikes'. Following such generalisations he then went on to attempt to further cloud the real issue with hyperbole; 'The workers of Britain have learnt to fight as a class and that, in itself, is the greatest advance the workers have made in this country. Those who talk about the failure of the General Strike are mentally a generation behind the times in which we live, and those who imagine that this, the first general strike, is the last can have no real understanding of the conditions that brought it about'. (i)

The appropriate comment upon such a statement came in an anonymous letter in the following weeks correspondence column. 'I fail to

(i) Sunday Worker 23 May, 1926  
13 June, 1926

'I fail to find anything in the article by A.A.Purcell that will convince honest minded labour people that their (General Council) policy of retreat was a magnificent victory. I say unhesitatingly that the workers state quite frankly that they were sold' and an ominous portend for the political future of Alf Purcell came in an unsigned article in the Sunday Worker some months later. 'The Biggest Bubble that has been pricked was the leftness of Messrs Purcell, Hicks Bramley & Co. The moment they were required to put their left phrases into action, that moment saw them scurrying behind Mr J.H. Thomas' skirts for safety'.  
(i)

It was left to Alex Gossip to spell out to the membership what the result was to be of the last strike. 'The Government is to bring in legislation that will restrict our ability to strike unless a majority of members in a secret ballot vote for such a strike. They will restrict and restrain our right to picket. They will require a Fighting Fund to be separate from the Benefit Funds and this Fighting Fund will be liable to action for damages. Finally they will require us to 'contract in' to a Political Fund not contract out as now'. 'Members should note that nothing has been said about Employers locking out their workers, about Employers refusing work to certain workers, nor how Employers shall use their funds not to which political party they shall give them'

Despite such pessimistic portends Alex Gossip and Alf Purcell were optimistic at the end of the year. Alex Gossip wrote 'The General Strike should have opened the eyes of even the most blind and apathetic, and made them determined to hasten the day when this present wicked

(i) Sunday Worker 20 June, 1926  
1 Oct, 1926

and unrighteous system will be cast overboard and a righteous system established in its place'. (i)

Alf Purcell shared this opinion; 'This is by no means the last General Strike. It is the first general strike. You will get it, all in good time. The stress under which the working class is suffering will compel a general strike. As soon as the millions who have been side tracked by the Tory Party get back on to the proper line, this is the side upon which they will be found. When that happens it will be goodbye to general strikes. These will be finished with, but so will the Tory Party and the capitalist class'.

In the years that followed the General Strike, the leadership of NAFTA were to return again and again to the theme of direct action but the realities of Trades Union Organisation in the aftermath of this event was to become defence in the face not so much of organised capitalism, but of unemployment.

Before leaving this period, however, it should be seen that whilst it ended in defeat, it was in reality a flowering of the enormous talent and vitality that this union had generated. NAFTA gave the Labour Movement three M.P.'s, the General Secretary of the T.U.C., the President of Scottish T.U.C. and President of British T.U.C. It was deeply involved in the major left-wing movements of the time in the Unemployed Workers Movement, the National Minority Movement and the National Left Wing Movement. Men of the stature of Alex Gossip, Fred Bramley, Alf Purcell, William Leonard, Jim O'Grady, J.P. Gardner, Alf Tomkins were

(i) Monthly Report December, 1926

all drawn from this small union. A group of leaders of an importance and in numbers quite disproportionate to the size of NAFTA.

It can be argued that the basis for this union drawing in, developing and projecting such men, stems from the industrial conditions of Furniture making in the late 19th Century. The art and craft of Furniture making in terms of cabinetmaking, upholstery and polishing was a quiet, group activity. To be good craftsmen required technical knowledge, manual dexterity, a working knowledge of calculations, and an ability to plan ahead. Day working, as opposed to payment by results and its associated elemental task working, brought men together in groups in a relatively quiet industrial situation and this time rate method of furniture making required relatively little intrusive supervision of its perceptive participants.

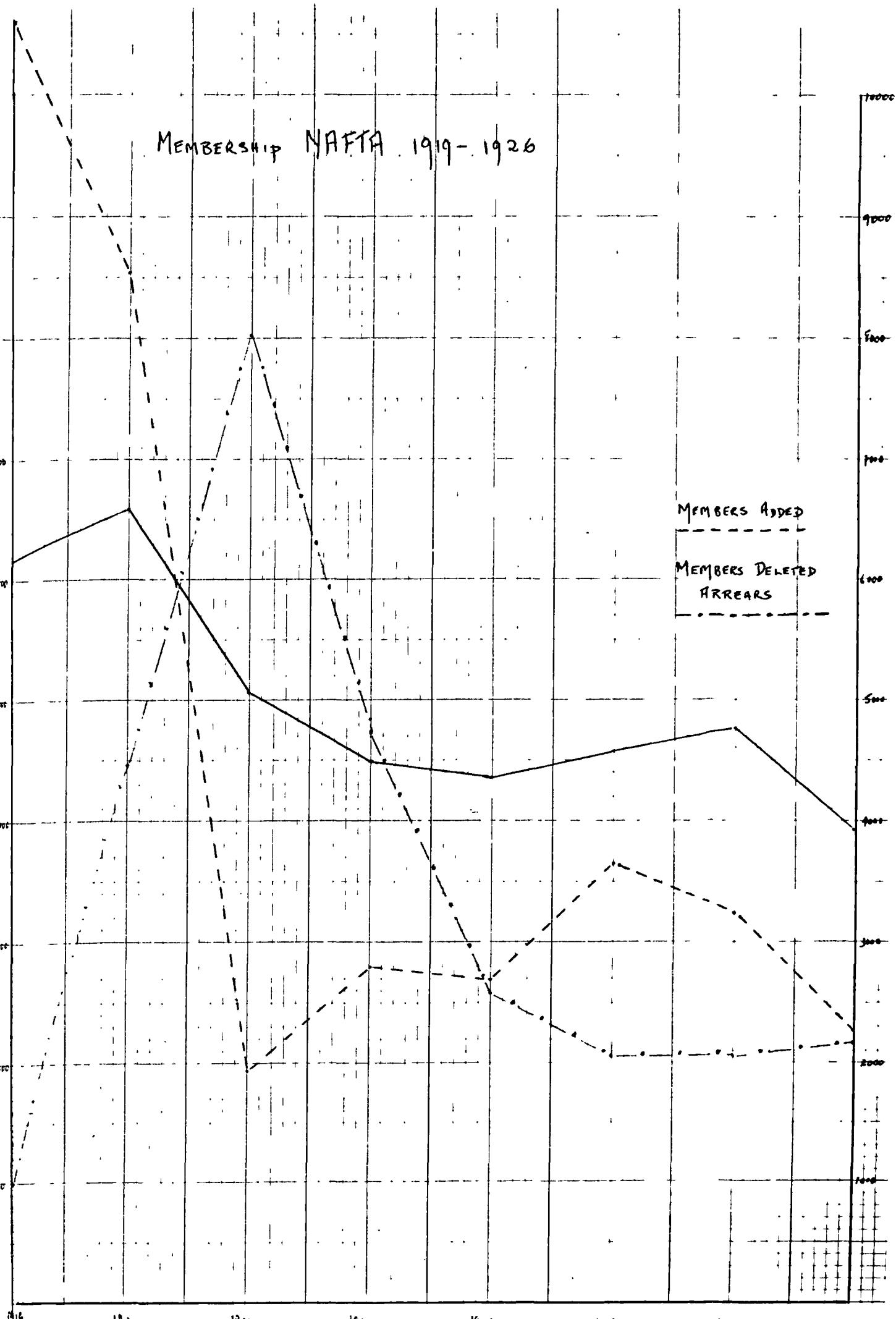
Talk, argument, discussion was not only possible on a group basis but a necessary adjunct to making and moving large pieces of furniture around a workshop. The hours of work might be long, the availability of employment uncertain, but the opportunities for self-improvement, both at work and in the branches, with their extensive libraries, and the very nature of the work itself attracted the type of craftsmen who were both intelligent and perceptive and who developed in the work place a strong working class bond paralleled in only a few other industries. The traditions that stemmed from William Lovett in the 19th Century found its full <sup>the</sup> FLOWERING in/earliest decades of the 20th Century. The union would continue to be led by exceptional men but with the advent of P.B.R. and the pressure for higher production, they would be different men, honed on a different wheel, products of a different age.

MEMBERSHIP NAFTA 1919-1926

Members Each Year.

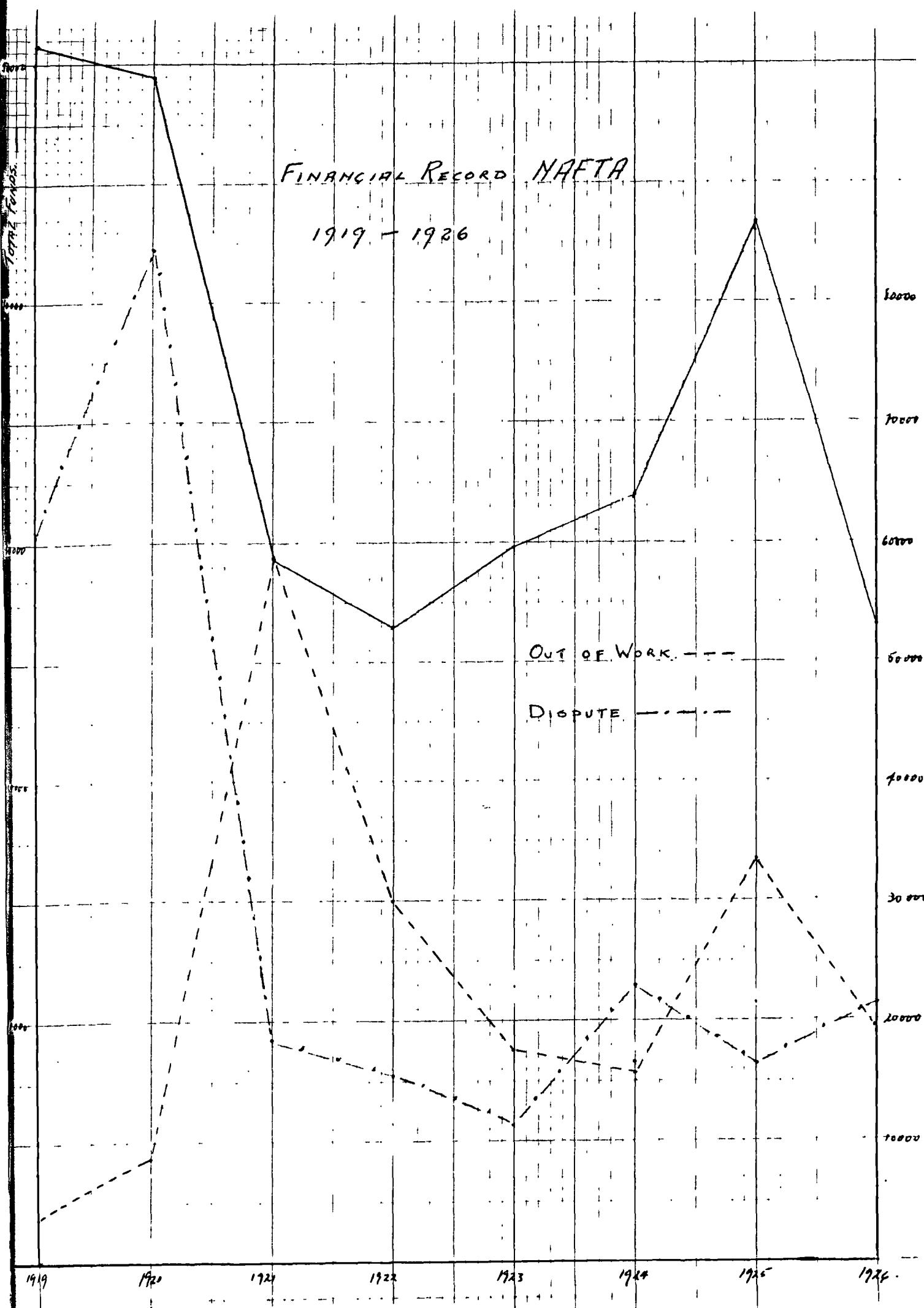
1919 1920 1921 1922 1923 1924 1925 1926

MEMBERS ADDED  
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MEMBERS DELETED  
- - -  
ARREARS  
- - -



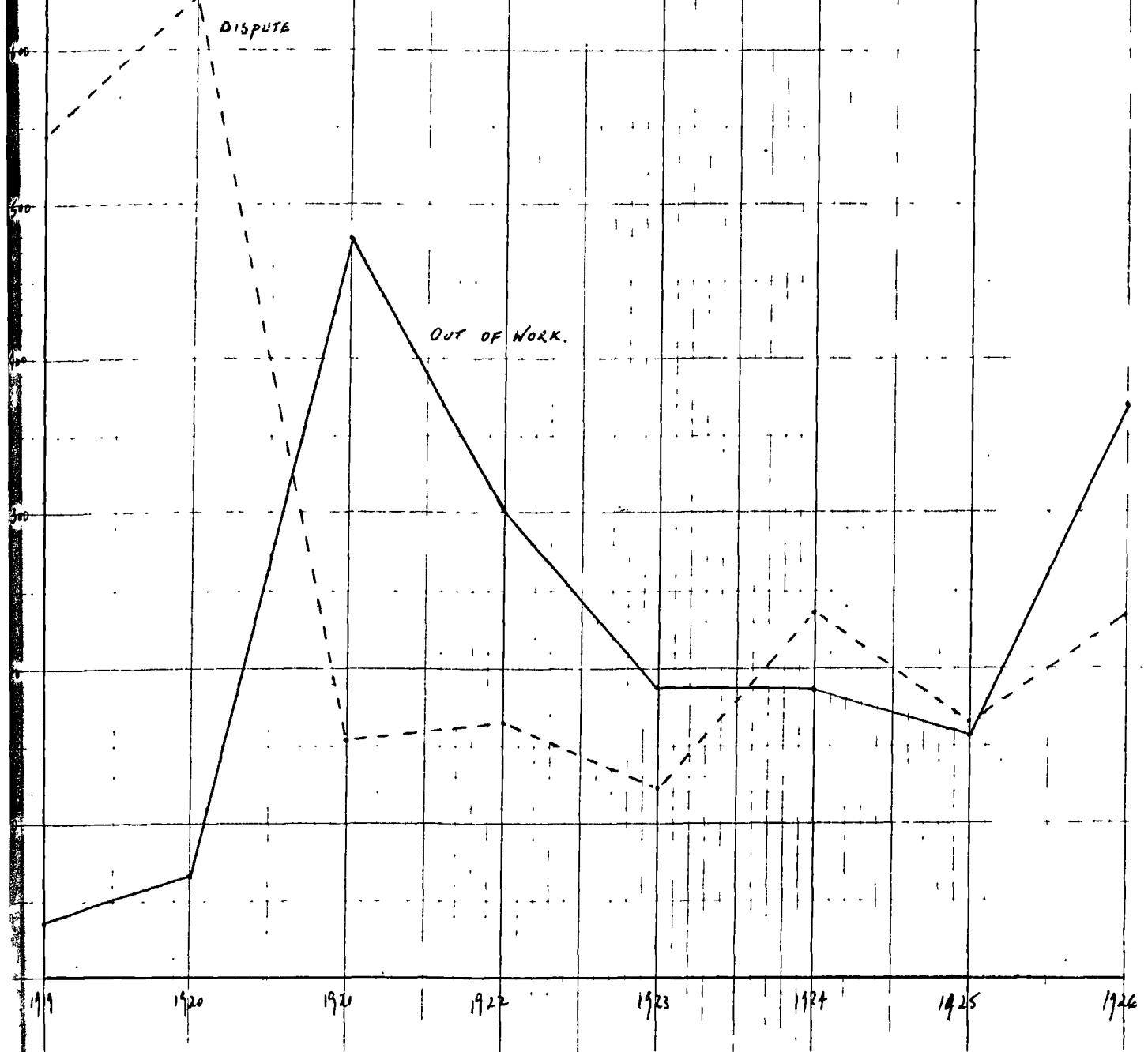
FINANCIAL RECORD NAFTA

1919 - 1926



NAFTA 1919 - 1926

OUT OF WORK AND DISPUTE PAY  
PER MEMBER.



ALL HAIL THE ADVANCE GUARD - NAFTA 1926 - 1931

In the immediate wake of the defeat in the General Strike of 1926, the whole of the Trades Union movement was forced into a defensive role by the Trades Dispute and Trades Union Bill brought in by the Tory Government. This was, of course, the situation that NAFTA found itself in, but it not only had to contend with the effects of the new anti-union legislation but also a most unscrupulous and unfounded attack from within the labour movement perpetrated by J.H. Thomas and his supporters.

NAFTA found itself equally at odds with the Mond-Turner report and in the minority with its support for the Cook-Maxton response. Politically NAFTA became more and more isolated with the rightwards drift of the Labour Party and the election of the second Labour Government, once again in a Parliamentary minority, gave, in its performance, cause and justification for this union stance. The defection of MacDonald, Snowden and their erstwhile tormentor Thomas, with other renegades to the arms of the Liberals and Tories in the so-called National Government was, while viewed as vindication of their stance, a matter also of despair for the Furniture union.

It was a struggle with unemployment which above all occupied the energies of NAFTA during this period. The state of trade had been poor after the general strike, but by the end of the period it approached a catastrophic state with 25 per cent of the membership unemployed, the majority of the rest on short time working, a declining membership and the benefit funds exhausted. The very existance of the union in its Provident Benefit form was under threat.

By the end of 1926 the membership of NAFTA had dropped to 19,700 but with the start of 1927 matters seemed to be improving and the small Liverpool Union of Picture Frame Makers joined the Association. This trend for amalgamation, this long establishment of NAFTA philosophy was further given a/boost by the General Council of the T.U.C. writing to all furniture unions, calling upon them to meet to discuss amalgamation. The call was ignored by the Wood Machinists, the Progressive Cabinetmakers and Progressive Polishers (the latter pair, small London unions) but NAFTA did meet with the Amalgamated Upholsterers and the United Polishers Society.

Unfortunately, the discussions, though useful in establishing and reinforcing links, <sup>DID</sup> not produce the basis for amalgamation, with the acceptance of P.B.R. by the other two unions, and different rates of benefit being the most important objections to further talks. (i)

May of 1927 brought the introduction of the Trades Dispute and Trades Unions Act described by Alex Gossip as 'ridiculous and fantastic in its terms and outrageous and unjustifiable in its effects'. The E.C. warned the members 'The right to strike, organise picketing, political action, and freedom of association are all to be drastically curtailed' and The General Council of the T.U.C. circularised unions asking members 'to fall into line in readiness to play his or her part in the great fight which the present Government in a reckless and partisan spirit are forcing upon the British Working Class movement'. (ii)

The reality could not match the rhetoric. The unions and Labour

- (i) Monthly Report May, June, Sept, 1927
- (ii) Monthly Report May, 1927

movement

were too close to a resound defeat to put up any sort of fight and to the dismay of the left wing the Bill was enacted with comparatively little opposition.

Alex Gossip comments 'In our opinion, the General Council of the Trades Union Congress, and the Executive of the Labour Party did not approach the question in the militant spirit which is so necessary to success, but confined themselves to a series of more or less weak demonstrations in the various districts and gentle babbling in the House of Commons, and there was nothing done to rouse any real enthusiasm against the obnoxious Bill and no fighting lead given(. (i)

No one could ever have accused the NAFTA of lacking fighting spirit, and when J.H.Thomas, came out with his infamous smear on Alex Gossip and the NAFTA at the Blackpool Labour Party Conference of October 1927, he was subject to the full fury of righteous socialist indignation. Thomas was the favourite 'whipping boy' of the left and was the subject of a long campaign of vilification by the Sunday Worker in a series of unsigned articles (some of which are undoubtedly in the style of Alex Gossip) particularly with regard to his friendship with wealthy Tories such as Lord Inchcape with whom he stayed during Cowes week'. (ii)

At the Conference Thomas publically accused Alex Gossip of applying to the General Council Strike Committee for permission for his members to build huts on Hyde Park, during the General Strike. These huts, which were actually built, were to accommodate Special Constables and Strike Blacklegs.

(i) Annual Report 1927

(ii) Sunday Worker 21 Jan, 12 July, 19 July, 8 Aug, 20 Sept, 4 Oct, 8 Nov, 1925

Alex Gossip emphatically denied the charge and called for a full investigation by the General Council of the T.U.C. of this accusation; and this was agreed to. The charge, amounting to infamous conduct by a Trades Union leader, had the effect of rallying support around Alex Gossip. Almost every branch of the Union wrote to him expressing their support and condemning Thomas' statement.

That the charge was at best mischievous and patently unsubstantiated is borne out by Alf Purcell's comment in the Monthly Report. As a member of the General Council Strike Committee during those ten days he was able to report 'I have no hesitation in stating that no such application was received by the Strike Committee during the General or National Strike period of May, 1926. I have never then or since heard a word about this incident until I saw a report of the Labour Party Meeting at Blackpool. I would wish members to know that I was Chairman of the sub-committee dealing with the issue of licenses for work during the General Strike'. (i)

The Committee of Enquiry met at the T.U.C. on 17th and 24th November, 1927, and was composed of Ben Turner (Chairman), H. Boothman G. Hicks, J.W. Ogden, Rt.Hon. F.O. Roberts, M.P., Miss J. Varley, W.M. Citrine, A.S. Firth, J.H. Thomas, M.P., J. Bromley M.P., A. Couley, A.G. Walken, A. Gossip, B. Rockman, A. Tomkins, A.H. Uriel.

Thomas stated that as all documents relating to the charge had been destroyed he would be relying on the evidence of three witnesses to prove his charges. Walter Citrine, General Secretary T.U.C.

(i) Monthly Report October, 1927

responded by stating quite categorically that no documents relating to the National Strike had been destroyed. Thomas's evidence before the Committee was to say the least confused. He stated that he did not know exactly who had written the letter to the Strike Committee asking for the license for NAFTA. He called his witnesses. The first could not, under questioning, recall whether such a letter had, in fact, been received. The next thought he had heard a report of such a request from someone. The Third stated that he heard from someone else that the Union had asked for permission but he could not remember who that person was.

At the second meeting of the Committee on the 24th November, Citrine informed the meeting that an extensive search of the documents relating to the National Strike had been undertaken. No letter had been found nor could anyone who might have been concerned with such a matter, recall such a letter. The meeting ended with the promise of a full and public report to be published by the General Council of their findings.

Patently the charge of Thomas was unproven and this was confirmed at an internal (T.U.C.) meeting of the committee on 11th January 1928, when Ernest Bevin refuted, absolutely the Thomas allegations against the furniture workers and at which Citrine also declared the NAFTA innocent of the charge. (i)

What has been established by subsequent investigation of the unpublished documents available, is that temporary wooden latrines were built in Hyde Park prior to the General Strike by the London building firm of J. Mowlen.

(i) Documents of T.U.C. Library

Unfortunately, NAFTA decided to publish a report of the proceedings in the Monthly Report for October, 1917, and in so doing provided the committee of enquiry with an excuse, though pusillanimous, to avoid the publication of their findings and the inevitable subsequent condemnation of Thomas. In the Daily Herald of 26th January they state 'The General Council of the T.U.C. declines to publish a report of their findings in this matter as NAFTA have dealt with the matter in their journal - to all intents and purposes, publically finding Mr J.H. Thomas guilty without the full evidence taken into consideration. There is no evidence, in an otherwise well-documented file, at the T.U.C. as to how this last decision was arrived at, and the accusation against NAFTA was, as far as the Committee of Enquiry was concerned, no longer a matter of concern. Alex Gosaip responded in the Daily Herald on the following day 'Anything more contemptible is difficult to imagine. This is a manufactured excuse to save the face of Mr. Thomas, and if it had not been one excuse it would have been another'. (i)

The one man Alf Purcell who might have avoided these public recriminations and who might also have ensured a public vindication of Alex Gosaip, was away in India on a T.U.C. delegation, and so without a friend at court NAFTA were unable to make the General Council change its mind.

The E.C. of NAFTA wrote to Thomas asking him if he was prepared to withdraw his accusation and apologise but he refused to answer and it is an indication of the isolation of the left wing NAFTA that they were quite unable to force him to retract his claims, nor could they influence the T.U.C. to utter a public denial of the charge, and had to rely

(i) Monthly Report Jan, 1928

for vindication on the publication of a pamphlet to make their case (see appendix). (i)

NAFTA had to let the matter rest, and though the whole episode had been most unsatisfactory, the union was, by the early months of 1928 more concerned over the fundamental issues raised by the Mond Turner reports and the Cook-Maxton response.

In November of 1927 Sir Alfred Mond of I.C.I. and a group of employers from a variety of industries, informally approached the General Council of the T.U.C. with a proposal to meet and discuss methods of improving industrial relations. The then Chairman of the General Council Ben Turner accepted the invitation and a series of meetings were held.

The left wing of the trades unions and labour party were astonished and dismayed at this turn of events, and bearing in mind the events of the previous years, and the vindictiveness shown to the workshop leaders of the labour movement after the General Strike, saw this as an absolute sell out by the right wing of the movement. Alex Gossip wrote 'In view of the deep antagonism shown by many organised workers against the so-called Industrial Peace Conferences, those representatives of the workers who are responsible should ask themselves how is it that the capitalist press and class are describing them in such loving terms. We welcome peace as much as anyone but this can only come with the complete destruction of the hateful and iniquitous system of society under which we exist at present'. (ii)

- (i) Monthly Report March, 1928
- (ii) Monthly Report March, 1928

Alex Gossip returned to the attack some weeks later. 'Let me remind the membership as to who Sir Alfred Mond is and what he stands for..... In his recent visit to Italy he is reported as stating 'I admire Fascism because it is successful in bringing about social peace....Fascism is tending towards the realisation of my political ideals, namely, to make all classes collaborate loyally'. (i)

The interim agreement of the Mond-Turner talks was published in July, 1928, and had proposals dealing with unemployment, recommendations in favour of recognising the trades unions as bargaining agencies, the encouragement of employers of trades union membership, plans for the setting up of joint consultative machinery by the T.U.C., The Federation of British Industries and the National Confederation of Employers organisations.

The left wing response of the Miners Federation and James Maxton Chairman of the I.L.P. published a reply known as the Cook-Maxton Manifesto. It vigorously denounced 'Class collaboration', recorded 'serious disturbance at the direction in which the British Labour Movement was being led', called for an 'increasing war against capitalism' and protested that much of the energy which should be expended in fighting capitalism is now expended in crushing everybody who dares to remain true to the ideals of the movement'.

Cook took the battle, which he had been fighting alone on the General Council of the T.U.C., to Congress in September 1928, but was heavily defeated and to rub salt in the wounds Congress instructed the

(i) Monthly Report April, 1928

General Council to make a special investigation of the activities of disruptive elements in the Trades Unions and to take action against Trade Unions which it considered to be following policies 'hostile to the general interests of the Labour movement'. (i)

In the final analysis the Mond-Turner report was of little value to the Trade Union movement, and of none to NAFTA and the Furniture Workers for the reasons which Alex Gossip was able to point out. 'We have heard a great deal of late of the wonderful achievements of the General Council of the T.U.C. as a result of the Mond-Turner conferences, and of how recognition of the Unions has been established. Lord Melchett (Sir Alfred Mond as was) is of a different opinion and he has knocked the idea on the head in several speeches. I ask the members to note the speech reported in the Morning Post of 28th September. "We were never asked and we would never have conceded for a moment, that we should in any way be compelled only to employ union labour. We were never asked and we would never have conceded, and nobody could possibly interpret it into any form of words that I have set my hand to, that there should be any differentiation in my works between union and non-union labour". (ii)

These concerns at a national political level did not, however, pre-occupy the leadership of NAFTA to the exclusion of the routine of union work. The twenties had seen the substantial introduction of the spray gun and nitrocellulose lacquer as a means of finishing furniture. Prior to that time the French Polisher, working by hand, with shellac and varnishes had been the normal medium for decoration and protection

(i) G.A.H.Cole Hist. of Labour Party p.203/4      o.p. C.T.  
(ii) Morning Post 28th SEPT. 1928

of the finished article. In the wake of this production change the polishers fell victim to dermatitus. The traditional French Polishing materials had never presented this problem but because they were slow drying materials and required time and space for their effective use the needs of higher levels of polishing output to match spraying had lead to adulteration of the traditional materials. Quite what the irritant additives were, was never established, but adulterated they were, with solvents and ingredients designed to cut down the drying time for the ~~plishing~~ stage, and to quickly give the results which would in times past have taken many hours of work. This <sup>is</sup> not to say that nitro-cellulose was dangerous but rather that the response of employers who did not introduce spray equipment was to purchase French polishing materials which gave the same~~s~~ output as the spray guns but without the capital outlay.

The spray guns when first used were crude and their operation little understood, so that initially they produced as many problems for the workers as the adulterated materials. Extraction of the solvent vapour was non-existent, masks and protective clothing were unknown and men using the equipment were severely handicapped by respiratory problems. The initial approach of the employers had been to man the spray equipment with untrained boys and learners but in January 1928, NAFTA signed an agreement with the London Cabinet Trades Employers Federation permitting only fully qualified Polishers to use these new spraying machines. The Polishers did not altogether welcome this agreement and the Monthly Reports of the period record rejection and distaste for the new equipment from the members. It became obvious that in everyone's interests, a measure of compulsion had to be introduced, and in 1930 the NAFTA was able to

get an amendment to Section 79 of the Factories and Workshop Act. This dealt with the Spraying of Volatile Solutions. It can be summarised as:- No Benzene shall be in any sprayed material. No sprayer shall be under the age of eighteen. A separate room shall be set aside for spraying. The vapour shall be mechanically removed and fresh air shall be let into the room. The air in the spray room shall be changed every two minutes. The sprayers shall be provided with protective clothing. The mess room for the sprayers shall be separate from the spray room and there shall be separate washing and lavatory facilities for the sprayers away from the spray room. (1)

These regulations, now taken for granted, have within them the implicit statement of what was happening prior to this regulation, and the fact of the early introduction of these regulations is a testament to the sterling and persistent work of Alex Gossip and the General officials of the NAFTA.

One other major document which came from this period was the Joint Agreement of Co-operation and Mutual Aid between NAFTA and the Woodworkmen Union of the U.S.S.R. The product of years of championing the cause of Internationalism and co-operation between unions both in a world-wide context and with Soviet Russia in particular. The agreement was enthusiastically endorsed by the E.C. and by a vote of the membership, its aims being to:-

1. Set up an Anglo-Russian Committee of Cooperation with one representative of each union.
2. Give moral and material assistance during strikes and lockouts.

(i) Monthly Report 1930

3. To assist the woodworkers of other countries in their struggles.
4. To fight against the splitting of the Trades Union Movement of the Woodworkers.
5. To strive for the creation of a real International of Woodworkers.
6. To resist the breaking out of new Imperialist Wars.
7. To provide regular exchange of information, reports, etc., and the regular mutual exchange of delegates to conferences, congresses etc.

There does not appear to be any evidence of the agreement being called into action during this period even though it was one of considerable financial stresses; but as a moral and financial agreement, it did ensure that even when the union reached a financial crisis point it did not lose faith in its future, there was always a friend to turn to in a time of need.

In this period, unemployment was the rock upon which the Association nearly floundered. It had remained high in 1927 and 1928 and one method used to ease the burden of the industry is described by C.F. Hawkins, the Organiser for High Wycombe. 'There are 1500 of our members out of work nationally, but only 17 in High Wycombe. This is not to say there is a lot of work available in the town but rather that we use work sharing. Short time working is and has been normal for the last year or so but when an employer is 'busy' he 'borrows' employees from those that are slack and this is arranged through the local Federation of Employers and our Union. Both the members and the employers like the system since it avoids involvement with the Employment Exchange and any chance of being disqualified for benefit'. (i)

(i) Monthly Report April, 1928

Despite this mutual arrangement, organising the High Wycombe Furniture Workers was difficult as C.F. Hawkins explains: - 'Apathy is the bug bear in this district. There are two special contributory factors to it:-

1. We average less than 1 per cent wholly unemployed in the Wycombe district though at the moment there are more than 50 per cent of the furniture workers on short time.
2. Wages are varied automatically on the issue of the cost of living index. This leaves us with a position where workers have little fear of total unemployment and they think that the wages are settled for ever. Both these provisions have their value but they do have a doping effect upon the workers, tending to reduce their interest in organisation.

of the  
These problems/tied wage structure and the work sharing were to be examined again before the period was out but it was the political scene which occupied the stage from mid-1929 onwards.

Alf Purcell was the Parliamentary Secretary of the Union and M.P. for the Forest of Dean, and J.P. Gardner was a NAFTA sponsored M.P. for North Hammersmith. This apparently stable and defensible state of affairs was disturbed in April, 1929 by Alf Purcell's decision not to fight the Forest of Dean constituency in the next election. He wrote to the members 'Due to certain personal and domestic causes it has become necessary for me to change from the Forest of Dean to Moss Side, Manchester, which latter division I hope to succeed in securing for the Labour Party at the forth coming General Election'. (i)

(i) Monthly Report March, 1929

There was no further explanation given, nor is there any further evidence available to supplement this comment except that Alf Purcell's home and family were in Manchester and the undoubted wish to spend more time with his family as he grew older. No mention of his resignation is made in The Monmouthshire Beacon or the Gloucester Journal for the period and the Gloucester Echo merely notes the reselection meeting. 'The executive of the Forest of Dean Labour Party chose a short list of 4, Frank Hodges, ex-Secretary Miners Federation of G.B., F.W.Goldstone, Gen.Sec.N.U.T., Mr Potter, editor of the Miner, John Alpass, Labour member Gloucestershire C.C., Mr A.A.Purcell, the present member for the division is not standing'. The E.C. of the union were concerned by this change of plan but loyally supported the move and granted Alf Purcell £400 toward his candidature and £50 to J.P. Gardner. (i)

In the event Alf Purcell lost the fight at Moss Side 'The Catholic end of the constituency let us down over labour policy on public expenditure on sites and repairs to their schools'. The final result being Tory 11,625, Labour 9,522, Liberal 8,191. The union gave all the support they could with district organisers and Alex Gossip in good voice, and their efforts supplemented by a 'team of students from Manchester University'.

The loss of his Parliamentary seat led Alf Purcell to resign as Parliamentary Secretary to the Union and J.P. Gardner, M.P., took his place. There was, however, no other suitable post within the Union for Alf Purcell and he accepted the appointment as Secretary to the Manchester and Salford Trades and Labour Council. 'I have no excuse to offer,

(i) Gloucestershire Echo 25 Feb, 1929

except a desire to keep working inside the Trades Union Movement. Maybe the work I am undertaking will give me more and better opportunities than is the case at the moment. Naturally I would have wished to remain inside the Association but there is little or no room under existing circumstances and I am bound to find work elsewhere. There is nothing less than horse sense in that'. (i)

A sidelight to this affair concerns Alf Purcell's seat on the General Council of the T.U.C. In February 1928 nominations were called for, for delegates to the T.U.C. Conference of '28. Alf Purcell was nominated and was opposed by Alf Tomkins. In a straight fight Tomkins received the nomination by 683 to 348 votes (5% of members). A variety of reliable sources within the retired membership of the union have stated in private that the Organising Committee for the Furnishing Trades of the Communist Party had not forgiven Alf Purcell for what they saw as 'his betrayal of the working classes during the General Strike' and taking the opportunity of his (A.A.P's) absence in India on a T.U.C. delegation 'decided to put their own man (Tomkins) in as a delegate'. It is further suggested that 'by organising the right branches to vote heavily in a situation which resulted in a notoriously low poll, they would achieve these ends'. (ii)

Alf Purcell was lost to the Union but not to the Trade Union movement. He continued as Secretary to the Trades Council until his death in 1935, a vigorous crusading figure, in the forefront of all Union activity in the city remembered to this day as the most influential and effective official ever to hold that post.

- (i) Monthly Report September 1929
- (ii) Verbal evidence (non quotable)

This election had brought the second Labour Government to power, and it was in trouble from the start. It was a minority Government dependent upon Liberal support to stay in power, and it entered office as the depression struck. In the King's speech that opened Parliament there was a promise to deal effectively with unemployment which stood at 1,163,000 or 9.6 per cent but by June, 1930 it had risen to 1,912,999 or 15.4 per cent and by December, 1930 to 2,500,000 or 20 per cent. Britain was still on the Gold Standard and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Snowden was a fanatical believer in this economic measure. By July, 1931 unemployment had reached 2,750,000.

This depression and the consequential unemployment hit the Furniture Industry very hard indeed. Unemployment was running at over 3,000 for the Autumn months of 1930, that is, over 16 per cent and because of the work sharing going on this was a figure which disguised the underlying depth of the problem. Financially it was also worse off than these figures indicate, because with most of the members on short time they were in consequence paying reduced contributions.

The depression deepened in 1931, the industry failing to come out of the seasonal lull in trade associated with the new year, and by March 4,600 members were out of work, some 22 per cent of membership. Funds were running low and the contribution rate was RAISED by 6d. per member per week in an effort to stem the outflowing tide. This availed them little and by the end of June with 25 per cent of members wholly unemployed the financial situation became critical. Alex Gossip wrote to the members in July to tell them just how desperate the crisis had become; 'our sick fund is £100 overdrawn and the General Fund is £3,500

overdrawn. If our losses continue at this rate and if account is taken of the loss of contributions of those out of work, then this fund could be required to pay out £60,000 in this year alone, which it would be totally unable to do'. (i)

Even the stand by in hard times of work sharing had broken down. C.F. Hawkins wrote 'There is just not enough work to share. In Wycombe we have 800 members out of work and the rest have been on short time for over a year. Branch secretaries, knowing the circumstances which prevent members meeting their branch dues are heartbroken at the prospect of scratching them off the books. The question of how long the Association can continue the brave struggle to pay out of work pay without jeopardising the organisation for wage bargaining and fighting purposes is now being seriously discussed by a number of branches in the area'. (ii)

In September, with 4,300 unemployed the worst fears of the Association were realised. NAFTA's London members were locked out.

The background to the dispute stemmed from 1929. Trade in London at least had been reasonably bright that year and by consultation the Union was able to persuade the employers to abandon the sliding scales in favour of a fixed rate subject to revision by negotiation. The rate had been fixed at 1/9d. per hour and whilst the rest of the country dropped over the next two years to 1/6d. per hour or 1/7d. per hour in London workers retained their premium RATE. The London employers now wanted a 2d. per hour reduction in the rate and gave one month's notice of this change.

- (i) Monthly Report July, August 1931
- (ii) Monthly Report August 1931

NAFTA was despite its financial situation prepared to fight this demand but had the ground cut from under their position by the A.U.U. who, with funds as low as those of NAFTA agreed the reduction without a fight. Potentially, NAFTA could have had 4,000 members out on the streets but in the event only 761 were locked out for refusing the new working rates. The men and women concerned were out for two weeks when the employers offered to phase the reductions in wages, that is 1d. immediately and 1d. in the Spring of 1932. Mass meetings were held of all London members but in each case though the members refused to accept this compromise solution. They also refused to accept an additional levy of 1/- per week on those working (there was a 4/- per week levy on London members who were still in employment). In the light of this contradictory response and with an eye to the funds the Association had no recourse but to close the dispute down and accept the employers terms. As Alf Tomkins, London Organiser, stated 'The response to the 4/- per week strike levy has been simply awful'.

At a National level the economic situation was a cause for grave concern. A run on gold by foreign investors in the Spring had allowed Snowden to appoint the May Commission to investigate the nation's finances. It was even more dire in its predictions than he had hoped for and in its report in July, 1931 it proposed savings of £96 million of which £65 million was to come from cutting unemployment benefit by 20 per cent raising contributions and applying a means test, £13 million by cutting teachers salaries and £8 million by the cutting of public works expenditure for the maintenance of employment.

Not only was this series of cuts abhorant to Snowden's Parliamentary Labour Party colleagues but its very dire pronostications started a further run on the pound and £50 million borrowed to stop the run was soon swallowed up. The Government attempted to borrow a further £80 million but the International Bankers would only make it available on the condition of the acceptance of the May plan.

The Government was now at a crisis point and Ramsay MacDonald went to the King ostensibly to resign the Premiership, but in fact returning to Downing Street, charged with the task of forming a National Government, comprised of Stanley Baldwin and other Tories and Liberals under his leadership. Unrepentant in his betrayal of his Socialism he is quoted as remarking to Snowden ('Tomorrow every Duchess in London will be wanting to kiss me'). (i)

Alex Gossip in common with all Socialists was appalled 'The present political situation is enough to break the hearts of all those who have worked so long to make a real Socialist Government possible'.

In August, Snowden introduced his emergency Budget cutting unemployment benefit by 10 per cent and public sector wages by the same amount, and on 21st September, this arch-devotee of orthodox finance had to introduce a Bill suspending the Gold Standard. Thus this artificially produced financial crisis was over though the economic crisis remained. The Tories now pressed for Tariffs and a General Election and Parliament was dissolved on October 7.

(i) G.D.H. Cole Hist. of Labour Party p. 254 CP C.I.T.

In the election that followed the Labour Party was heavily defeated. It fell from 289 seats to 52 (46 Labour, 5 ILP and 1 independent), whilst the coalition candidates polled 14,500,000 votes and won a total of 558 seats of which 471 were Tory members.

J.P. Gardner was one of the victims of this defeat but NAFTA did still have one member of Parliament. William Leonard, the Scottish Organiser and Vice President of Scottish T.U.C. had fought the St. Rollox division of Glasgow at a By-election in June 1931, and was successful in retaining the seat in the 1931 debacle.

G.D.H. Cole wrote 'The Labour Government of 1929-31 had never attempted to apply a constructive Socialist policy. Caught in entanglements with the other parties which were in a position to turn it out at any moment, led by a Prime Minister set on retaining office at any price and by a Chancellor of the Exchequer who was utterly determined to resist the only measures which could have enabled it to confront the crisis, without surrendering its principles, and consisting mainly of men who had no understanding of the nature of the crisis or of the forces that were arranged to defeat them, the second Labour Government floundered from mistake to mistake'. (i)

The crisis in the nation, and within the Labour Party was reflected in the financial crisis which now faced the NAFTA in 1931. Unemployment had failed to fall even in the buying seasons of Spring and Autumn and remained stubbornly stuck at 25 per cent of the membership.

The High Wycombe branches proposed to the E.C. that NAFTA become

(i) G.D.H. Cole Hist. of Labour Party p.258 - P. C.T.

a 'dispute pay only' union since the out of work support was such a drain on funds that it frustrated the wage bargaining functions of the union, and pointed to the failure of the London dispute as evidence of their case. Whilst agreeing with this stance the E.C. argued that the provision of Provident Benefits stabilised the union membership since members had a lot to lose by leaving the union. The French woodworkers union was a 'dispute only' union and was in the process of becoming a Provident Union because their members 'flit in and out of the union on the eve of any trouble and leave after settlement as there are no other benefits accruing'. (i)

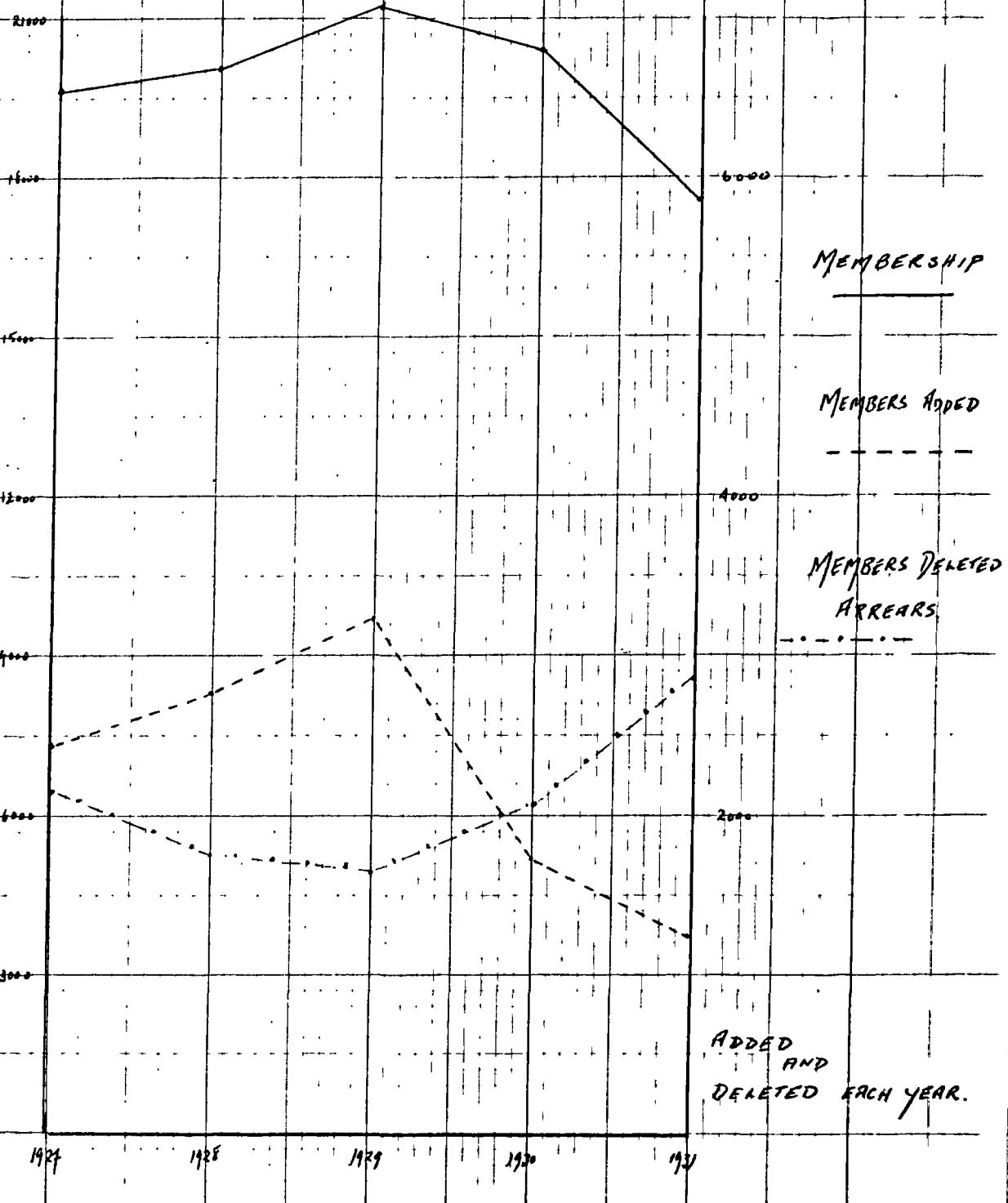
The nettle was grasped and the membership agreed to a swinging cut in the benefits paid by the union, in an effort to save the situation.

	<u>Section 1</u>	<u>Section 2</u>	<u>Section 3</u>
Cut of work pay became	10/-	6/- and	4/- per week
Dispute pay became	20/-	12/- and	8/- per week
Contributions stayed at	2/6d	1/8d and	10d per week
The rates having been			
Out of work pay	18/-	12/-	8/-
Dispute pay	36/-	24/-	18/-
Contributions	1/6d	1/-	6d

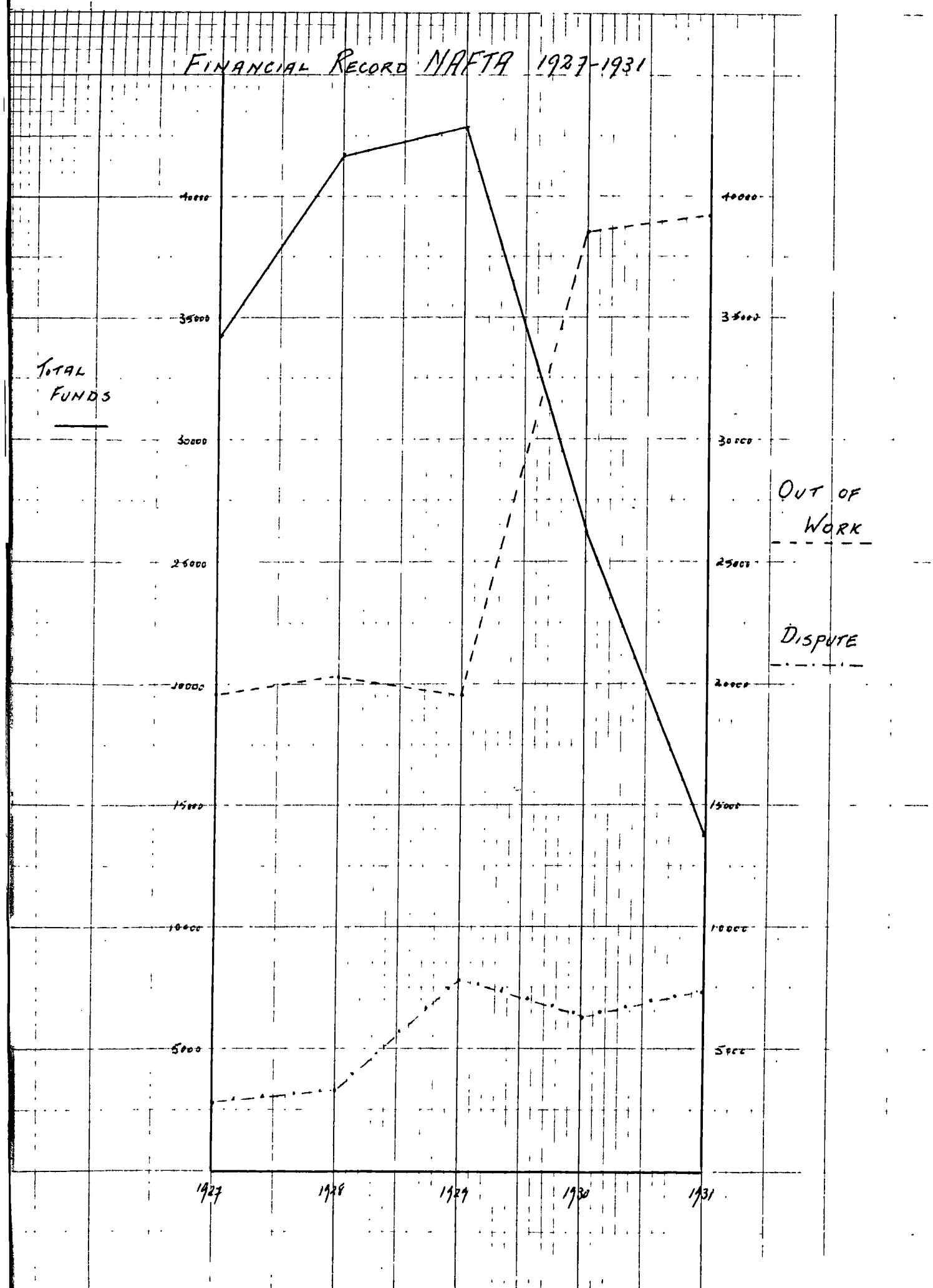
The period was ended. Alex Gossip was now 69 but still an ardent and effective orator and organiser. Many of the old colleagues who had fought with him to build the Association were gone, the membership had dropped to only 17,000 but the old fires of optimism and Socialism were still alive to guide the union through the dark days ahead; he wrote to the members as 1931 ended:-

(i) E.C. Minutes September, 1931

MEMBERSHIP NAFTA 1927-1931.



FINANCIAL RECORD NAFTA 1927-1931



NAFTA 1927-1931.

OUT OF WORK AND DISPUTE PAY  
PER MEMBER.

OLD

PENCE. 500

400

300

200

100

OUT OF WORK.

DISPUTE

1927

1928

1929

1930

1931

## 1932 - 1939 - THROUGH THE DARK DAY

The NAFTA was in an embattled situation in this pre-war period. It was not a fight against employers which occupied the Union's resources, but rather against the twin evils of Fascism and unemployment. As a left wing socialist organisation, it had under Alex Gossip leadership, as early as 1924, recognised the danger to working class organisations and to democracy that Fascism represented, and had from then on fought an unremitting struggle to counter this threat at home and in Spain, and to raise Trade Union consciousness of this threat. The equally insidious evil of unemployment reduced the NAFTA in this period to its lowest membership since 1916, but by careful management, dedication from within the membership and support from the 'fair' employer, the period ended with the association strong, organised and ready to organise the unorganised in the furniture industry.

NAFTA started 1932 with a membership of just over 18,000 of whom 4869 or 26.3 per cent were out of work, and by February notoriously the worst month for unemployment, in this still highly seasonal trade, the figure had risen to 5653 or 30.44 per cent and hovered just below this figure for the remainder of the year.

It is a commonly held belief in the furniture trade that it was NAFTA's strict adherence to a policy of 'no payment by results' for any furniture worker who wished to be a member of the union which brought the Association to such a low membership in the '30's. There is certainly an argument that the membership had become very conservative in this period in its attitudes to those workers in the so-called 'mass production

factories' in that it resisted a number of attempts to organise a Trade Section until 1938, but an equally cogent argument can be suggested, that is, that in a period of such appalling unemployment, the prospect of a trade section, formed to fight the 'unfair employer' meant in effect a fight and a loss of funds. Any further reduction in the funds of the union would effectively cripple the union to the extent that the full members would lose even the low out of work benefit that the union was able to pay.

As to the 'no PBR' aspect of the argument, by 1933 the union was in fact, organising PBR workers where it could. The operative clause of the rules allowing this being 'such workers must try to secure proper conditions, namely day rate payment, as soon as possible'.

Indeed, in High Wycombe a great many of the furniture workers who were members of the union in this town, were working in factories in which the wage was PBR related. (i)

The arguments will continue to rage around this question and one of the strongest proponents of the argument that non acceptance of PPR held back the growth of NAFTA, is Jock Shanley the then organiser of the Amalgamated Union of Upholsterers, later General Secretary of A.U.U. and subsequently Assistant Secretary of NUFTO.

As Jock Shanley explains, 'The growth of the machine dominated furniture making concerns in the East and North London was considerable from the mid to late 1930's. These were not the sweated sections of the trade (which undoubtedly did exist) but rather highly organised,

(i) Verbal Evidence George Venables

well capitalised concerns, in which the worker on PBR enjoyed conditions and hours comparable with those in the 'fair' firms, but in which the workers earned 2/6d. per hour or more compared to the 1/9d. per hour paid for day work'. 'How could NAFTA organise a man to take a wage reduction!'

'There was a sweated section of the industry and this had to be tackled eventually. In those firms the employee was truly exploited and this sector was a threat to the selling base of the PBR firms just as they threatened the selling base of the day rate firms'. (i)

This argument is generally accepted by many commentators on the furniture industry but it has to be treated with some caution insofar as the firms referred to, employed no more than 7,500 workers and came to their peak in the late 30's when NAFTA was regaining its membership. As an argument, it disregards the effect of unemployment and short time working which in the early 30's reached unprecedented levels for the furniture industry. 'No PBR' was 'a' causal factor but it is not proven that it was 'the' causal factor. One feature, however, within the overall context of unemployment in the 30's is the apparent disparity between the official statistics for unemployment in the furniture trade and the levels of unemployment amongst NAFTA members, as can be seen in the following table:-

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(i) Verbal Evidence Jock Shanley, April 1981

<u>Year</u>	<u>Unemployment all trades</u>	<u>Unemployment Furniture Workers</u>	<u>Unemployment NAFTA Members</u>
1930	14.6	10.0	16.0
1931	21.5	19.0	25.0
1932	22.5	21.7	28.1
1933	21.3	20.6	29.3
1934	17.7	15.4	22
1935	16.4	13.9	18.32
1936	14.3	11.6	15.0
1937	11.3	9.8	12.7
1938	13.3	13.4	13.2
1939	11.7	12.8	15.9

N.B. NAFTA figures taken at June of each year.

(i)

The answer to this anomaly lies with the nature of the furniture industry and its output. NAFTA membership, in the 30's, was concentrated by and large in those firms who were at the 'better' end of the trade. In these firms the employee was paid at a day rate for a skill output destined for a customer who bought on quality rather than on price. In the depressed years of the '30's such customers were rarer and the financial constraints on all classes made purchasing decisions much more influenced by price. The 'quality trade' suffered more severely in the down turn in retail activity than the 'volume trade'. The volume trade as far as furniture was concerned was almost totally composed of firms who paid their employees on PBR. Insofar as this ethical pursuit for the purity associated with day rate payments lead to a membership which suffered a high level of unemployment, the case made by Shanley 'et al' is proven but in all other respects the arguments are not substantiated.

(1) Mitchel & Dean Abstract of British Historical Statistics p.67

A further argument which contradicts the general 'no PBR' line is revealed in the membership figures (see appendix). In this period annual recruitment to the union was as high as at any period after the first world war and reached a peak of 5,000 new members in 1937 alone, the very period when the proponents of this argument would have suggested that NAFTA was failing to recruit from the 'mass production' factories. This high recruitment was, however, not reflected in overall membership since it was matched by equally high deletions of membership for arrears of union dues. This deletion due to unemployment and short time working of the period must surely give credence to these factors as being of prime importance in the low membership of the union at this time.

The foregoing arguments, however, should not be taken as a view that NAFTA was in any way complacent during this period. The contrary is true and in an effort to resolve the problem of the unorganised workers and the declining membership, the NAFTA held a rules revision conference in Leeds in August 1932. The main result of which was a proposal to creat two trade sections (in addition to the three normal membership grades) with contributions of 9d and 5d. per week and,dispute benefit only payments of 18/- and 10/- per week. Despite this national conference decision the membership rejected the proposal by 2483 to 925.  
(i)

C.F. Hawkins writing in the journal after this vote explained that as far as High Wycombe was concerned, this was a very short sighted decision. 'In Wycombe employers state "They are all trade unionists when there is any trouble on" For these workers the unemployment

(i) Monthly Report Aug/Oct 1932

benefit does not appeal to them, the compulsory insurance scheme has dished us of that inducement to membership. Up to now there are no other unions functioning for furniture workers, but some scheme must be evolved to attach to our union those thousands of workers for purely trade organising purposes, before a new trade section appeal from another union steps in and complicates our control of working conditions'. C.F. Hawkins was not being particularly prophetic or alarmist with this statement. He was, as an organiser, only too well aware that with the substantial majority of the workers in a trade unorganised, this threat did exist, and it was, in a year or so to materialise in the form of the Transport and General Workers Union. (i)

Yet concerned as they were over employment and unemployment, the refusal of the NAFTA to participate in the T.U.C. demonstration on unemployment in the Spring of 1933, does at first appear to be out of character. This was, however, not the case; 'The E.C. could not, and has no intention of trying to place any obstacle in the way of members taking part in the T.U.C. and Labour Party Joint Demonstration re Unemployment, but so far as the E.C. are concerned, as an executive they are not taking part. These joint bodies are debarring the organised unemployed from participating (National Unemployed Workers Committee Movement), and have declared openly they will use the police to prevent those who try'.

The NAFTA were in a situation of outcasts in the wilderness, so far as their relationships with the T.U.C. and the Labour Party were concerned. That they were prophets in the wilderness is not in question; they had, however, moved from being an influence at the very centre of

(i) Monthly Report Oct, 1932

Labour Party and T.U.C. organisation to the outer fringes, in common with other left wing organisations.

Such a position as a Trade Union was not without its perils, but it is to the eternal credit of the leadership, that through this dark period of Labour history, the NAFTA kept faith with the ideals and principles of Socialism, whilst all around were compromising and hesitant,

By February 1933, however, unemployment had risen on a membership now down to 15,800 to 5205 or 32.64 per cent, and by March there were 5363 members out of work, some 34 per cent of the total membership. (i)

For the rest of the year these dreadful figures remained nearly constant and the cost of this situation in terms of the human misery involved, coupled as it was with the application of the notorious means test, can only be contemplated with awe. The leadership, impotent to change the situation, nevertheless looked to the formation of a Trade Section as a long term answer to the problem, if not in total, then at least in part. Alex Gossip wrote 'Our membership is now down to about 15,000 and 5,000 of these are out of work, 5,000 are on short time, working 28 hours per week or less, and so are only paying half contributions. This only leave 5,000 members paying full contributions. In the light of these facts the membership should recognise the utter impossibility of being able to continue paying even the present very much reduced out of work benefit (10/-, 6/- and 4/- per week). As a matter of fact the E.C. has been reluctantly compelled to face the issue, that it might be in the best interests of all concerned if this undertaking, to payment unemployment benefit was abandoned altogether. (ii)

- (i) Monthly Report Feb, March, 1933
- (ii) Monthly Report May, 1933

'Efforts must be made to gain control of all factories and workshops working under conditions other than covered by our agreement, and this applied to all workers even though they be on piecework or other systems other than plain time work.'

It must be recognised that such workers so organised must try to secure the proper conditions as soon as possible, and having secured trade union rates and conditions, must not revert to their previous conditions. If we are to maintain and improve what we have already secured, we must have a thoroughly organised industry, wherein no non-unionist will be allowed to participate.'

The statement went on to ask the membership to vote again on the setting up of a Trade Section, but it was again rejected by 2187 votes to 1070.

A final attempt was made by the Association in 1934 to set up a Trade Section. 'The Executive has had under consideration the present position of the union and the difficulties which have to be faced in securing new members, and retaining those who have been erased for arrears (particularly in High Wycombe). There has also been a very serious reduction in funds due to the fact that the unemployed members need not pay General Fund contributions, and those on 28 hours or less who pay only half contributions. This has caused a reduction of £10,000 in funds in 1933 as compared to 1932. Even with the benefits cut, the debt of the General Fund to the Tool Insurance fund has increased to £4,878 at the end of 1933, with no prospect of any real improve-

improvement in the trade. You are asked to vote for the setting up of a Trade Section with contributions of 10d. per week, with the benefits confined to Dispute Pay, General Benefit and Legal Aid where necessary. The vote was again against the E.C. by 2329 to 984. With this final rejection the E.C. left this question until trade improved and turned to other equally pressing problems.

One of these was that Nationalism in Ireland was entering the area of Trade Union organisation. A newly formed Irish union of woodworkers, based in Dublin, was recruiting members from the woodmachinists, the joiners and from NAFTA. 'By beating the Nationalist drum, which should never be allowed to interfere, with Trade Union solidarity and is essentially reactionary in outlook' wrote Alex Gossip. The threat as far as NAFTA was concerned was not too great and the eventual total loss to the new union was less than one thousand members. (i)

In London the fight to maintain wages and conditions was built round the concept of the 'fair firm' which complied with the local agreements and in consequence was able to bid for the very important co-operative trade. In this connection Alf Tomkins carried a new phrase for the firm applying unfair working conditions. 'Yet another "Rat Shop" has been discovered supplying bedroom suites to the London Cooperative Society. This shop is paying 1/1d. per hour as top rate on a 54 hour week. (London rate being 1/7d. per hour for a 47 hour week).

It was the size of the union, however, in relation to the trade as a whole which gave the most concern in 1934. With only 14,900 members

(i) Monthly Report June, 1934

the worst fears of C.F. Hawkins were realised when the T.G.W. recruited the workforce in the factory of Everest Upholsterers of Long Easton near Nottingham. This action did not go unchallenged and NAFTA, the Machinists, and the Upholsterers took the T&GW before a special committee of the T.U.C. The T & GW was represented by Arthur Deakin 'who showed himself in a very bad light, and attempted to act the dictator, and if all officers of that union are like this, we can readily understand the deep discontent which exists amongst so many of their members'. The T.U.C. Chairman, Arthur Shaw, ruled in favour of the furniture workers and the T &GW were ordered to desist from all future attempts to recruit from this trade 'since it is already well represented and organised'. (i)

In previous years the unemployment had been regionalised but with the coming of the early 1930's this factor which had, to an extent, mitigate the effects of unemployment on membership and funds, had disappeared. The following table for August, 1933, shows how wide-spread and evenly distributed the unemployment with the furniture trade, compared to National, all trades, unemployment.

Regional Breakdown of unemployment for August, 1933:-

/over.....

(i) Monthly Report Oct, 1934

District	Branches Reporting	Branch Membership	No. of Unemployed	% of Unemployed	Branches Not Reporting	Members Not Reporting	Total Membership
London	29	3959	1356	31.7	11	942	4901
Scotland	17	1952	588	30.1	2	16	1968
Ireland	6	720	198	27.5	5	308	1028
Manchester	29	2419	658	27.2	7	591	3010
Birmingham	13	1121	253	22.6	3	20	1141
Bristol	9	1021	351	34.4 *	4	83	1104
High Wycombe	10	662	162	24.5	4	92	754
Leeds	19	1730	420	24.2	3	40	1770

\* includes Barnstaple Branch with 58.7% unemployed.

(National figures, Jarrow 67%, Motherwell 37%, Birmingham 6%, Oxford 5%, High Wycombe 3% unemployed). (i)

Whilst NAFTA did not support the TUC/Labour party unemployment demonstration it did, however, actively endorse the National Hunger March of 1934. The E.C. commends to the membership the following document. 'This Congress and March shall lead the working class fight against the Unemployment Bill, the Means Test and the Anomolies Act.... it will lead the fight for the restoration of the 10 per cent economy cuts and for all increases in wages and a 40 hour week.

Unity against the starvation attacks of the National Government

Unity against the growing threat of Fascism

Unity against the sharpening threat of War

signed Alex Gossip, Wal Hannington, John Jagger, W.Locke, James Maxton M.P., Harry Pollit, Jack Tanner.

(i) C.P. Hill Social & Economic History 1700-1939  
Harold 1961

The march and congress took place and was an unqualified success in bringing the problems of the unemployed to the attention of the southern areas of the country (see National figures above). But it was done in such a way as to avoid the accusation of political bias. C.F. Hawkins writes, 'The unemployed workers passed through Wycombe, and as advised no stress was given to the viewpoints of any political party in the propoganda opportunities created by the interest in the marchers passage through the town. Concentration was focused on the distress of the unemployed and their families, the protest against the new unemployment Bill and the appeal to the Government to extend the benefits. There was undivided support for this which assisted the solidarity committee and other comrades to collect and distribute funds for food etc., the church authorities providing the halls for sleeping accommodation.

Alex Gossip wrote 'The Great Hunger march and Congress has been a complete success and has drawn attention to the question of unemployment as nothing else could possibly do, and there was no mistaking the burning desire for all united efforts to force this matter to the forefront. The Capitalist press tried to belittle the great turn out in Hyde Park which, notwithstanding the better weather, was some 100,000. Some of the papers gave the figure of 50,000 and the notorious Glasgow Bulletin even went down to 10,000'.

In the 30's unemployment regional in its effect when viewed over the country as a whole but for the furniture industry every region was affected as we have seen. In High Wycombe where furniture making was 'a' major industry in the 30's as opposed to 'the' major industry of

earlier years it was in the 1933/34 period that unemployment was at its peak. C.F.Hawkins wrote 'The main reason for our low membership is due solely to unemployment, work sharing is long since past. Some members have suggested that the higher wages obtained under the piece work conditions set up by Employers as a bait to forsake our union are responsible but even these ideas have faded away to a wretched struggle to obtain even the minimum wages'. Yet even in this slough of despond there was some light which in time would lead out of this dreadful period. 'I must report though that however severe the competition for prices may be, the minimum rates can be and still are being paid by the "fair employers" in this district'.

The end of 1934 saw unemployment in the industry down to 2,863 members or 19.1 per cent but this upturn in the economy was not to be mistaken as an improvement for all. Only 655 of those unemployed were in benefit. The remainder being long term unemployed who had run out of the twelve weeks benefit in any one calendar year. (i)

Residual and long term unemployment remained a problem through the pre-war period as these November figures show:-

<u>Year</u>	<u>Unemployed</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>In Benefit</u>
1935	2280	14.12	631
1936	2016	11.70	609
1937	2261	11.20	718
1938	3058	13.8	835
1939	3767	17.8	1113 (start of war)
1940	1953	8.5	566

(i) Monthly Report November, 1934

Yet all was not despondency. East End United, Branch No.15, had started the '15 Sports Club' and this had been extended to the organisation of camping holidays for the members of the branch, and Alf Tomkins reported on a visit to their holiday camping site in North Devon. 'Over 100 campers in a glorious setting. The organisation seemed to run with pleasureable ease, a real example of comradeship, each taking his turn at the work required to be done, and the spectacle of staid and soberly minded furniture workers disporting themselves in the sunshine, in shorts and bathing costumes, made me proud of the example which had been set by this branch of our union'.

Holidays with pay were the exception rather than the rule at this time, indeed two weeks holiday with pay did not arrive for all the furniture workers until 1946, but some employers did pay at least one weeks holiday. The leadership of NAFTA started to press for holiday with pay for all workers from 1935 onwards and were particularly active in pursuit of this aim by 1937. They received help in their campaign from an unexpected source, the employers magazine of the Furniture industry The Furniture Record. In an editorial is stated 'Being convinced that the time must come when every employee will receive a holiday with pay, the Furniture Record intends as part of a strong and unhesitating editorial policy to advocate the adoption of this reform throughout the furniture industry, believing that its institution will react to the ultimate good of employers and employed alike. It must be remembered that legislation to enforce holidays with pay is by no means outside the bounds of possibility, and in this as in so many other direction, it is preferable for reforms to be made voluntarily than to have them forced upon one by Government action, with its natural

sequel of forms to fill up and inspectors to ensure compliance'. (i)

There was, as can be seen, a large measure of self interest in this proposal and an obvious aversion to the officials of Government entering the premises of furniture manufacturers.

Such antipathy to officialdom could be harnessed at a local as well as national level, and in the town of High Wycombe, Charlie Hawkin, Ted Rolfe, and other union officers of the district produced a duplicated paper - The Furniture Worker from 1933 until 1936. Priced 1d. and issued monthly it offered information, promoted solidarity within NAFTA and fought campaigns of an essentially local nature. It was, however, not adverse to a little backhanded blackmail as the following article illustrates:-

'There is a furniture factory not far from Abercrombie Avenue where to tell the truth one would never believe a factory inspector had ever entered.....Fancy, just fancy, 130 men use two dilapidated lavatories, whilst the others are unusable.....as for the drains, they and carbolic have never met....what is amazing is the dampness of the place, fire insurance premiums must be very low here as the place would never burn, for when tools rust, and glue won't dry, its time something was done by the factory inspector and such places condemned or renovated...' and the article winds up:-

'We don't want to jolt the factory inspector. We don't want to come out publically with the firm's name but we do intend the above items to be seen into'

(i) Furniture Record June 18, 1937

and they were and the firm not named; nor for that matter was employment lost by the imposition of a closure order, whilst the situation was improved, which was as important at this time as the improvements themselves.

Improvements, whether they were in unemployment or in factory conditions did not come from the ballot box in 1935. Only 22,000,000 voted out of an electorate of 31,373,000. The Labour Party polled 8,326,000 votes and won 154 seats. Liberal Nationals 33 seats, Independent Liberals 21, Tories 387 seats.

Willie Galacher, Communist, won East Fife and Harry Pollit 'one of the ablest men in this country' as Alex Gossip described him was beaten in East Rhonnda. William Leonard retained his St. Rollox seat but as a Labour Party and Cooperative Candidate he was debarred from taking a position as Parliamentary Secretary for the Union. J.P.Gardener, Parliamentary Secretary, was unfortunate in being unable to obtain a constituency and the union again remained without members either in Parliament or the General Council of the T.U.C. Had there been such membership they might perhaps have been embarrassed by the fury with which NAFTA greeted the Knighthood granted to Walter Citrine, General Secretary of the T.U.C. in that year's honours list.

Alex Gossip lead the attack 'We note with strong disapproval, of the acceptance of so-called honours by Mr. Citrine and other Labour representatives from a notoriously anti-Labour-Tory Government and be it noted, honours of this kind are only given for services rendered against the workers and in favour of capitalist interests. What a betrayal of our class'. (i)

(i) Monthly Report Jul, 1935.

The E.C. minutes note that 'many letters have been received from branches congratulating the General Secretary on his opposition to the acceptance of Mr. Citrine of a Knighthood which can only be construed as being given by a Tory Government for services rendered to capitalism, and at the request of those branches the T.U.C. has been written to by the E.C. protesting against his acceptance of what is nothing short of a bribe. (i)

At the Brighton Labour Party Conference that year it must have come as no surprise to Alex Gossop, as delegate for the NAFTA, that, 'the Labour Party attempted to withhold my credentials at first'. In this instance the excuse was 'because I absolutely refused to bow the knee to the demand that I should cease all connection with the Relief Committee for the Victims of Fascism'. This being yet another organisation 'banned' to Labour Party members. Attempts had been made two years earlier to expel Alex Gossip from the Labour Party for his involvement in proscribed organisations. This failed insofar as he could not be expelled since he had never been an individual member of the Labour Party but rather a founder member of the I.L.P., and attending conference as the representative of his union. (ii)

In their continued reaction to the acceptance of honours from the Tory Government NAFTA were co-proposers of 'a mild composite resolution, as compared to ours, on the acceptance of Knighthoods etc.., from a Tory Government which was eventually carried against the platform' and to the undoubted embarrassment of the executive of the Party.

(i) E.C. Minutes Sept, 1935  
(ii) Monthly Report Sept, 1935

Since so many of the organisation with which Alex Gossip was actively involved were proscribed by the Labour Party because of their communist domination, it is important to place some perspective upon the C.P. of Great Britain in the 30's and the people who were both in the party and around it. Some clue to the thinking of the time is expressed by John Murray. 'To believe in, to pursue, to give oneself to Communism in this country does not mean to become a communist, it means to devote oneself to the task of making the Labour Party Marxist and revolutionary once more. The English Communist is the man who works with those and for those who aim at a real social revolution' and 'Intellectually, spiritually, ethically, the choice before the conscious Englishman is to be a Communist or nothing'. (i)

Alex Gossip's stance is made even clearer in the debate on the proscribed organisation at the 1933 Labour Party Conference. Emmanuel Shinwell referred to them as 'Two penny-halfpenny organisations' to which Alex Gossip's riposte was that if either of the Labour Governments had 'done the job they were elected to do then the so-called twopenny halfpenny organisations would have been absolutely unnecessary'. (ii)

The anti-establishment line was continued unabashed in the monthly reports. Alex noted 'with deep approval that over 200 members of the Postal Workers Union at their recent conference protested against the General Secretary of the General Council of the T.U.C. being received as a fraternal delegate. When by a small majority he was permitted to speak, the protesters left the hall'. (iii)

(i) John Middleton Murray 'The Necessity of Communism' Cape London  
(ii) Labour Party Conference Report 1933 1932  
(iii) Monthly Report June, 1934

'They objected, of course, to the acceptance of a Knighthood from a Tory Government which has shown itself as the better enemy of the organised workers, and his (Walter Citrine's) pitiful attempts to defend his action only made matters worse'. Not only could and indeed would such public statements and public displays have created many enemies for the furniture union in the T.U.C. but it could also be construed as a narrow and vindictive witch-hunt of the very type which the union so deplored. This, however, to avoid the reality of the situation and of the times, as Alex Gossip makes very clear. 'Such bonuses which emanate from a political party which introduced the Trade Union Act of 1927, the Sedition Act, the means test, which barely veils its support for Fascism etc., are not bestowed for nothing. We heartily applaud our Postal Worker brothers and Sisters'.

The position taken on such matters by the Association was rigidly true to a set of unvarying principles as is evidenced by their attitude to the Coronation of 1937.

'The E.C. has decided to return the Coronation Tickets to the T.U.C. There were several free tickets for standing room and also a few at 15/- each for a seat without any overhead covering. We do not think it is for trade unions to take part in glorified circus processions, got up in the interests of capitalism'.

Such an attitude may to later generations seem petty, but to NAFTA Royalty was synonymous with capitalism and the capitalism of the 30's kept never less than 1 in 10 of their members unemployed and paid the upholsteresses who made the cushions for the coronation chairs, £1.19s.2d. per week for 47 hours of work. (i)

(i) Verbal Evidence Lily Carter, 18 Feb, 1981

The unemployment of the times made strikes for improved wages and conditions impractical and there were only two disputes in this period of any size other than an upholsteresses strike. The first of these was in High Wycombe in 1933. After the Christmas break an employer discharged twelve of his employees as he said he had no work for them. Not only was this in breach of the work sharing agreement but 'the method of selection of the twelve would bear no other explanation except a conspiracy to break up the shop organisation, as nine of the twelve functioned as shop committee men'. The remaining 100 workers came out in sympathy and all were out of work for three weeks before all were reinstated. 'No blacklegs were obtained, the workers of other factories made weekly collections for the fighting fund in response to our meal time factory gate meetings'. This response was especially gratifying to the union with regard to the 'no blacklegging' as there were over 1,000 furniture workers signing on at the Labour Exchange in High Wycombe at the time. These times were hard and the authorities were merciless in their application of the rules of the 'dole' the 'subsidised idleness' as the well-to-do described it. In Wycombe that year 'the child of a furniture worker on Transitional Benefit was run down and killed by a motor car in the morning. It happened that his benefit was being received in the afternoon, the death of the child was known to the Committee and the amount of transitional benefit reduced the same day'. (i)

The Scottish Strike of 1936 was larger and longer lasting than the Wycombe dispute. It started on May 25, over the refusal of the employers to grant 1d. an hour increase. Initially, it affected some 2,100

(i) C.R. Hawkins M.R. Feb, 1933

workers but this number very quickly dropped as firms involved granted the increase, led by the Scottish Cooperative society factories, on the intervention of Willy leonard M.P., the ex-Scottish organiser.

The strike lasted until 17th August by which time only 490 NAFPA members were still out, the remaining working/factories which had by now settled. The strike was won with  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. an hour straight away and another  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour from the beginning of December of that year.

The Upholsteresses strike in London has been mentioned earlier and affected the women working in the West End workshops of Maples, Heals, Waring & Gillows etc. These women were all on time work and the task of organising was very difficult, particularly in the early 30's where short time working was the rule rather than the exception and victimisation of the organisers within the shops easily accomplished. By 1935 trade was improving and the women had become 100 per cent organised within the A.U.U. and presented their request for an increase from the then rate of 10d. per hour. The employers offered  $\frac{1}{4}$ d. per hour on a take it or leave it basis and the women struck work. The response was 'magnificent, everyone came out, there was no blacklegging and everybody did their picket duty in the most atrocious weather'. After twelve days and with the assistance of the General Secretary E. Wildson and the Organiser Jock Shanley an increase of 1d. an hour was won. (1)

The poor trading of the 30's precluded any major changes in the technology of the furniture industry of the period. Innovation and experimentation in a period of depression being regarded as commercial

(1) Verbal Evidence Lily Carter, 18 Feb, 1981 (Shop Steward, Maples)

quicksand. The only area where this did not apply was in polishing where the spraying of nitro cellulose became the universal method for finishing the furniture. It was, however, but slowly accepted by the workers as C.F. Hawkins notes. 'Our polishing members are still not coming to terms with nitro cellulose spraying. There is nothing yet to produce a smooth, bright durable finish equal to pure polishing (French Polishing) but the hire purchase layouts and big buyers of furniture will not pay the cost of it. Art in polishing and skilled handcraft in making is fading out under mass production. We must, therefore, adapt ourselves to the new methods. Any of the firms making finishing products will send a demonstrator anywhere. Why not invite all of them in turn to the branch? However, the work is going to be done, we must fight for the opportunity to do it at our rate'. (i)

At this time, a sideboard which was polished in the traditional French Polishing method took  $9\frac{1}{2}$  hours to finish after staining by the women labourers. When the same sideboard was finished in Nitrocellulose spray it took 25 minutes, and even that short time was subsequently reduced. (ii)

The scourge of the polishers, dermatitus, was reduced in this period by the introduction and use of barrier creams. 'At the start of the morning and the afternoon shift, the foreman came round and squeezed some barrier cream on to your hands. You rubbed it in while he was there; not everyone liked it, but it did stop the dermatitus much better than the old system of washing your hands in a bucket of washing soda at the end of each shift'.

(i) Monthly Report July, 1934

(ii) Verbal Evidence George Venables, Polisher, High Wycombe

The problems of unemployment seemed insoluable to the leaders of organised workers but the other evil of the times, Fascism, was a problem which could be resolved by 'all militant peoples' provided they presented a united front to this menace. (i)

As had been noted before, Alex Gossip had, with great perception recognised the evil potential of fascism and warned his members against it as early as 1924. 'There are two Fascist movements in Great Britain. British Fascisti Ltd. and the British Empire Fascisti. The latter is more secretive but nonetheless dangerous. The British Fascisti are organised into units A,B & C. Each unit (A) consists of seven members under an officer whose duty it is (i) to take active measures against the revolutionary elements in their own districts; (ii) for the purposes of swift mobilisation in the event of a general strike. (ii)

These units form a troop, under a troop officer, three troops form a company and three companies a division.

Units (B) are comprised of owners and drivers of vehicles of all descriptions.

Units (C) are used for the purposes of propoganda and publicity.

In their publications the fascisti have openly stated that if the soldiers are not used against the workers in the case of an industrial dispute occurring whilst a Socialist Government is in power, then the value of the British Fascisti would be demonstrated. Alex Gossip comments 'This appears to mean that they will stop at nothing in their defence of the idle rich'.

(i) A.G. August, 1934

(ii) M.R. Sept, 1924 Pamphlet of the General Council of Labour Defence Council July/Aug, 1924

It was, however, the arrival of Mussolini and later Hitler on the international scene which concentrated the minds of left wing leaders in this problem, as Douglas Hyde comments; 'The shock to the world Communist leaders caused by Hitler's virtual destruction of the mighty German Communist Party was terrific. If this could happen, then anything was possible...' 'The new situation created by the Nazi's successes ended all dissention on the left. It resulted in the tactic of the Popular Front, the decision to enlist the aid of the middle classes, the intellectuals. John Strachey took the point further; 'This swirling stream of world events is now beginning to have its effect in Great Britain. In less than a year it has set up a remarkably strong current of opinion in favour of the accomplishment of the unity of the British working class by the acceptance of the British Communist Party's recent application for affiliation to the Labour Party.' (i) (ii)

Alex Gossip was very much at the centre of such moves, but his idealism was leavened with pragmatism, in his recognition of the dangers of Fascism, and as it might effect his members.

'The Hitler regime in Germany is a distinct menace to the British Trade Unionist, as with their murderous attacks and tortures on political opponents and trades union, and their determination to cripple the power of the unions and reduce wages to the lowest level, they hope to capture the markets of the world and their competition will make our position as organised British workers much more difficult than it is at present - and that is hard enough. Support the Anti-Fascist Movement'. (iii)

- (i) Douglas Hyde 'I Believe' Wm.Heinemann London 1951 P79
- (ii) John Strachey Theory & Practice of Socialism 1936 P53  
Siker & Warburg
- (iii) Monthly Report April, 1933

Alex Gossip returned to this theme of economic warfare in the following month 'We equally condemn the murderous followers of Hitler, Hitler himself, and those who are using him as a tool for their own ends in Germany'.

'This is a matter which directly effects the British workers as Fascism aims at reducing the standard of life amongst the workers. They have succeeded in Italy and are attempting the same thing in Germany.... In Germany though, just as we know here, inspite of the T.U.C. and the E.C. of the Labour Party, there is springing up the United Front'. (i)

In 1933, however, the threat of Fascism to workers organisations and to democracy was as an international rather than United Kingdom problem and to some extent the threat became a vehicle for the proposals for a united front and with it the acceptance of the Communist Party and other proscribed organisations into the fold of mainstream Labour Party politics. Indeed, this aspect of the struggle is rather more emphasised in Alex Gossip's messages to the membership than warnings of a distinct and identifiable threat at home. 'We protest against and condemn all those who are attempting, at this present time to disrupt the workers and prevent them from shgwing a United front against the war mongers and oppressors and exploiters of the people, and we deeply regret that the National Joint Council of the Labour Party Executive and the General Council of the T.U.C. should lend themselves to disruptive tactics. We urge all our members to cooperate with those who through the anti war and anti Fascist United Front organisations are playing their part in trying to prevent any further murderous onslaughts on our class'. (ii)

- (i) Monthly Report May, 1933
- (ii) Monthly Report July, 1933

This emphasis at this time which equated capitalism with Fascism is borne out by the conclusions reached at the European Workers Anti Fascist Congress held in Paris in June, 1933. Bill Zak and Bernard Rockman were the delegates from the London Furnishing Trades Branches at this meeting which had 3,400 delegates from all European Countries. The conclusions reached by the Congress were that 'the fight against Fascism was, and meant, the intensification of the fight against capitalism, and for the overthrow of the capitalist system with a united front'.

By a year later the problem of Fascism had come much closer to home with the growth of Mosley's Black Shirts. Not only was their whole philosophy utterly abhorant to the leadership of NAFTRA but in particular their noxious anti-semitism was a frontal attack on the furniture workers who as a group had one of the highest Jewish memberships of any organised group of workers.

The display and behaviour at Mosley's Olympia rally caused Alex Gossip to write to the Home Secretary. 'We have entered our strongest possible protest against the brutalities of the hired bullies of Mosley at Olympia, London. This conduct is typical of Hitler, Mussolini and others of a similar type.' He went on to warn the membership 'Fascism here must be smashed, or it will smash all the organisations built up by the workers for their protection'. (i)

This aggressive posture so untypical of the pacifist Alex Gossip was a measure of his concern over this threat. That this fear was not shared by others within the country was itself a concern and he was at

(i) Monthly Report July, 1934

pains to point out to the membership that the traditional British approach of right of freedom of speech was a mistaken concept in the case of Fascists. 'If we want to preserve our Trade Unions, our Co-operative Societies, our Political parties etc., here in Great Britain we must advocate and work for a real United Front of all militant people to combat the enemy and we must not treat this murderous movement (the Fascists) as if it were a genuinely sincere one but treat it as we would a gang of blacklegs and scabs'. (i)

The membership saw Fascism as a menace to be fought in positive terms as their attitude to Spain was to show; however, the membership did not at this time share the leadership's wholehearted approval of the United Front.

'The E.C. has had under consideration correspondence from the Communist Party relative to their desire to affiliate to the Labour Party. On the question of War and of Fascism it would appear to be virtually necessary for unity. The E.C. have decided to submit the matter to those members who pay Political Levy. Are you in favour of supporting the affiliation of the Communist Party of Great Britain with the Labour Party?' (ii)

The vote was 239 for and 193 against - a majority of 46. In 1936 only one in ten paid the political levy, that is 1850 members from a union strength of 17,830. In effect a meagre response, a minority vote of only 20 per cent of those paying the political levy. The leadership carried this mandate to the Labour Party and T.U. Congress of that year but failed in both instances to have their resolutions accepted.

(i) Monthly Report August, 1934  
(ii) E.C. Minutes March, 1936

Attitudes began to change, however, when Spain in 1936 became the amphitheatre in which the conflict between democracy and Fascism fought its first battles. Alex Gossip wrote to his members 'The vile attempt now being made by the aristocratic military clique and the Fascists to obtain power in Spain, is being gallantly resisted by the organised workers there, who are receiving support from their comrades in other countries' and 'Branches are collecting money in aid of our Spanish comrades who are resisting the Fascist attacks on their liberties and lives'. 'The Spanish Embassy has been informed of our best wishes for the success of the Government and trust that the Fascist rebels will get what they richly deserve viz; a complete and overwhelming defeat'. 'The Prime Minister has been written to urging him to summon Parliament in order that Great Britain may do all possible to prevent the Spanish Fascists aided as they are by Germany and Italy from securing victory over the Spanish Government'. (i)

This opposition to Fascism earned NAFTA the accolade of being attacked in the December 6 issue of East London Pioneer, a Fascist newsheet 'A scurrilous rag' as Alex Gossip described it. In an article by John Beckett an ex Labour M.P. 'now a miserable tool of the Fascists', the article attempts to establish that it is because of the Union,NAFTA and Jewish employers, that long hours and low wages are prevalent in the East End Furniture Trade'. (ii)

Alex Gossip readily accepted that such conditions did exist, inspite of the unions, and were caused by Gentile as well as Jewish employers and affected Gentile as well as Jewish employees.

- (i) Monthly Report Aug/Sept/Octo.36
- (ii) East London Pioneer Dec,6 1936

The furniture trade in parts of East London was a 'sweated trade' but it would take more time and powerful allies before the furniture unions were able to tackle this problem.

In 1937 the furniture workers were amongst those who left the country to fight for the Republican Spain in the International Brigade. 'We desire to place on record our highest appreciation of the seven members of No.15 Branch (East End United) who have volunteered to go to Spain to help fight the Fascist menace and to protect the Freedom and Liberty, not only of the Spanish workers, but of the workers of the world' wrote the E.C. and Alex Gossip added 'They were given a most enthusiastic send off, and the fact that the members in question were amongst the most active and loyal in the branch, made all present more desirous if possible for their safe return when their work in Spain was successfully accomplished'. (i)

There is no record of how many members of the union joined the International Brigade but it is estimated by surviving members of the union that some 35 to 40 members were involved. Neil Wood has suggested that the reason that drew these volunteers to Spain was 'It was the first and last crusade of the British left wing' and Louise MacNiece in her poem 'I remember Spain' gives some measure of the idealism which this cause generated:- (ii)

"Our blunt ideals would find their whetstones, that our spirit would find its frontier on the Spanish Front  
Its body a rag-tag army" (iii)

- (i) Monthly Report Feb, 1937  
(ii) Neil Wood - Communism and the British Intellectual 1939 P 46.  
(iii) Louise MacNiece - Collected Poems 1949 Faber & Faber

It was a crusade born and extinguished in flames, symbolised in the bombing of Guernica. The British volunteers in Spain totalled 2,762 and they suffered appalling casualties. 543 were killed and 1,762 were wounded. Little training was given or was possible before being thrust into action with the inevitable results and the experience of many, is summed up in the letter from Joe Garber of No.15 Branch, written from the Military Hospital in Castellan (See Appendix); a casualty and a veteran within four weeks in Spain. (i)

Spain was emotive, romantic a polarising issue around which there were no ambiguities, as far as the rank and file union or party members were concerned. This made the task of collecting funds for Spain not only simple but popular. The total sums collected by NAFTA members is not known but it was substantial and from the surviving records we know that in one Branch (No.15) over £500 was collected in a period of two years despite an average Branch unemployment of 17 per cent.

Any ambiguity of thinking over Spain was confined to the leadership of the Labour Party and the T.U.C., and their position was strongly attacked by Alex Gossip.

'We have written to Mr Walter Citrine (note - not Sir Walter Citrine!) asking that Ernest Bevin's speech at the International Conference on Spain be published, owing to the conflicting statements which have appeared in the Press. Mr Bevin alleged to have said he was voicing the opinion of British organised Labour and we naturally desire to know the attitude 'we' have taken up on this vital question'. (ii)

(i) See also 'Homage to Catalonia' George Orwell 1939  
(ii) Monthly Report April/May, 1937

Citrini replied to the effect that the Conference was private and the speech could not therefore be published, and that Mr Bevin comments 'From what has already come out of this was a direct betrayal of our Spanish comrades and most certainly did not represent the true feelings of the British worker'.

Alex Gossip was justified in his attack of Bevin's stand on this issue. Bevin was a supporter, and speaker for non-intervention at the 1936 Edinburgh Labour Party Conference, his maintenance of this stand was in line with the policy of the British Labour Leaders who as G.D.H.Cole reports 'held off support (for Spain) because they could not assure the French of gaining British Government support; and were indeed hesitant about invoking this war danger, which stronger pressure, if it had been successful, would have involved'.

Spain was a water shed, a recognition that the pacifism of Left Wing idealism was no longer a viable concept in the face of international Fascism 'The Pacifists from the English Universities are said to be most excellent machine gunners' wrote the Manchester Guardian correspondent from Spain. (i)

And as ideas were changing so were the people, not least in the old guard of NAFTA.

Sir James O'Grady died in January, 1935. 'We regret to announce the passing away of our one time Organiser, the late Sir James O'Grady who as plain "Jim" at one time did splendid work for the Association'.

(i) Quoted by Cicely Hamilton Modern England 1938

The General Secretary, Assistant General Secretary and members of the E.C. represented the Association at the funeral. (i)

The parting of the way with 'Jim' O'Grady had been as long ago as the 1921 but the ties that locked him with the Association were those of a different age when this man with Alex Gossip, Fred Bramley, Alf Purcell and Charlie Hawkins had laid the foundations upon which the Association stood unflinchingly through the stormy years of the 20's and 30's. Alex Gossip commented at the time of the funeral 'In his earlier days he was one to be reckoned with in the movement. His latter years were spent in the service of the Imperial Government'. (see earlier appendix for biography). A sad epitaph for 'the genial colleague' who after an illness was being wished 'a speedy and complete recovery, and we sincerely trust he will soon be once more, up and doing in the cause of the oppressed class to which he belongs, and for whom he has spent his energies and abilities for so many long years'. (ii)

Alf Purcell died on Christmas Eve 1935 at the age of 63. Starting life as a polisher he had become the General Secretary of the Amalgamated Society of French Polishers and when that Society joined the NAFTA became a District Organiser, Parliamentary Secretary and M.P., for Coventry and later the Forest of Dean; he had latterly been the Secretary of the Manchester and Salford Trades Council carrying on that work with the energy and ability which he displayed in our own Association'. (for biography see earlier Appendix).

Alf Purcell's widow was left in 'rather poor circumstances' and is 'in delicate health' and the Association raised over £200 for her

(i) E.C. Minutes January, 1935  
(ii) Monthly Report July, 1914

support in addition to the moneys raised by the Manchester Trades Council. (i)

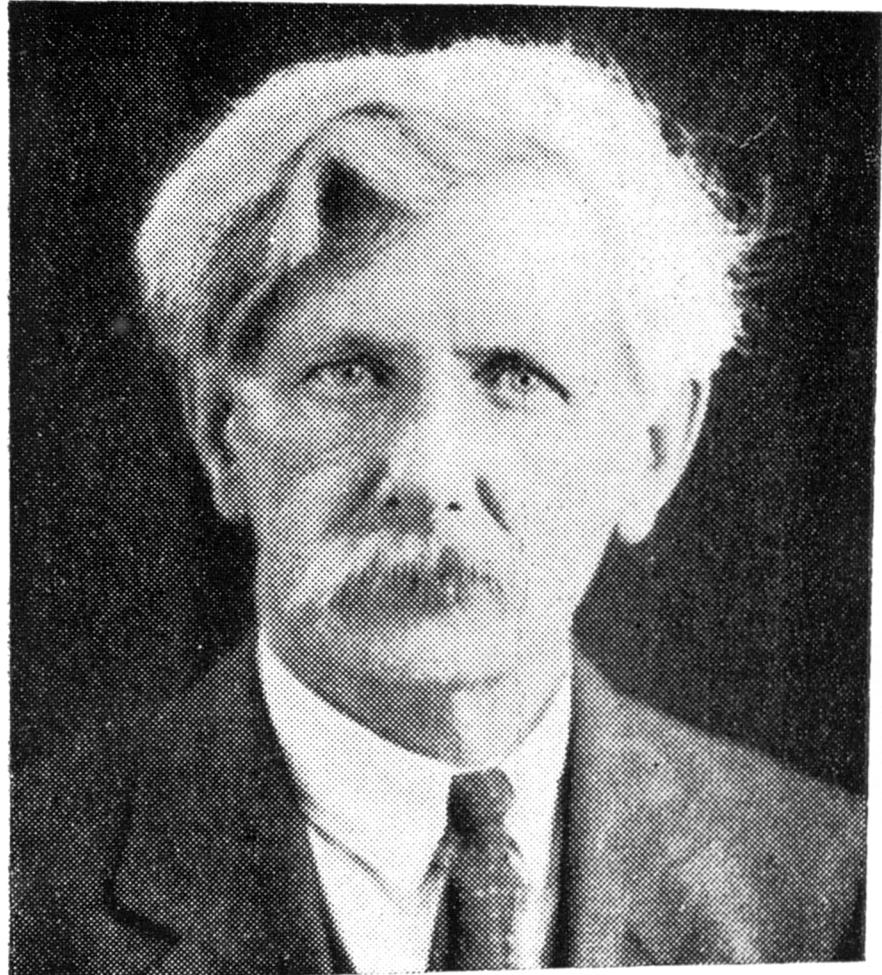
The Association's Parliamentary Secretary J.P. Gardner died in August 1937, at the age of 54. A sculptor and stone carver born in Belfast he had joined NAFTA when the London Stone Carvers Society amalgamated with the Association in 1912. He was elected M.P. in 1923 for North Hammersmith and held the seat until the election of 1931. In 1929 he had succeeded Alf Purcell as Parliamentary Secretary and at the time of his death was the candidate for North Salford.

The same month August saw the resignation of H.A. Urié from the post of Assistant General Secretary due to failing health. He had joined the Alliance Union in 1884 as a member of No.6 Branch - South London Carvers and was Secretary of that Branch from 1889 to 1893 when he was elected to the E.C. and served on the Executive until elected as Assistant General Secretary in 1907. In a long loyal and hardworking career he was only challenged twice in election for this post at the tri-annual elections, on all other occasions being returned unopposed, a measure of the respect and confidence that he won from the membership despite all those long years in the shadow of the General Secretary Alex Gossip.

The happier event of the year was Alex Gossip's 75th birthday in September 1937. To celebrate the event his own Branch No.2 (London West End) held a presentation and public meeting on the 17th September and No.15 Branch (East End United) held, on behalf of the Association, a Mass Dinner and Ball, and later in the month Alex and his wife

(i) E.C. Minutes Jan/Feb/March 1936

N.U.F.T.O. RECORD



**ALEX GOSSIP**

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F. G. AGED 75

travelled to Dublin where a Dinner and Presentation was given on behalf of the Irish members.

This was an international celebration of this great leader's birthday. Not only were the messages of congratulations from within the British Trade Union Movement but also from as far afield as Australia, America, Russia, India and Africa.

One of the honours which Alex Gossip cherished most had come in 1934 when he was made a Freeman of the Borough of Fulham, his home for so many years. In his speech on receiving this honour he notes with characteristic candour 'I have been in the habit of receiving more kicks than anything in my years of militancy. I appreciate the honour you have unanimously conferred upon me. There is an old saying that a prophet is without honour in his own country. This is not true otherwise I should not be receiving this honour'. (i)

The election for the vacant post of Assistant General Secretary was won by Alf Tomkins, Organiser District No.1 (London) and the other two candidates in the final ballot became organised No.1 District Bernard Rockman and London District Management Committee, Bill Zak. The vacant Parliamentary Secretary post being filled by F.E. Sweetman who later became the Labour candidate for Chatham District.

The political Fund which supported both national and local labour candidates was by this period at a very low ebb. In 1937 had all the members contracted in it would have put £2,000 into the fund but in fact

(i) S. Harrison Alex Gossip Lawrence & Wishart, London 1962 pp.62/3

there was only £164 contributed in that year. The table of contributions is shown below:-

Contributions to Political Fund 1919 - 1939

1919	£320	1929	£578	1939	£157
1920	592	1930	500		
1921	676	1931	340		
1922	711	1932	225		
1923	849	1933	202		
1924	950	1934	192		
1925	977	1935	180		
1926	803	1936	185		
1927	744	1937	164		
1928	605	1938	166		

As the decade drew to a close two problems remained as the main concerns of the union. Their apparent inability to organise the unorganised in the industry and the growing spectre of war.

The furniture industry in the 30's had seen the growth of large factories on the northern and eastern areas of London, Tottenham, Edmonton, Walthamstow etc., and they had proved difficult if not impossible to organise in the early part of the decade. By late 1936, however, a joint campaign was mounted by NAFTA and the A.U.U. to attempt to resolve this problem. The old problem of the past, that of acceptance of P.B.R. was quietly set to one side by the joint statement 'Some A.U.U. members favour piece work but it is not A.U.U. policy to enforce this, the NAFTA rules provide for the organising of piece workers with an object in view of getting day work rates whenever this is possible'.

'The NAFTA agrees to allow A.U.U. full reign to organise the London Upholsterers and the A.U.U. has agreed to the same conditions for NAFTA where they are already in control'.

The campaign was only marginally successful, not so much in terms of the enthusiasm roused amongst the workers but rather because of the underlying problem of unemployment which was again increasing. There had been a number of recruiting campaigns during the period in Scotland, the North East and in particular High Wycombe where Ted Rolfe had been brought in as an additional organiser for the period of the campaign.

The industry by the late 30's had developed into a three tier structure. The highest wages were paid by the P.B.R. firms, day rates at an acceptable level were paid by the high quality makers and the economic conditions of the 20's and 30's had created a substantial group where in conditions and rates of pay could fairly be described as 'sweated labour'.

When the trade for the furniture industry was good, the effect upon the market of this third group could be disregarded, but in any down turn in the economy the undercutting effect of the low wages in this sector threatened the very existence of the other 'fair' firms in a price conscious market place. The unions looked for change to rescue the exploited worker, and the employers sought change to protect their business, yet neither, either by recruitment or through Federations and Trade groups were able to effect the substantial changes necessary.

The only answer lay in some form of governmental control via a Trade Board and this solution was proposed by the 'fair' employers in 1938. The initial reaction of NAFTA at least was scepticism, tinged with suspicion, as a result of their earlier experiences with the Trade Board after the 1914-18 War which had put them in a Government straight jacket of legislation without improving the wages paid or the conditions in the cheap end of the trade, the underlying problem was, however, the recognition that their stance on piece work would undoubtedly have to be abandoned.

The E.C. wrote to the membership 'Regarding the setting up of a Trade Board. The employers are particularly keen to establish same because of the excessively bad conditions in the uncontrolled factories. Your E.C. is quite ambivalent about the idea, seeing much virtues in the idea, but also the problem that it means an automatic recognition of piece work. The E.C. is concerned that there seems to be no provision for the control of the number of learner improvers and apprentices in the industry under a Trade Board'. (i)

The response was not a rejection and the mild reference to payment by results was in effect but a token gesture to the past resistance to this method of payment since as has been shown it was already of necessity tolerated, and indeed in all subsequent negotiations on the Trade Board the question of P.B.R. is quietly ignored.

The next meeting on the subject was held in August and where the NAFTA, A.U.U. and Wood Machinists met the Employers Federation on a

(i) Monthly Report May, 1938

formal basis. The joint union proposal was to the effect that they were in favour of some form of Trade Board but a self-organised and controlled body without Government intervention. Their proposals were, as they must have known, flawed since they centred round the 'fair employers' who were, in fact, not the problem employers and it would have meant a Trade Board without any legislature muscle to deal with the 'sweaters' in the trade. Indeed, talking . with those members of the unions concerned with these discussions reveals that the real concern was that a Trade Board under Government legislation required a number of Government 'appointed members' to the Board and as such, these members were expected to be anti-union. The consequent fear being that the Unions would find themselves in a legislative straight jacket over terms and conditions of employment with which they did not agree. They did not trust a Tory Government to be fair to a working class organisation.

Once again, though they raised objections and indeed counter proposals; the Unions were prepared to go on talking and their fears were somewhat mollified by the Ministry of Labour's attitude in all discussions and all the committees set up to look at the problem were joint committees of equal numbers of employers and union officers chaired by officials of the Ministry.

The Definitions of Trade required by the Board were produced, as was the preliminary work for the statutory order for the Trade Board and there is no evidence of anything other than a very high level of involvement and cooperation by both sides of the industry.

At the meeting on 14th December 1939, the employers and the unions unanimously accepted the introduction of a Trade Board to operate from 1st March 1940. The Agreement fixed the minimum wage to be paid to a furniture worker in the United Kingdom as:-

Operative males	1/7d per hour	
Labouring males	1/3d per hour	all workers over the age of 17
Female operatives	11d per hour	years to be entitled to piece
Female labourers	9d per hour	work rates on the scales with a minimum of 1½% bonus.

47 hours per week to be the standard week with all time beyond this to be paid at overtime rates.

The impact of the Agreement may not be fully appreciated if viewed against the conditions operating in the 'fair firms' of 1/10d per hour for male operatives, overtime payments, and a 47 hour week. The Agreement has, however, to be seen against the background of the sweat shop, which it set out to eliminate and in these Alf Tomkins reports 'the hours were from 70 to 80 per week when trade was busy with wages of 1/- or 1/1d per hour without any overtime payment'. (i)

The Trade Board Agreement was, in a very real sense, a watershed for the furniture unions. Prior to the agreement they were essentially in the embattled situation that they had occupied since their foundation. With this Agreement, however, the employers and employees in the industry enjoyed a period of industrial peace and cooperation unbroken to this day.

(i) Annual Report 1941

The spectre of war which hung over the final negotiations hastened their conclusions but this war also presented the NAFTA with a real moral dilemma. As a union they had been outstanding in their opposition to Fascism at home and abroad, yet they also had an honoured and justified reputation as pacifists both from moral and political conviction.

A.J.P.Taylor has suggested that 'Until 22nd August, 1939 the Labour movement from right to left retained its old principles, or if you prefer, its old illusions. It still held the outlook of Keir Hardie E.D. MOREL, J.Braillsford and J.A. Hobson. Two simple sentences expressed it all. Imperialistic capitalism was the cause of war. Socialists should oppose both war and capitalism'. (i)

Alex Gossip would have agreed with precisely these ideas and he wrote at the time of Munich 'We protest against the action of the British Cabinet and Prime Minister in betraying Czechoslovakia to the German Nazis, and thereby discrediting and dishonouring our country, and not even consulting Parliament, which is kept in the dark as much as the people generally'. (ii)

'A strengthened Italy and Germany will make war almost inevitable in a few years at most, and the British Government will be largely responsible'.

Alex Gossip wrote to the membership of the dilemma which faced all peace loving men at this time. 'Whenever Fascism rears up its ugly head, all sense of decency and respect for human life goes; by the board, and unfortunately suffer. And yet what can one do. If no resistance is made, the suffering is no less, and life without liberty is worth nothing'. (iii)

- (i) A.J.P.Taylor, The Troublemakers p.180 London 1969 Panther
- (ii) Monthly Report October, 1938
- (iii) Monthly Report July, 1939

He was, however, like all left wing socialists devastated by the announcement of the German Soviet pact of 23rd August, 1939; 'There may be some things which one may have some difficulty in understanding, as it is a bit difficult to get full details, but which we feel sure will come out right in the end'. (i) Nevertheless, he was able to assure the membership of the justice of the war which had been declared, and he did so with his characteristic perception and incisiveness; 'A mad dog has run amok with a Swastika on his arm, and full of evil desire to dominate the people of Europe and to make it wholly Fascist, and much as we detest war and opposed both the South African war and the war of 1914-18 as both were purely capitalistic and Imperialistic conflicts, there would appear to be no other course left in the present case than to use force to stop the wild career of one to whom ordinary reason does not appeal'.

'We must be very careful and watchful, however, against any attempt of our own rulers to use the present position to further the interests of the owning and the exploiting class, and to use our hatred of Fascism and Nazism to embroil us in an Imperialist conquest'. (ii)

'The pity of it all, is that Spain, Austria, Czechoslovakia, etc., were sold and betrayed by the French and British Governments and that of Germany made tremendously stronger than it was before.'

This was the last political message from Alex Gossip to the membership. Now 77, in failing health he was able to continue in office only for a few more months to see the implementation of the Trade Board before he retired.

- (i) Monthly Report Sept, 1939
- (ii) Monthly Report Oct, 1939

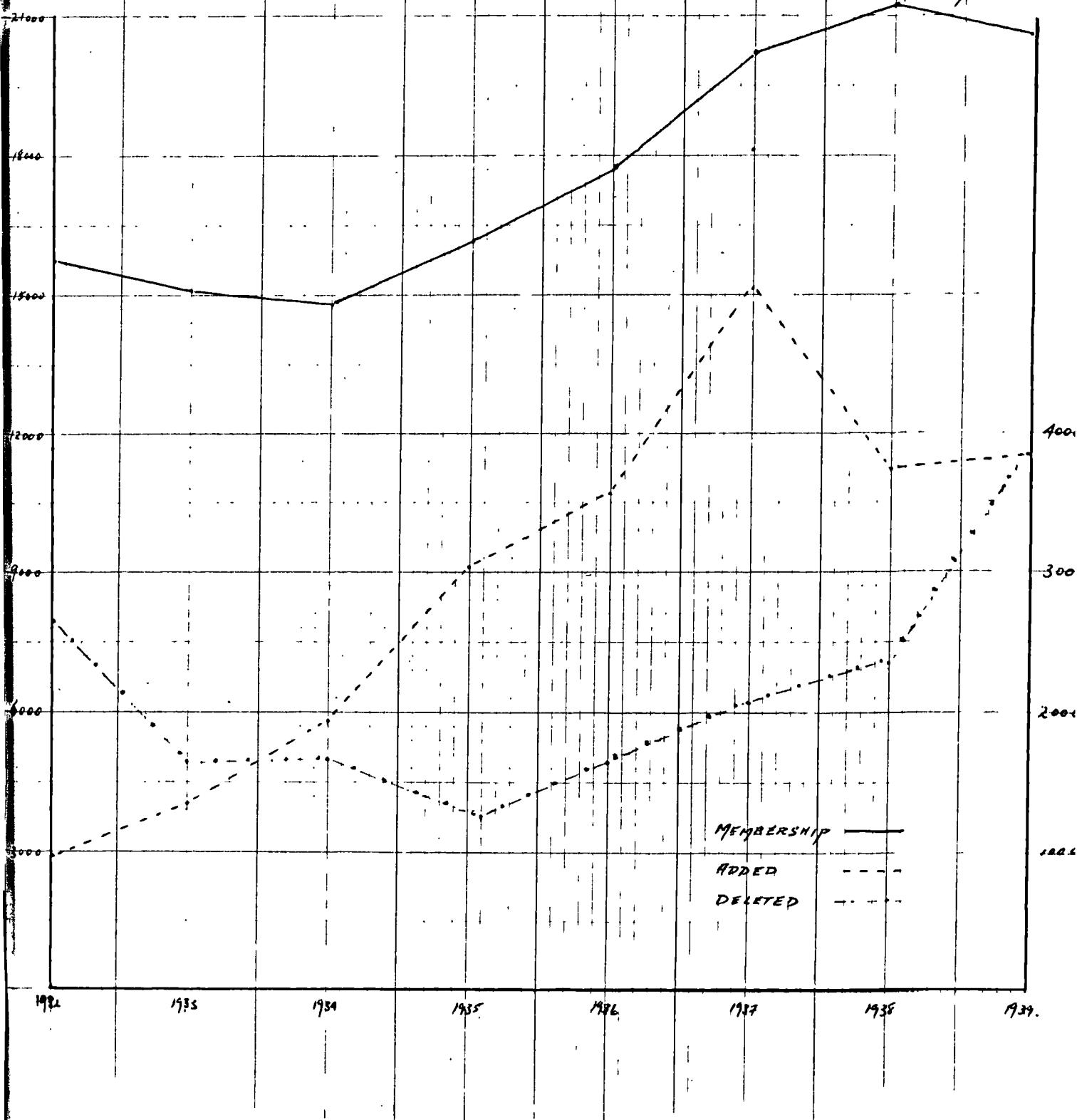
A great leader, a great Socialist, for 34 years he had led his members through triumph and vicissitude. For Alex Gossip there is no finer memorial than the Union itself.

In the beginning Alex Gossip was the Union and the Union was Alex Gossip.

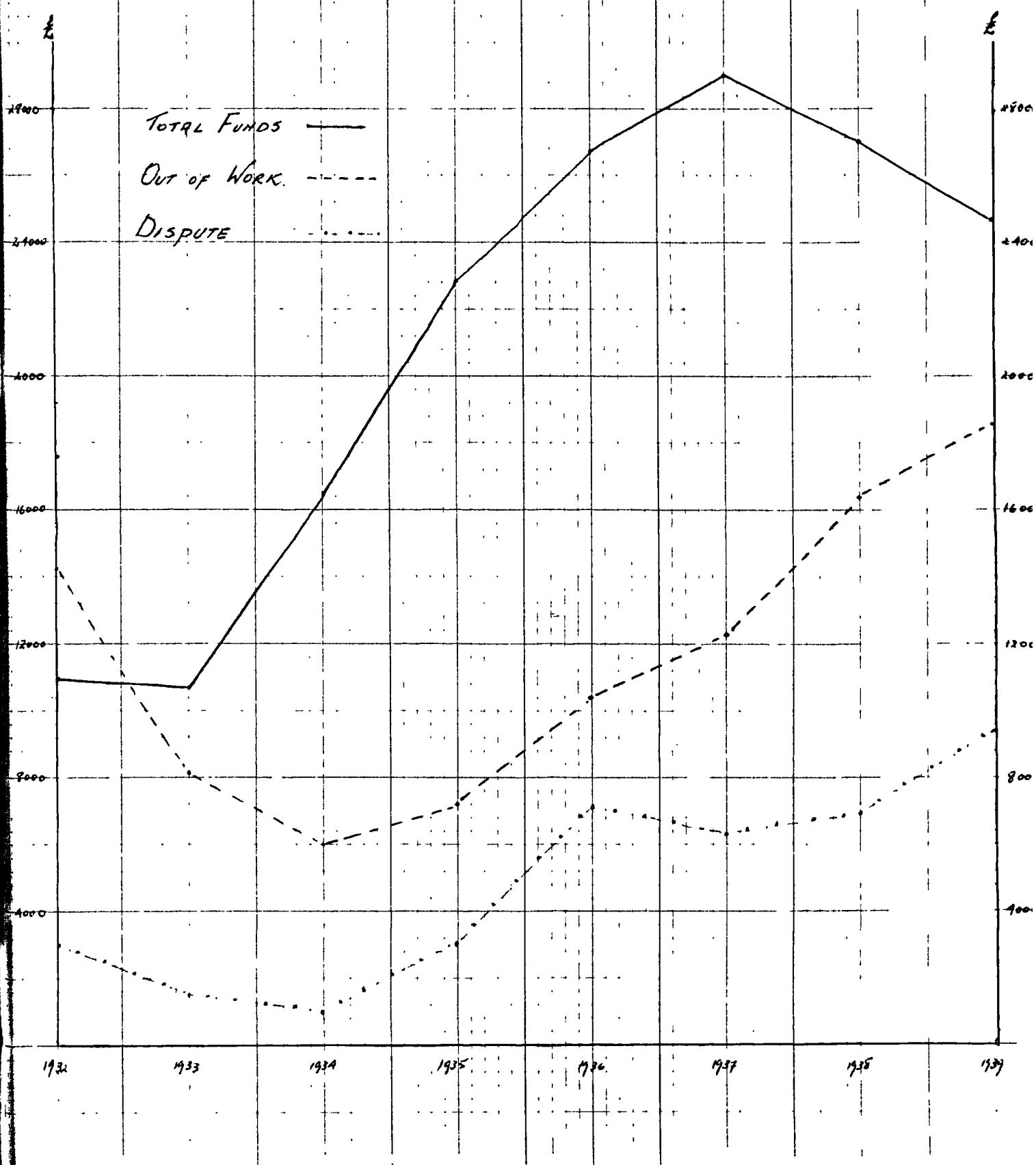
MEMBERSHIP NAFTA 1932 - 1939.

MEMBERS EACH YEAR.

MEMBERS ADDED  
AND DELETED EACH  
YEAR.



FINANCIAL RECORD NAFJA 1932-1939.



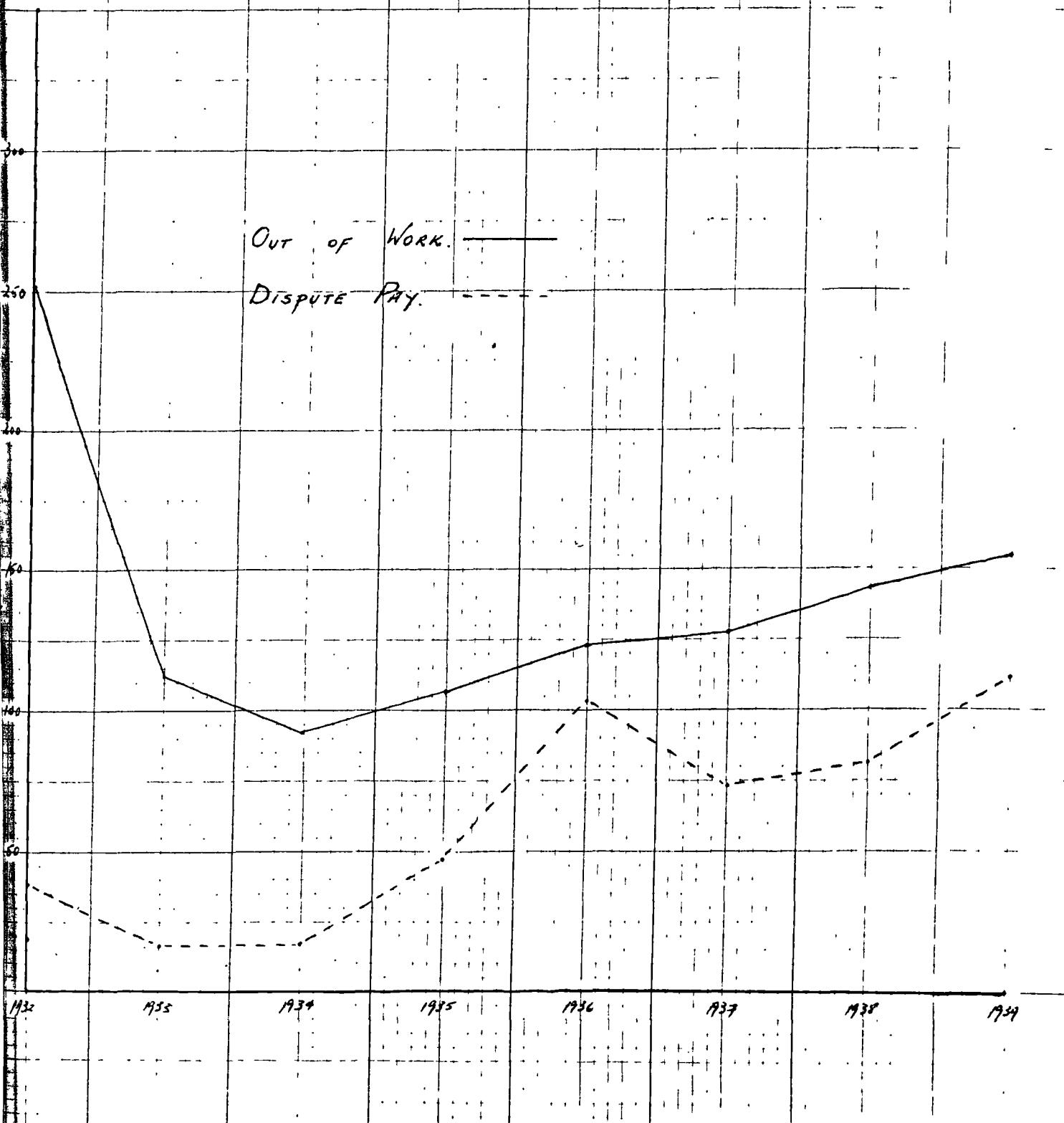
NAFTA

1932 - 1939

OUT OF WORK AND DISPUTE PAY  
PER MEMBER.

Out of Work.

DISPUTE PAY.



## 1939 - 1947 From NAFTA to NUFTO

The war years represented a new era for NAFTA. Under the leadership of Alf Tomkins the union operated in a new and controlled industry in a period of total war. Yet the contrast between the attitudes of this association to this war and to the first world war are most marked. The first world war was opposed by the unions leadership and in this opposition they were supported to a very large degree by the membership. In consequence every opportunity was taken both inside and outside of the union to publicise this stance and demonstrate this opposition.

In contrast the second world war was supported wholeheartedly by the union and its executive officers and so with one notable exception very little comment is made in its journals upon the progress of the war. In the 1939-45 war the major preoccupation of the executive of the period was with the opportunity to build and consolidate a national union with a national negotiation machinery; an enormous task but one which was tackled with imagination, efficiency and deserved success.

At the start of the period the union had a membership of some 20,000 and its greatest strength lay within the more craft based factories and workshops. By the end of the period it had become a highly organised and centralised industrial union with 61,000 members spread across all aspects of the industry from the most modern factory to the smallest craft workshops of the land.

The implementation of a Trade Board agreement for the Furniture Industry was but barely established when of necessity production of

furniture for the civilian market was concentrated into only 150 production units. Just before the war it was estimated that there were 1,500 furniture factories with ten or more employees and this reduction in levels of production, coupled as it was with a shortage of furniture due to bombing meant that utility furniture was rationed. 'Priority classes', that is newly marrieds, people setting up house because they were about to have children, and bomb victims, were issued with 'dockets' which were, in effect, permits to buy furniture up to the value of a certain number of 'units' and each utility piece was given a units price. In all, there were only twenty-two articles of furniture to be produced in the utility scheme. Each of these articles had a carefully proscribed timber content and two qualities and usually three designs were specified for each article. The design included beds, sideboards, chairs, tables, kitchen cabinets and an armchair, but not a three piece upholstered suite 'since it would have used a considerable quantity of scarce materials in its manufacture'. (i)

A Board of Trade enquiry showed that 65 per cent of housewives questioned liked it and only 20 per cent positively disliked it, while nearly all, even if there had been a choice - though from 1943 only utility furniture was available - would have bought the utility kitchen cabinet. The design panel claimed with some justice 'that it is pleasant to look at and easy to keep in condition'. The materials were not, however, always of first quality and manufacturers used whatever was available. (ii)

'One purchaser of a utility sideboard found that when the sun shone on the back under the thin oak veneer I could distinctly see the lettering "Apples"'. (iii)

(i) Furniture: An Enquiry Made for the B.O.T. 1945

(ii) Utility Furniture B.O.T. 1945

(iii) Norman Longmate 'How we lived then' p.261/2 Hutchinson London 1971

production

For those factories which were designated furniture/units, a concurrent feature was the operation of the closed shop. There was in reality no compulsion in this matter but as Jock Shanley, the then General Secretary of the A.U.U. relates 'As soon as we knew the name of a factory which was to produce furniture under the utility scheme we sent an official down to meet the management, and told them 'We have come to sign up all your work people as you are going on to the utility scheme'. The idea being to infer that it was a provision of the contract that all workers should be in the union. No one ever questioned it and we established our influence over the whole of the utility making factories very quickly'. (i)

Those factories which were not on the list of 150 units were not, however, without work. The Mosquito, a wooden plane was produced by more than 400 firms ranging from furniture makers, church pew carvers and pianoforte manufacturers. The gliders used in the invasion of Europe were another more obvious item to be produced by the furniture industry and so great was the impact of this new production upon the furniture industry that even today parts of the G.Plan factory in High Wycombe are known as the 'Glider Shop' and the 'Wing Shop'.

Other manufacturers dealt with the more mundane aspects of war production such as munitions boxes and portable buildings but the most astonishing feature of those years was the levels of output achieved and the size of contracts placed. This is most clearly exemplified by the war production of Ercol furniture which included thirty-six million tent pegs as well as other items.

(i) Verbal Evidence Jock Shanley

'The chief complaint was that there was not enough to go round. There was no fixed ration for the furniture and only enough units were issued to give the applicants the barest minimum of furniture to set up house. The maximum was, at first, sixty units for a couple, plus another fifteen for each child or expected child, and in July, 1944 this allowance was cut to thirty units, too little even to furnish a single room'.

'Spending the units was an exercise in organisation. For a newly married couple in 1944, a table was six units, four chairs at one unit each, a sideboard at 8 units and a wardrobe at 12 units, used up the whole allowance with no units left for a bed - five units for a double and six for two singles'.

A degree of prejudice has grown over the utility design which was quite unwarranted. They were designed under the guidance of a panel of eminent industrial designers and as Angus Calder states 'were simple and serviceable, and though hardboard was used instead of plywood, and a matt finish instead of the usual high polishes, the utility pieces at their best made an aesthetic virtue out of austerity. Indeed, it was not only on the question of aesthetics that the utility furniture scored, it was substantially better made than a great deal of pre-war articles. Alf Tomkins commented on the introduction of the scheme that 'A useful feature of the new furniture is the fixation of constructional details, and it is generally agreed that the standard set by the return of the mortice and tenon and the dovetail instead of the crude forms of jointing, which have become the rule in machine production jobs, is a feature which should be retained by Government control after the conclusion of hostilities. (i) (ii)

- (i) A. Caulder 'Peoples War' p.325 Panther, London 1971  
(ii) Annual Report NAFPA 1942

The impact upon the furniture industry of this time by these new requirements should not be underestimated. The most important being the introduction into the industry of the specialist technical advisors from agencies such as the Ministry of Aircraft Production, the advent of dispersed sub-contracting with its requirements for absolute adherence to tolerance levels in wooden components to a level never before imagined and above all the influence upon production of the new Urea Formaldehyde based glues and their accelerated curing under heat to produce a moisture resistant joint of greater strength than the wood itself. All were quite fundamental in establishing the technological base for the furniture industry of the post-war years, as well as the management/control function of this now technologically rather than craft based industry.

The one dissenting voice heard in NAFTA during the war was that of Bill Zak, Secretary London District Management Committee. Both he and Alf Thompkins were the union delegates to the 1940 Trade Union Congress in Southport and his report of the Congress, sharply critical of the role of the General Council, was in its turn roundly criticised by Alf Thompkins.

Zak was scathing in his comments regarding the management of Congress, 'monopolised by the platform', questions 'did not receive consideration' 'did not receive proper attention'. His report ends 'Our task is still to guard against the unscrupulous employer and the encroachment of capital'. (i)

Alf Tompkins took the unprecedented step of issuing a separate report in which he states 'It would be difficult to find one delegate

(i) E.C. Bulletin Jan, 1941

who attended....with the intention of representing the Trade Unionists who appointed him who would not give full praise to the General Council of the T.U.C. for the service given to the movement'. He goes on 'The T.U.C. like all other responsible administrative bodies, give judgement on fact and consequently do not need the facility to turn a complete volte-face because of "advice" or instructions received from outside the Trade Union Movement.'

This reference to outside advice stemming from Bill Zak's support for the anti-war Peoples Convention and his subsequent election as one of the 26 Members of the National Committee of the Peoples Convention at their meeting of 12th January, 1941. (i)

There is no further reference to this question in any Union Documents for the rest of the war period nor any correspondence in existence which sheds any further light upon this episode and it must be assumed that within the furniture union at least the Peoples Convention had little or no impact nor lasting effect.

At an organisational level, when the war broke out the furniture industry though covered by a national Trade Board and Joint Industrial Council, was still essentially at a local level of control. On the employers side there were a whole series of locally based societies loosely knit into a number of national, regional and trade federations. On the union side the workers were represented by the three main unions NAFTA, A.U.U. and the Woodmachinists, with a series of small societies still in existence as diverse as the venerable Edinburgh Society of

(i) Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Warwick Nira Bowes 1976.

Upholsterers and the specialist Association of Cricket Bat makers. Agreements with the employers were still on a local basis and there were some 30 different local agreements which nationally covered the country but which inreality left considerable areas without some form of agreement. These had grown up for historic reason and one example will suffice to illustrate. The London Agreement covered all factories with the London postal area and the High Wycombe agreement covered an area within a ten mile radius of the Guildhall in High Wycombe. In effect, an employer, operating in the Uxbridge, Ruislip area was not party to any working agreement and could in theory at least, apply any terms and conditions to employment he wished.

In reality the conditions of war emergency production applied and sets of working rules did pertain; however, it was a less than satisfactory arrangement and Alf Tompkins with his Regional organisers and with the blessing and assistance of the other unions began the task of covering the country with labour agreements. The first step was to recognise those working arrangements outside of the normal local areas and a series of so-called 'no-man's-land agreements' were signed during 1941 and 1942.

By 1943 the employers had reorganised themselves as the British Furniture Trade Employers Confederation and the union side matched this with the setting up in August of 1943 of the National Federation of Furniture Trades Unions with Jock Shanley (Gen.Sec. A.U.U.) as Chairman and Alf Tompkins (Gen.Sec. NAFTA) as Secretary.

This was not, however, the formation of battle federations as had

occurred in the 1930's and earlier. The war years were the start of an almost unbroken era of industrial peace in the furniture industry. Whereas the immediate pre-war years record dispute pay of 8/- and 9/- per member per year and similar sums throughout the first world war, the second world war was marked by the payment of minimum sums such as  $\frac{3}{5}$  d.  $\frac{1}{8}$  d. and even when disruption and strikes were at their highest in the rest of industry during the war, namely 1944, the union paid out  $\frac{1}{16}$  d. in strike support, per member for the year.

It cannot be claimed that the furniture workers were more conscious of the part they had to play in the war effort, nor that they were cowed into submission by the effect of Order 1305 in the summer of 1940 making strikes illegal; nor is there, despite a strong left wing bias to the union, any evidence of the Shop Stewards National Council having any effective voice either at local or national level. The conclusions must be reached that reason for industrial peace in this erstwhile turbulent industry was primarily full employment, guaranteed wages and bonus levels. This coupled with a most effective local machinery for dispute settlement and the establishment of Joint Production Councils in most furniture factories proved effective in resolving difficulties at a local and factory level before they were allowed to escalate. The Joint Production Councils though, set up by the Ministry of Supply to discuss at a factory level, "matters relating to production and increased efficiency" were used throughout the furniture sector to discuss such matters as piece rates, bonuses and working conditions. Whilst it could be mistaken to suggest that all factories were dispute free or that all J.P.C.'s were effective, what is not in dispute is the

question of continuity of employment for the furniture workers. After the trauma of the 30's when unemployment rarely fell below 20 per cent of union membership and often was as high as 33 per cent with equal numbers on short time working, the war years represented work and a decent wage, and with the militancy of 1944 having no impact at a national level on their leaders, so in turn at a grass roots level, there was no desire for militant action.

A factor in stabilising the industry had undoubtedly been the adoption of a cost of living related sliding scale for wages in 1940, this coupled with bonus earnings on the continuous flow of war production, had the resultant of a labour force which saw little reason for militancy.

A further factor in the non-militant attitude of NAFTA may well have been the dilution which occurred in the industry in the war. There had been dilution in the first world war but the scale to which it developed in this period was quite unprecedeted and by 1944 there were 9,286 women members in the union out of a total strength of 36,707. There is verbal evidence that women carried out all the tasks which had previously been the preserve of men, with the exception of the saw mills, but equal work did not mean equal pay, and the situation was taken for granted both in the furniture factory as it was in Parliament where as late as 1944 a move for equal pay for women teachers was denounced by Churchill as 'Impertinence' and abandoned as a part of Butler's new Education Bill. In furniture factories womens wages were fixed at two thirds of the mens rate appropriate to the task. (i)

(i) Caulder Peoples War p.466 CP. C.T.

There is no record of any dissent from this position which, indeed, remained normal practice until the equal pay movements of the 1970's.

By 1944 the first moves were taking place to consolidate the agreements which had taken place under the umbrella of the National Federation of Furniture Trades Unions, to form a National Union. The only dissenting voice being that of the wood machinist who maintained that in 1944 only 1,000 of their 20,000 members worked in the furniture industry, the remainder being in the joinery and carpentry trades. Indeed, many furniture wood machinists had never been members of the woodcutting machinists union, seeing NAFTA as the more logical union for their membership since they were furniture workers first and foremost and only incidentally machinists.

Progress to amalgamation was, however, slow since it was blocked during the war years by a powerful lobby which argued that with so many members in the Armed Forces and with such a high proportion of the current membership being women who would leave the trade at the end of the war, that the decision for amalgamation should be postponed until peace time conditions prevailed.

The Executive of the union used this period to consolidate the local agreements and reduced man's land agreements down to eight regional agreements. Once again there is no record of dissent from such a move which was accepted as logical and sensible by the membership but which effectively removed a very large measure of local control over negotiation on wages and conditions. Typically, the Regional agreement for the North East Counties, covered Yorkshire, Northumberland and Durham and in one document replaced six existing local agreements.

production was reduced and these were added to those engaged on the manufacture of utility furniture. As was the case with the first 150 utility factories, the union grasped the opportunity to apply for and achieve 100 per cent membership in these firms where ever possible.

Concurrent with this change in the pattern of the industry there was also pressure for National Agreements to cover the trade. The unions for their part had no wish to return to the catch as catch can wage rates of the pre-war period, and the difficulties that such a situation created not only for their members, but for the very retention of membership, and on the employers side there was a strong feeling that an equal base for labour rates was a most desirable position for the renaissance of the industry.

In 1945 a whole series of National Agreements were signed for groups within the Industry ranging from the National Agreement for the Blind Making trade, to the National Agreement for the Pianoforte Trade to the National Agreement for the Cane Willow and Woven Fibre Industry. This succession of agreements culminated in the ceremony in the Connaught Rooms, London on 31st January, 1946 at which the employers as represented by the British Furniture Trade Confederation, and the Unions representing the National Federation of Furniture Trade Unions, signed the first National Labour Agreement for the Furniture Manufacturing Industry.

The Agreement, a model of clarity and even brevity, stands to this day as the reference from which all national and local negotiations in the furniture industry starts. The document is a testimonial to the

perception of the main architects of the agreement, in that it has remained largely unchanged to this day, able to accommodate the varying directions in which the furniture trade has moved in the post war years.

The agreement fixed a working week of 44 hours with appropriate overtime rates. Minimum working rates of 2/2½d. per hour in London and 2/0½d in the rest of the country and 2/3 of that rate for women workers. In this it was no different from many other trades but such clauses as Homeworkers or outworkers being paid the union minimum plus 15 per cent were particularly perceptive and the statement that 'The provisions of this agreement are minimum and do not prevent the operation by individual employers of wages and conditions more favourable to individual workers' allowed a degree of local autonomy with national control which was most effective in providing the furniture worker with a good standard of living'. (i)

With regard to payment by results the provision of a clause requiring that 'evaluation of the task shall be by reference to time and not by price' enabled bonus rates to effectively keep pace with changing wage rates and the provision of the mutual agreement clause for the fixing of times effectively kept the rate fixer out of the furniture factory yet allowed the adoption of time study to become a normal management tool; furthermore, when time study and payment by results were used in a factory then the bonus base had to be fixed such that 'the average productive worker could by appropriate effort earn at least 25 per cent more than the minimum time rate'.

(i) Nat.Labour Agreement for the Furniture Industry 1946

Holidays with pay were established as was paid day release for all apprentices and learners, but it was in its provision for conciliation machinery that the agreement was most forward looking. Effectively a status quo provision was applied in the event of disagreement between employer and employee and failing this the establishment of a provisional agreement pending negotiations and adjustable resultant upon a subsequent agreement. Provision was made for factory level negotiations followed by District level discussions and in the event of a failure the referral of the dispute to the National Joint Industrial Council. In all the years of the operation of the agreement there have been few occasions when disputes went further than to District level negotiation. A tribute to the effectiveness of the agreement and the dislike of both union and management to 'wash their dirty linen in public' as one district officer has noted. (i)

NAFTA was no longer the political union of earlier years. Contributions to the political fund remained low and even when the 'opting out' procedure for political affiliation fees was adopted by the new Labour Government only one in six paid their contributions compared to one in ten for the war time period.

The union sponsored two parliamentary candidates, F.I. Sweetman and Bernard Rockman, but neither gained the acceptance of a constituency party for the 1945 election. Two members of NAFTA were returned to Parliament at this election, William Leonard who became Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Supply, and A. Bechervaise, but neither was able to take the role of Parliamentary Secretary due to other

(i) Verbal Evidence from un-named District officer

commitments. If this is to suggest that NAFTA/NUFTO had become a non-political union, such would be very far from the truth, rather there was a moving of positions such that the union's political philosophy and that of the 1945 Labour Party and T.U.C. were closer to a series of common goals by this time.

Amalgamation was now an obvious desire on the part of the unions concerned and seen as a logical step by the membership. The Edinburgh Upholsterers had joined NAFTA in 1945 with 200 members and £265 in funds and the Association of Cricket Bat. Makers joined the union early in 1947 with 55 members and £148 in funds, but the major amalgamation was that to bring the bedding and upholstery workers together with NAFTA. The benefits were uniform, the common interest was established, but the question of personalities and positions within the new union presented some problems; this difficulty being resolved by the adoption of a Regional and a Group system.

The country was divided up into six regions, each with a national organiser and a number of district organisers as dictated by membership numbers. There also was established a Bedding and Spring Mattress group and an upholstery and soft furnishing group, each with a group secretary and organisers. In this way the officers of NAFTA, the upholsterers and the bedding workers were absorbed into the new and larger union, without offence and without redundancy.

Actual amalgamation to form NUFTO, The National Union of Furniture Trades Operatives took place on May 1st, 1947 and brought 46,522 members

of NAFTA together with 10,608 members of the A.U.U. In terms of funds NAFTA was worth £152,000 or £3.20 per member and the A.U.U. some £61,000 or £6.10 per member.

Alf Tompkins, O.B.E., (1946 Honours List) became General Secretary of the new union and Jock Shanley, late General Secretary A.U.U. became Assistant General Secretary (Organisation) and Alf Bicknell remained as the second Assistant General Secretary with responsibility for Finance and Administration. The A.U.U. organisers moved across to the newly formed specialist soft furnishing group with Reg Carter (husband of Lilly Carter, Organiser of the 1930 Women Upholsterer's Strike) becoming London District organiser for the group and J.J. Johnson, the national organiser.

NUFTO was born, the national union which had been the dream of Alex Gossip and his comrades through the early years of the century. A large union, well endowed with funds, highly organised with a corps of experienced and dedicated district officers. This was the union which had been the vision of the pioneers of the early days, the culmination of the years of strife, sacrifice and leadership.

♦♦♦♦♦

*The President*

*Vice-President*

*General Secretary*

*and the two*

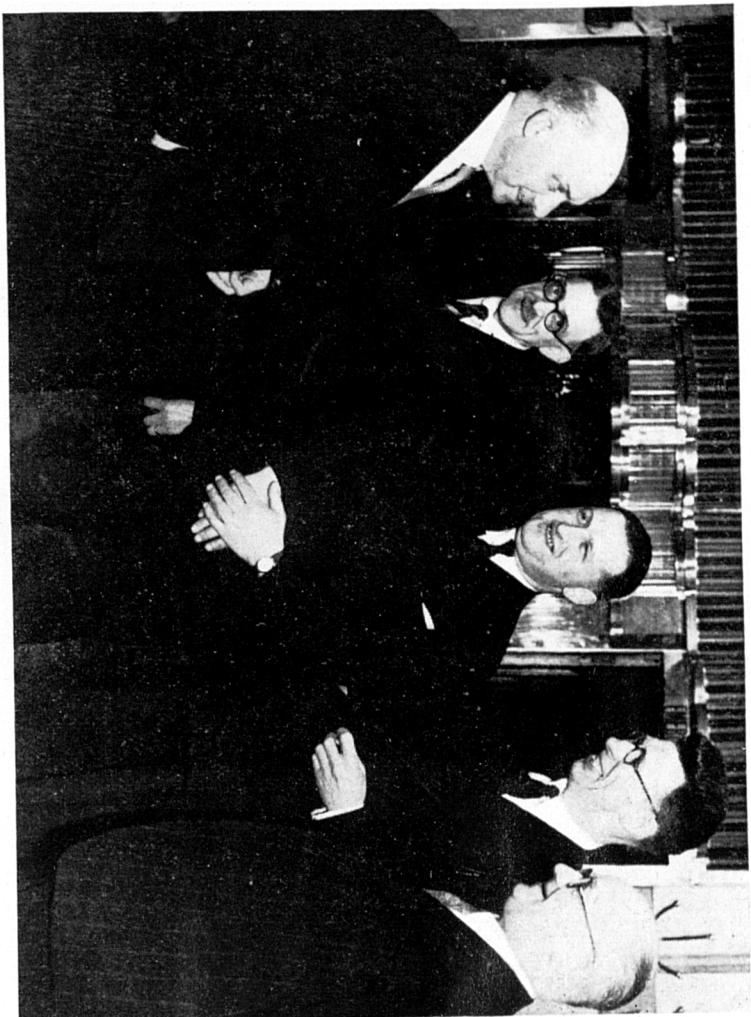
*Assistant General*

*Secretaries*

*at the*

*Celebration*

*1st May, 1947*



♦♦♦♦♦

N.A.F.T.A. BECOMES N.U.F.T.O

A. G. TOMKINS

Vice-Pres.  
W. POPE

Pres.  
R. S. SHUBE

Asst. Gen. Secs.  
J. R. SHANLEY A. J. BICKELL

AMALGAMATED UNION OF UPHOLSTERERS

The records of the A.U.U. were to a very large extent destroyed during the 1939-45 war and the following has been compiled on the basis of the surviving Annual Reports, E.C. Minute Books and the privately published Memoirs of Lewis Leckie - General Secretary A.U.U. 1897-1923.

<u>Society</u>	<u>Date of Founding</u>	<u>Membership 1891</u>
Liverpool Old Society	1844	95
Liverpool Upholsterers	1889	not known
Manchester Society	1846	75
Glasgow & District	1853	126
Edinburgh Upholsterers	1842	74
Edinburgh Upholsteresses	1872	not known
Dublin Society	1865	60
Belfast Society	1883	50

N.B. The Edinburgh Upholsteresses is reputed to be the oldest Women's Trade Society in the United Kingdom.

General Secretaries from 1891:-

Lewis Leckie	1897 - 1923
E. Wilsdon	1923 - 1936
Jock Shanley	1936 - 1947

# First Delegate Meeting of Upholsterers

*Central Hotel, Ranelagh Street, Liverpool, March 21st, 1891*

Object : AMALGAMATION



A. MUGGOCH      M. THOMPSON      R. TISDALL  
J. BOWIE      A. SALTER      H. TIPLADY      S. BECKLEY  
J. COSSAR      J. FLEWITT      W. WATSON  
J. HALL      J. RYAN

*Manchester Society :*  
STEPHEN BECKLEY & ALFRED SALTER  
*Edinburgh Society :*  
MARTIN THOMPSON & JOHN COSSAR  
*Belfast Society :*  
JOHN HALL & JOSEPH RYAN

*Glasgow Society :*  
JAMES BOWIE & ADAM MUGGOCH  
*Dublin Society :*  
RICHARD TISDALL  
*Liverpool Society :*  
HERBERT TIPLADY & WILLIAM WATSON

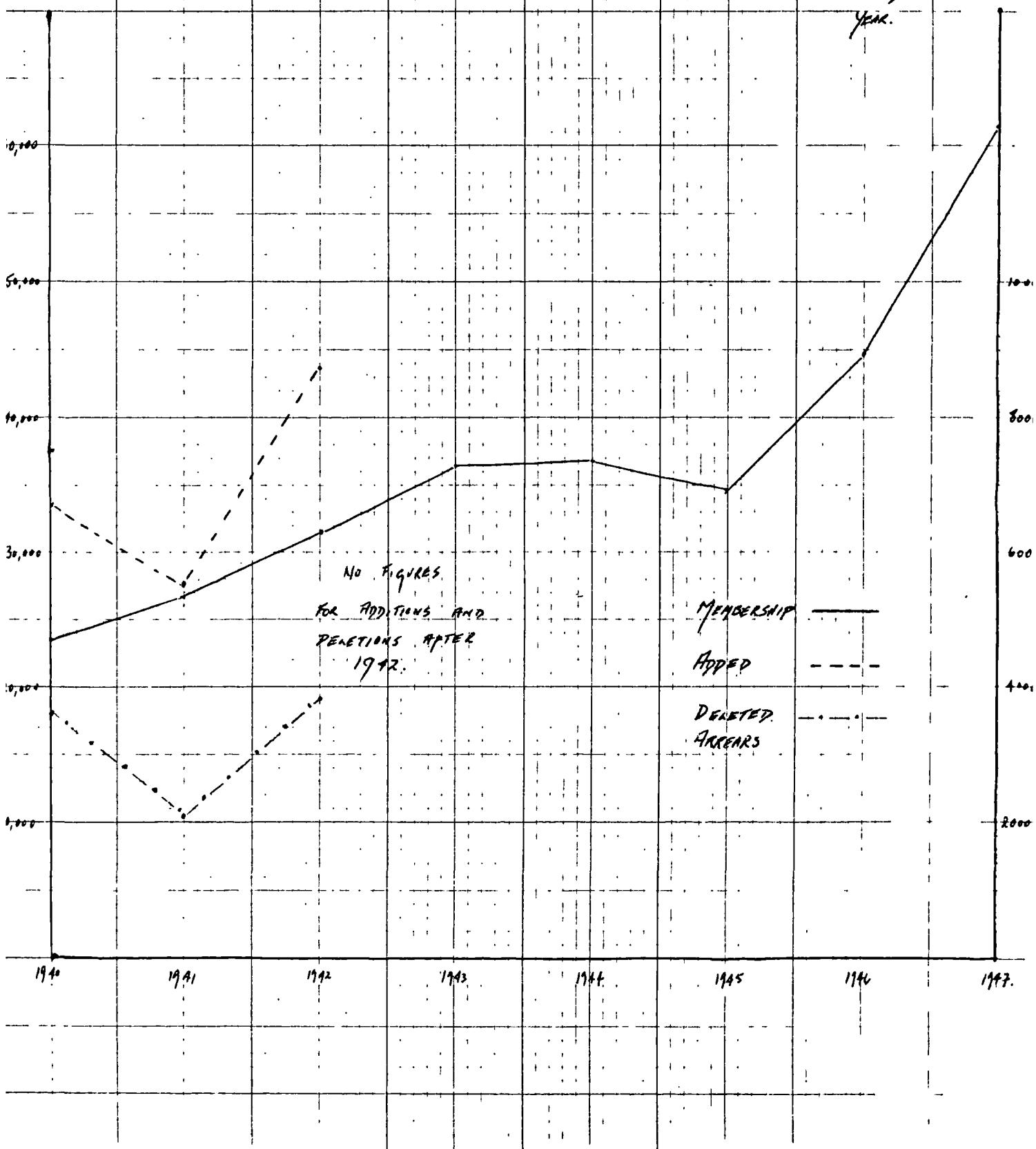
*Liverpool Association :*  
President : JOHN FLEWITT  
Secretary : HENRY WILLIAMS

Formation of A.U.U.

MEMBERSHIP NAFTA 1940 - 1947

MEMBERS EACH YEAR.

MEMBERS ADDED AND  
DELETED EACH  
YEAR.



## FINANCIAL RECORD

NAFTA 1940-1947

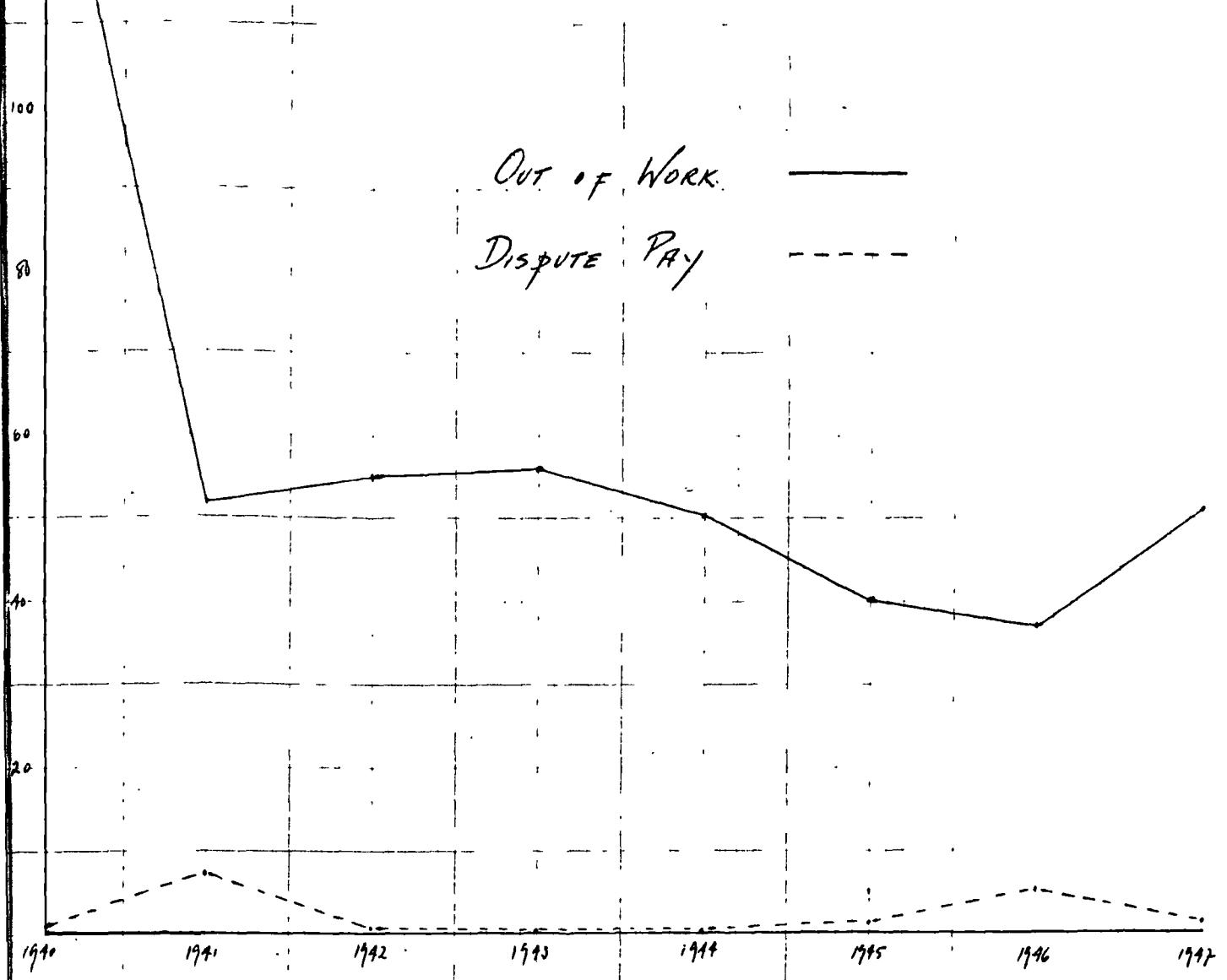
TOTAL FUNDS

OUT OF WORK

DISPUTE

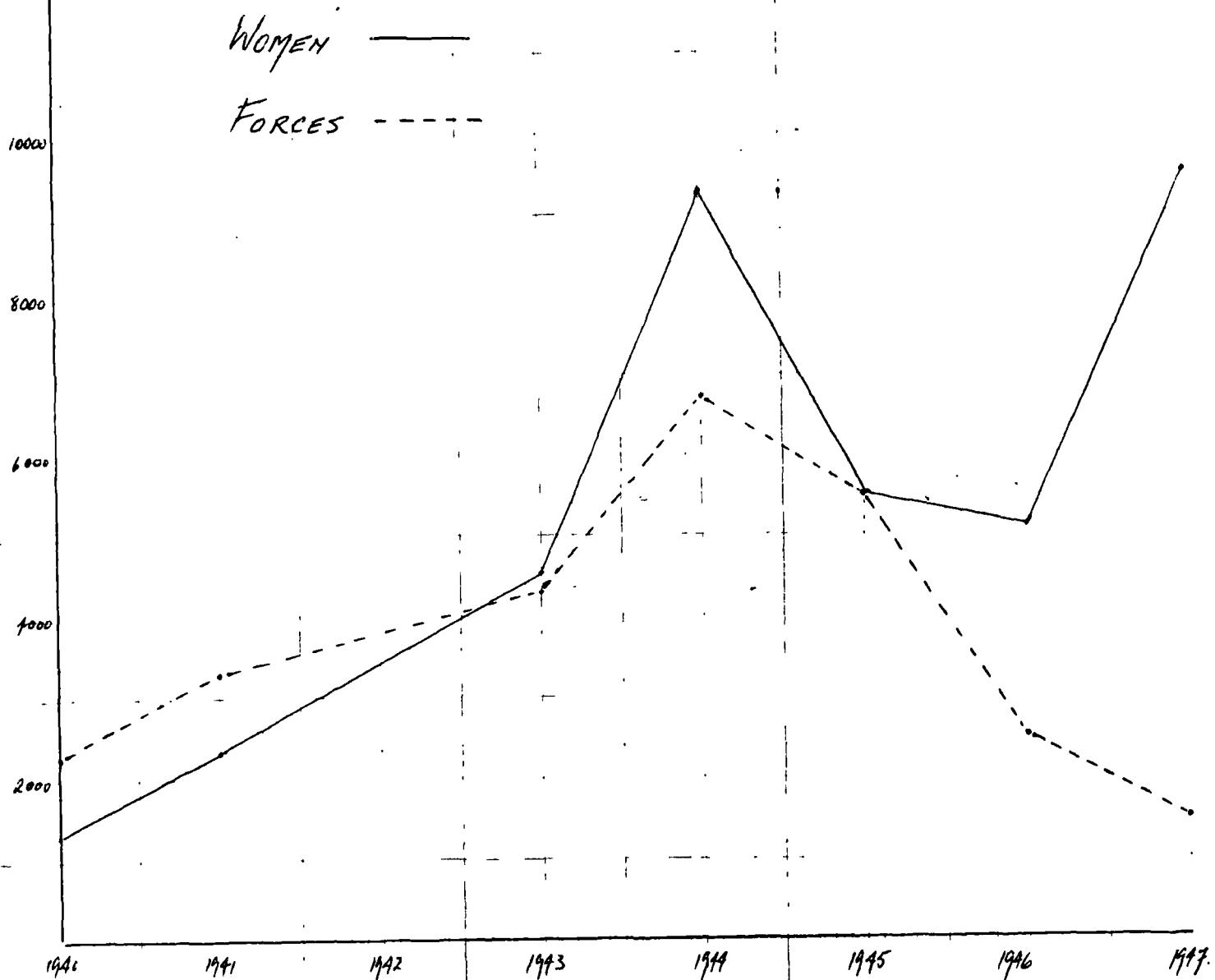


NAFTA 1940 - 1947  
Out of Work AND Dispute Pay  
PER MEMBER.



NAFTA 1940 - 1947

WOMEN MEMBERS AND FORCES MEMBERS.



NUFTO To FTAT 1948 - 1972

In this period of the Furniture Union's history the last steps were taken which resulted in the fulfillment of the dream of the early pioneers. In a series of amalgamations all of the smaller trade societies were gathered into the fold of NUFTO and by the end of the period the Amalgamated Society of Wood Cutting Machinists joined with them to form the Furniture Timber and Allied Trades Union with over 89,000 members and more than £2 million in funds, and organising over 95 per cent of all workers in the trade.

In industrial relations terms this was a period of relative peace and cooperation. Such disputes as there were, were settled amicably and the vehement discriminations of an earlier era were reserved for internal disputes and in relation to Government policy as it affected the union and its membership.

Yet these disputes or disagreements were never of any real or lasting consequence and in the post war period the main thrust of union activity was that of improving wages and organisation and of recruitment of membership set against a background of immense initial demand for the industry's traditional production followed by substantial and far reaching changes in the technology and output of the industry.

That a dramatic change in the industry was taking place is made clear by the following statistics. Taking 1946 production levels as an index figure of 100, the output of the industry rose to 199 by 1952. Well aware of this rise in production, the Furniture workers felt they

were entitled to a share of this prosperity. Not only was production doubled during the period but it was achieved with only a 10 per cent increase in manpower. Such an improvement in productivity cannot be explained away as post war recovery, indeed, the industry was by 1946 re-established on a basis of full peacetime production and the increase can only be related to changes in the industry itself. Effectively the Furniture Industry was well on the way to becoming a 'hand assisted machine production industry' and the trends which were apparent in this period were to accelerate and intensify over the following years. (i) (ii)

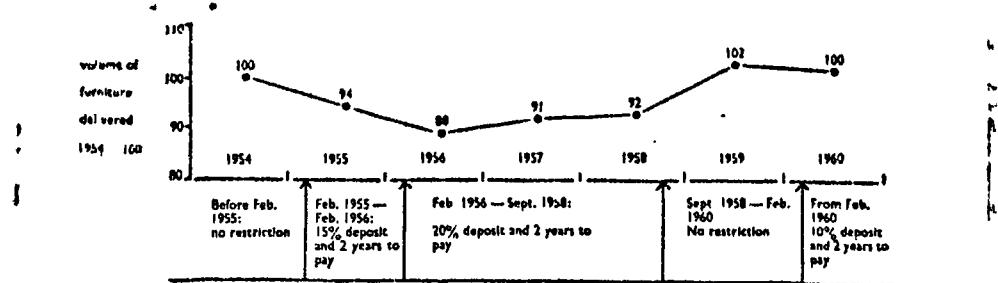
This change in the industry had its most marked effect upon the firms engaged in the trade and over the years 1950 - 1957 the numbers of those companies producing furniture dropped from 3,148 to 1,987. This decline though sudden and acute did not effect employment or output and since the industry subsequently stabilised at this number of companies, this can be seen as a weeding out of those who could not or would not modernise. Post 1953 the substantial increase in the output of the industry levelled off and though value of furniture produced in 1962 was £2 millions higher than ten years earlier, the volume was unchanged. This period was a time of consolidation and re-organisation with a smaller industry absorbing the changes of the machine production era. (iii)

The main problems facing the industry throughout the 50's and 60's stemmed, however, from a change in purchasing habits on the part of the furniture buying public. Prior to the second world war there was some purchasing of furniture by means of hire purchase agreements but

- (i) Board of Trade Index Figures 1952
- (ii) Organiser's Reports NAFTA Journal 1946
- (iii) Statistical Survey Furniture Industry F.I.R.A. 1958

post war this method became a norm as it was with most other consumer durables. The consequence of this change came when successive Governments in the post war period used changes in the availability of hire purchase or the levels of deposits associated with such agreements as economic regulations.

The following chart shows just how sensitive furniture production became in the post war period to the effects of credit restriction.



From 1960 onwards there was a progressive growth within the industry which whilst effected by Government legislation, was now more firmly established by advertising and promotion of branded trade names as a major recipient of consumer durable spending. By the late 60's the industry was reaping the full benefit of this change and output by value in 1970 was double that of 1950 and had trebled by 1972, as can be seen from the following table:-

///

Turnover and Employment in the United Kingdom Furniture Industry 1954-1971

	Turnover by Value (£1 millions)	Total Employed	Employment '000's		
			Males	Females	Unemployed
54	110	135.7	100.4	35.3	2.5
55	105.6	136.7	100.6	36.1	3.4
56	102	129.2	94.8	34.8	3.3
57	108.1	130.8	95.2	35.6	3.7
58	110.5	130.9	95.5	35.4	3.7
59	122.6	137.4	100.2	37.2	2.8
60	121.7	101.8	80.7	23.2	5.4
61	125.9	101.8	81.2	22.7	3.3
62	126.3	99.9	79.4	21.1	6.2
63	125.3	99.3	78.5	20.5	2.0
64	144.2	102.7	81.1	20.8	1.3
65	156.8	102.5	80.9	21.6	1.5
66	157.3	95.7	75.5	21.6	6.1
67	152.4	98.1	77.1	20.2	2.5
68	181.4	97.6	76.4	21.0	2.4
69	177.9	92.7	73.6	21.2	2.24
70	204.6	89.9	71.3	19.1	2.5
71	253.6	93.6	74.4	18.6	3.36
72	311.7	88.0	71.3	16.7	2.70

N.B. The method of accounting for numbers employed etc., in furniture industry was changed by the Government in 1960 particularly affecting those peripheral to the upholstery and soft furnishing sectors. (i)

(i) Dept. of Trade & Industry FIRA Economic Review for Furniture Industry 1973 p.6

The boom of 1968 saw volume up by 11 per cent and value up by 17.5 per cent but by this time a specific concentration within the industry was occurring. Some 3.8 per cent of the firms in the industry were now responsible for more than 50 per cent of the output. The numbers employed in the industry had and were falling and the industry could be truly said to have entered an era of machine related high productivity.

The technological change which was the centre of this new era was above all else the use of chipboard. This is a man-made board in which soft wood chips are bonded together with Urea Formaldehyde resin to produce a stable, dimensionally accurate board which in its turn can be covered in wood veneers, paper veneers or Melamine foil. This was the board that transformed the industry.

Gone were the designs of an earlier era with their curved surfaces and intricate patterns, and in their place the industry produced the flat panelled square edge products so familiar to today's furniture buyer. With a stable non-variable base material being used, high speed cutting machines designed to automatically replicate the joints produced over production runs of thousands of parts could now be installed in the modern factory. Linking the machinery together was the next obvious step and when these developments were added to automatic machine sanding lines, and linked finishing and drying equipment, it can be seen that a highly capitalised high volume output could be and was achieved. A small number of highly efficient companies with a limited range of products, whose trade names are household words now dominated the mass market for furniture.

The transformation of production which these changes represented were, of necessity, accompanied by a transformation of skills at a managerial and more obviously at a workshop level.

The industry of furniture making had always been regarded as a series of separate but inter-related crafts with quite rigid lines of demarcation between the trades. This new spirit of cooperation between employer and employee coupled with the changing more intensive nature of the industry required a re-thinking of attitudes on the matter and a progress to inter-changeability of labour.

The steps in the process of change stemmed from apprentice training. From the late 1920's the certification of apprenticeship was by way of an examination structure administered by the City and Guilds of London Institute. These courses, known as C & G 103, were both practical and written tests and were trade specific, that is for Cabinetmakers or Chairmakers or Upholsterers etc. By the 1960's, however, it became apparent to educationalists, unions and employers that these rigid compartmentalised skills were becoming anachronistic in relation to the changing nature of the industry. As a result of tripartite talks the old C & G 103 series of qualifications was superceded in 1968-69 by the C & G 425 courses (later re-numbered to C & G 555 in 1975-76).

In essence, 425 and the later 555, requires that apprentices undertake a first year of study which introduces them to all the craft skills of the industry and only in the second and third years of training do they concentrate their learning on one specific skill.

The only craft exempt from this generalist approach is that of wood machinists, and it is an acknowledgement of the now central role of the machine within the furniture industry and its increasing complexity, that the wood machinists apprentice spends all of his three years of training on this one subject.

This change of learning pattern was accompanied by new instructions to the union membership in 1969. NUFTO adopted a policy of acceptance of inter-changeability of skills within any firm such that if a short term shortage of, say, cabinetmakers, occurred then any member of the workforce, no matter what their trade, could be called upon to perform that task.

Effectively this was no more than a recognition of a situation which was already occurring in those firms which had the very best industrial relations, but it should not, for the majority of the industry, be seen as simply bowing to a fait accompli, rather as a particularly far-sighted and progressive move in an industry imbued with a very real sense of mutuality.

In the post war years NUFTO was in many respects a model union. The relationships with the employers at a national and local level recognised an inter-dependence which strove for a mutually satisfactory settlement to any question. The new attitude is typified in the contrast between Charlie Hawkins struggles with the firm of Meredrew in the 20's and 30's and the cooperation accorded to Charlie Ward, the District Organiser, in the post war period. He notes in his Monthly Report

'The management sent all unorganised workers in groups to the canteen, with full pay, to be addressed by me, and we now have a fully 100 per cent organised factory'. (i)

The only disagreement of any consequence was in 1952 when the employers called for a wage freeze and an end to the cost of living sliding scale. This disagreement was resolved at a meeting at the Ministry of Labour under the Chairmanship of Sir Robert Gould, Chief Conciliation Officer of the Ministry,

and subsequently there was never any further need to use this conciliation machinery for the furniture industry.

The 42 hour week was gained in 1960 and this did require a five day ban on overtime working and restriction of payment by results earnings but the 40 hour week gained in 1965 was achieved without need to revert to any industrial action. (ii) (iii)

Though the battles of former years with employers were now a thing of the past, there appeared within NUFTO the new phenomena of internal conflict. These internal disputes being centred round the reputed activities of the Furniture Trade Advisory Committee of the Communist Party, within the Union.

Alf Tompkins, General Secretary had been a member of the Communist Party in the 20's and 30's but had resigned in 1940 and moved politically away from the left wing of the Labour movement. His subsequent struggles with the left began in 1948/9 when a series of small but potentially

- (i) NUFTO Record May, 1949
- (ii) NUFTO Annual Report 1960
- (iii) Annual Report 1965

damaging unofficial strikes broke out in the industry. Alf Tompkins recognised that such disputes could have threatened the National Labour agreement and the National Negotiating machinery and so in a special message to the membership he wrote:-

'Are unofficial disputes necessary? Your Union says - emphatically no. We must emphasise that each member of the union is committed to observe the requirements of the conciliation machinery which has been devised to make unofficial stoppages absolutely unnecessary. It is important to note that in nearly every case where a difference has been dealt with by the conciliation machinery, the union submission has been upheld by the Tribunals appointed to adjudicate on the matter. What additional proof is required to establish, that time and wages lost as a result of unofficial stoppages is time and wages unnecessarily lost'.

'It is a well worn plea that unofficial action is a demonstration of militancy. If we seriously believe this to be the case, then we should not pledge ourselves through a national agreement to act as a disciplined, an organised body of people. Undisciplined activity is nearer related to anarchy. Militant trade unionism can only be effectively expressed by the membership, moving "en masse" to enforce, when necessary, undertakings given, or when a challenge is thrown down to agreements made'.

With a recognition that the General Officials could find themselves out-maneuvred by a small militant and highly organised group within the union, when elections were due, it instituted a system of individual postal votes for all elections within the union from July of 1949. The registers of paid up members were held as duplicates by the union

accountants who then checked the papers against their registers and declared the results.

This decision, though costly and time consuming, was welcomed and endorsed by the membership as a whole. The Postal Ballot was challenged on a number of occasions at Biennial Conference on the nominal basis of the expense incurred but in every case was supported by the vast majority of members. It has to be said, however, that postal voting did not reduce the number of members of the Communist Party within the Executive or appointed as General Officials but did, however, ensure that those members best fitted for union office were elected on a much broader mandate than would have been achieved at sparsely attended branch meetings.

The most vociferous dispute between Alf Tompkins C.B.E., (1951 Birthday Honours List) and his left wing colleagues occurred after the 1953 Biennial Conference. A motion from the right wing proposing to ban members of the Communist Party from holding office within the union, was withdrawn on the personal plea of Alf Tompkins. In his justification of this action the General Secretary, however, antagonised the party members by claiming that such a vote would "result in a series of Martyrs" who, "when their task of arousing sympathy was accomplished" would be replaced by "reliable fellow travellers". (i)

This action and the conference report that followed it aroused a hornet's nest of letters from the right and left wings of the union 'strongly deprecating this action' 'insulting' 'distorting the facts' and finally 'What a pity the communists never learned to play cricket'. (ii)

- (i) 1953 Biennial Conference Report July
- (ii) NUFTO Record July/Aug/Sept/Oct 1953

Alf Tompkins left his reply to this controversy until November when much of the heat had been removed from the issue and whilst claiming communist infiltration within the union, was careful not to re-start the arguments again and adopted a 'the price of freedom is eternal vigilance' theme.

These arguments, a symptom and a symbol of the times, do not in retrospect shed any credit upon Alf Tompkins. The anagonism and innuendo effectively reducing the reputation of a first class trade union leader. Nor did this action in any way reduce the number of communist party members who were and are active officers of the union, men who are without exception highly effective, dedicated workers for the benefit of their fellow members, and who, being recognised as such have been elected and re-elected, often unopposed, returned with huge majorities on a vote of majority of the membership.

The last episode of this skirmish occurred in 1955 when an unofficial strike involving 24 NUFTO members broke out. (One of the very few recorded in the post war period). Immediately Alf Tompkins saw this as a communist conspiracy. 'If a tiny minority cannot bear the thought of being bound together in an organisation which is devoted to the task of achieving the greatest good for the greatest number, they should cease to retain their link with their colleagues'. 'The duration of this unofficial strike provides the certainty that financial support is being provided'. 'a calculated step to weaken the Union'.

The action of the General Secretary seems to be one of over-reaction especially as this dispute was in an upholstery factory and the very

officials who were trying to resolve the dispute through the normal union channels were themselves C.P. members. In the event the matter was soon resolved and with the Soviet intervention in Hungary in 1956 a period of disenchantment with anything pertaining to Eastern Bloc countries ensued and the erstwhile close links between the union and furniture workers of Eastern Europe were reduced and not resumed until the 1970's.

Despite his problem, Alf Tomkins held his membership together with little or no opposition to his middle of the road stance, in this post war period. One of the fundamental factors which contributed to this lack of opposition was the position of the furniture workers in the national wage league table. Pre-1939-45 the industry had been relatively poorly paid but in the post war era the wages for the industry rapidly moved forward to make it one of the better paid industrial occupations as the following table illustrates:-

Indices of basic weekly wage rates 1959 - 1968.

	<u>All Manual Workers</u> <u>Wage Range</u>	<u>Furniture Workers</u>
1959	111 - 119	117
1960	112 - 122	119
1961	118 - 125	124
1962	119 - 133	133 January 1956 = 100
1963	127 - 138	136
1964	130 - 145	141
1965	138 - 152	146
1966	143 - 161	153
1967	146 - 162	158
1968	150 - 177	170

As can be seen, the furniture workers remained near the top of the wages league table for this period even allowing for the distortion introduced into this table by the inclusion of the category of professional and scientific services, public administration and defence.

Lack of dissent within the union allowed the officers to concentrate upon their organisational role, but despite this business organisation image, the union was not without a political voice.

The Union's disagreements with Government policy were at two levels. They objected in concert with the employers on the use of the industry as a pawn in the game of economic regulations as has been stated but as a national union they also made their voice heard both through the T.U.C. and independently on a number of other issues.

Throughout its history the furniture unions have always upheld a consistant policy of defence of the right of free collective bargaining and this policy was reiterated again early in the post war period. The wage restraint policy of the first Labour Government was not one with which NUFTO agreed and though Government policy was supported by T.U.C. the furniture workers were a dissenting voice. The T.U.C. General Council was in favour of a wage freeze in the Autumn of 1949 but at the special conference of Trades Union Executives in January 1950, they could only muster a majority of 650,000 votes and NUFTO were amongst those including the Miners, A.E.U. and N.U.R. who cast 3,600,000 votes against this policy. Indeed, wage rises at a national level and cost of living sliding scale increases for the furniture workers were continued unabated through this period.

On Suez they were energetic in their protests to the Government. They refused to accept the pay pause of 1962; with great reluctance accepted the wages and prices freeze of the 1966 Labour administration and its attendant 'early warning system' but were strongly against the report of the Donovan Commission. 'In place of strife' was in its turn rejected as a philosophy by the union as was the Tory Industrial Relations Bill and in common with the majority of Trades Unions the Furniture Workers de-registered under the Industrial Relations Act.

The trend towards concentration of production within a smaller number of companies has already been described and this evolutionary process made the need for centralisation and unification of the trades unions involved in the industry both logical and pressing.

In 1954 the National Union of Carpet, Linoleum and Rubber Planners and fittings joined NUFTO by transfer of engagements. This arrangement was also used in 1969 when the Midland Glass Beveilers and Kindred Societies joined NUFTO as did the United French Polishers Society.

The major amalgamation of the period was, however, with the Amalgamated Society of Wood Cutting Machinists. (ASWCM). Over the years there had been many discussions with this society both on their own and on a tripartite basis with the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers. The first of these meetings was held in 1963 arising out of the TUC 1962 Congress recommendations on amalgamation, but after an initial discussion between General Secretaries, the contact was broken. However, in 1965 where Charlie Stewart, General Secretary of the ASWCM was

was invited to the NUFTO Biennial Conference and on being invited to address the meeting, he spoke particularly on the need for closer ties between the two Societies. (i)

The wood machinists were in something of a dilemma with regard to amalgamation. At their 1963 conference the subject was discussed and it appeared that a number of unions were interested in absorbing or amalgamating. NFBTO, ASW, NUFTO, NUGM and T &GW unions all had members who were wood machinists and saw some logic in some more substantial link up. Though the discussion that followed were about the nature of the union with which to discuss amalgamation, the real problem for the wood machinists lay with the diversity of trades of which they formed a part. Members were working in Railway workshops, automobile factories and local dockyards and the two largest groups were engaged within the building trade and the furniture industry.

The delegates were split in their views as to whether a craft society or a general union was the more favourable group with which to amalgamate, and though the matter was not put to the vote, it was, however, referred back to the Executive to 'continue our exploratory talk and possibly by next year some positive proposals will be submitted before conference either for or against change'. (ii)

This difference of views was expressed at the following year's conference with speakers against industrial unionism. 'We have been fighting bosses for years - we don't want labour bosses' and trade societies as 'a bulwark against the encroachment these days of the great labouring unions'. (iii)

- (i) NUFTO Annual Report 1963
- (ii) ASWCM Conference Minutes 1963
- (iii) ASWCM Conference Minutes 1964

The General Secretary, Charlie Stewart, did not at this point make his own feelings known, but after the NUFTO Conference of 1965 the ASWCM set up a sub-committee to meet with NUFTO to discuss amalgamation under the Chairmanship of the General Secretary. (i)

The A.S.W. also called for talks on amalgamation, and these were arranged during the year. This tripartite approach and playing one union off against the other continued for a number of years even though all the apparent conditions for amalgamation were being met by both unions.

Many constructions can be put upon the delaying tactics which prevailed through the 1960's, with ASW and NUFTO the ardent suitors and ASWCM the reluctant bride, but what is substantial was that there was a groundswell of opinion within the unions that some form of amalgamation was essential and that either a joint or tripartite arrangement should and could be arrived at. This courtship culminated in a meeting of the General Secretaries of the three unions in May, 1969, but effectively these made no more substantial progress than any earlier discussions. (ii)

The wood machinists conference in 1970 saw the question again a matter of heated discussion with Jim Kooyman - District Organiser, the main spokesman for amalgamation with NUFTO. The General Secretary reported that a common rule book had been drawn up with NUFTO but as it contained a clause which allowed for the leader of the wood machinists to live in either Edinburgh or Manchester (the existing headquarters of the Wood machinists) it had been rejected on the General Secretary's

(i) ASWCM E.C. Minutes 29 Jan, 1966  
(ii) ASWCM E.C. Minutes May, June 1969

recommendation by the Executive Committee. As far as the ASW was concerned the worry was that the wood machinists had an asset value of £27 per member and the executive was very concerned about handing over all these assets to the ASW which only had an asset value of £6 per member. (i)

Charlie Stewart rallied the membership to inaction by reminding them 'you elected your E.C., you placed your trust in the E.C. to look after your affairs' and the matter of amalgamation was again remitted to the E.C. for consideration. This delaying action of 1970 was, however, the final act in a long drawn out drama and it had become patently obvious to the membership of the ASWCM that the existing system of separate unions with separate headquarters and separate district officers was both economically and administratively ineffective. The balance of opinion within the wood machinists society had moved to a preference to join with the well organised NUFTO rather than with one of the large generalist unions.

With the New Year of 1971 the two unions moved quickly towards amalgamation and in March, 1971 the joint executive committee of the two unions approved the common rule book and as the benefits paid by both unions were in line, the merger was agreed.

The mechanism for the merger was to use a technicality built in to the 1964 Trades Unions(Amalgamation Act) whereby FTAT (Furniture, Timber and Allied Trades Union) was formed and took over 'Engagements and obligations' of both unions. NUFTO members were not required to

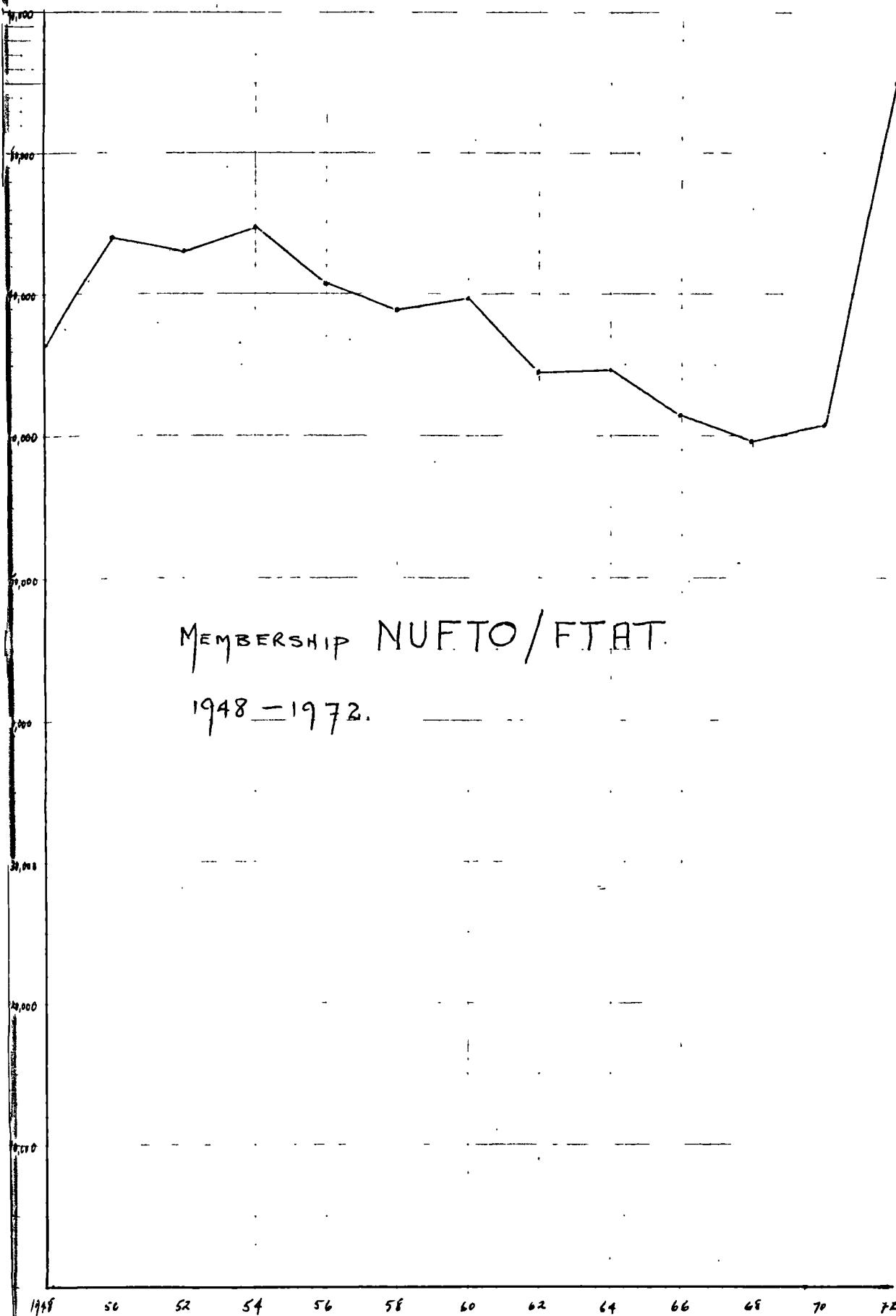
(i) ASWCM Annual Conference Minutes 1970

vote on the merger but endorsed the change by 55,000 to nil on a card vote at the 1971 Biennial Conference. On a Postal Vote the wood machinists voted 5,432 for and 1728 against amalgamation, and so on 14th September 1971, FTAT was born with 84,000 members and £2 million in assets.

NUFTO brought 61,788 members and £1,408,464 in assets to the new union and ASWCM 22,106 members and £650,627.

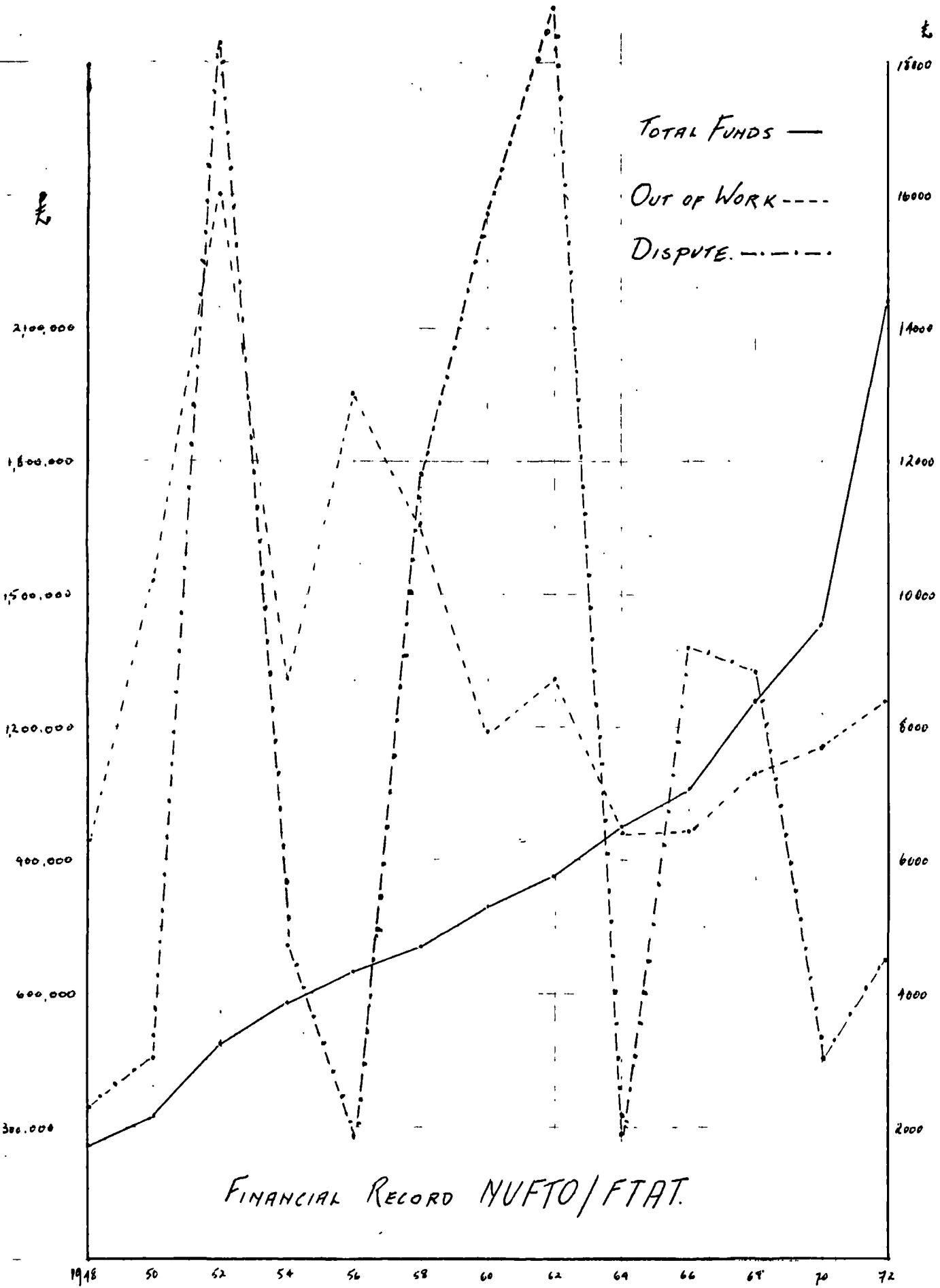
The father figure of the furniture unions, Alex Gossip, did not live to see his dream fulfilled; he died aged 89 on 14th May 1952, after a long illness, but at his death the union journal quoted from this poem by Joseph Burgess, a fitting tribute to the man who above all made FTAT possible:-

"They trimmed their lamps all through the murky night  
Guiding their fellow creatures to the light  
Then gratefully their fellow lit the flames  
Which glory shed upon their honoured names".



MEMBERSHIP NUFTO/FTAT.

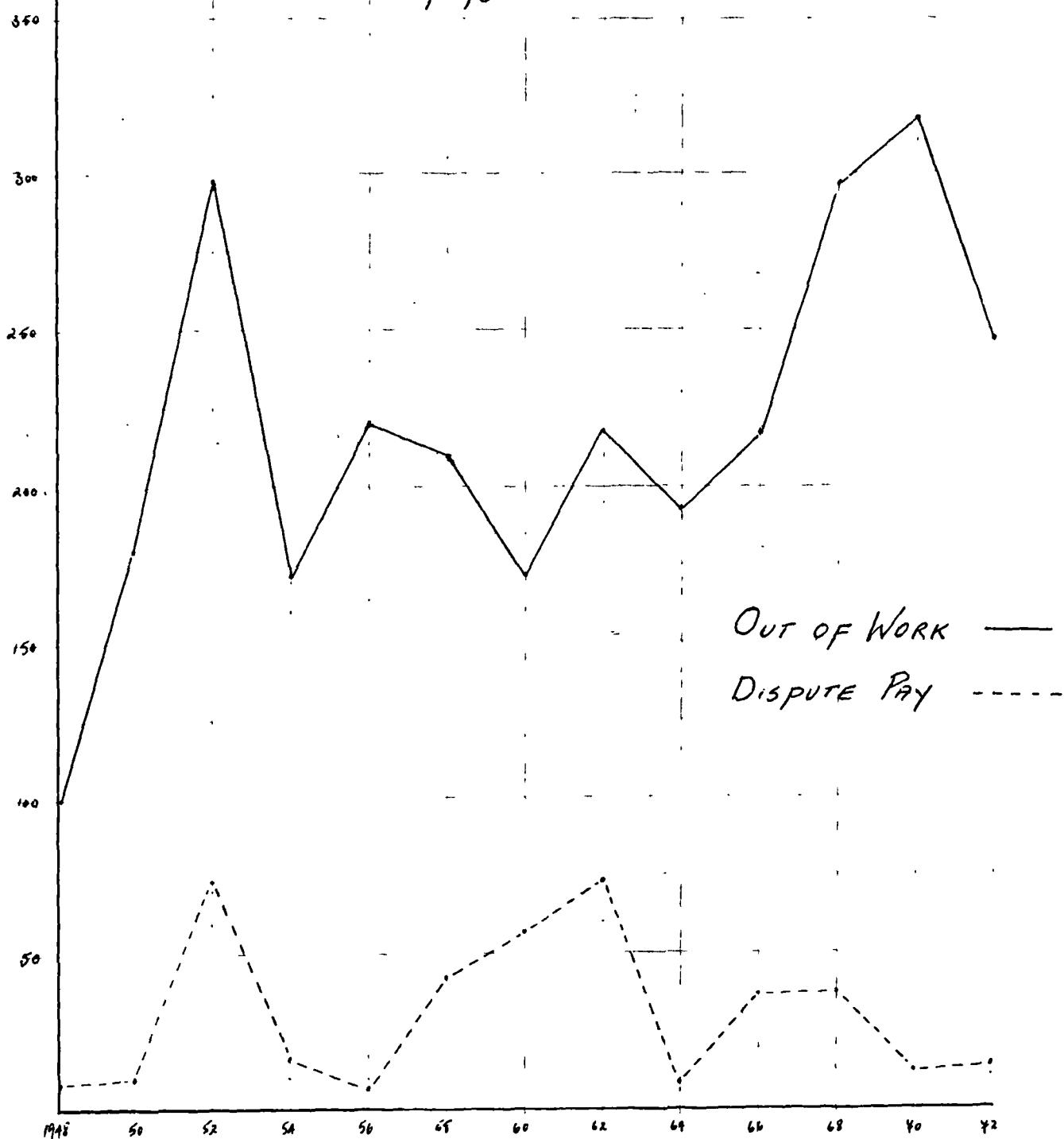
1948 - 1972.



NUFTO / FTAT 1948-1972

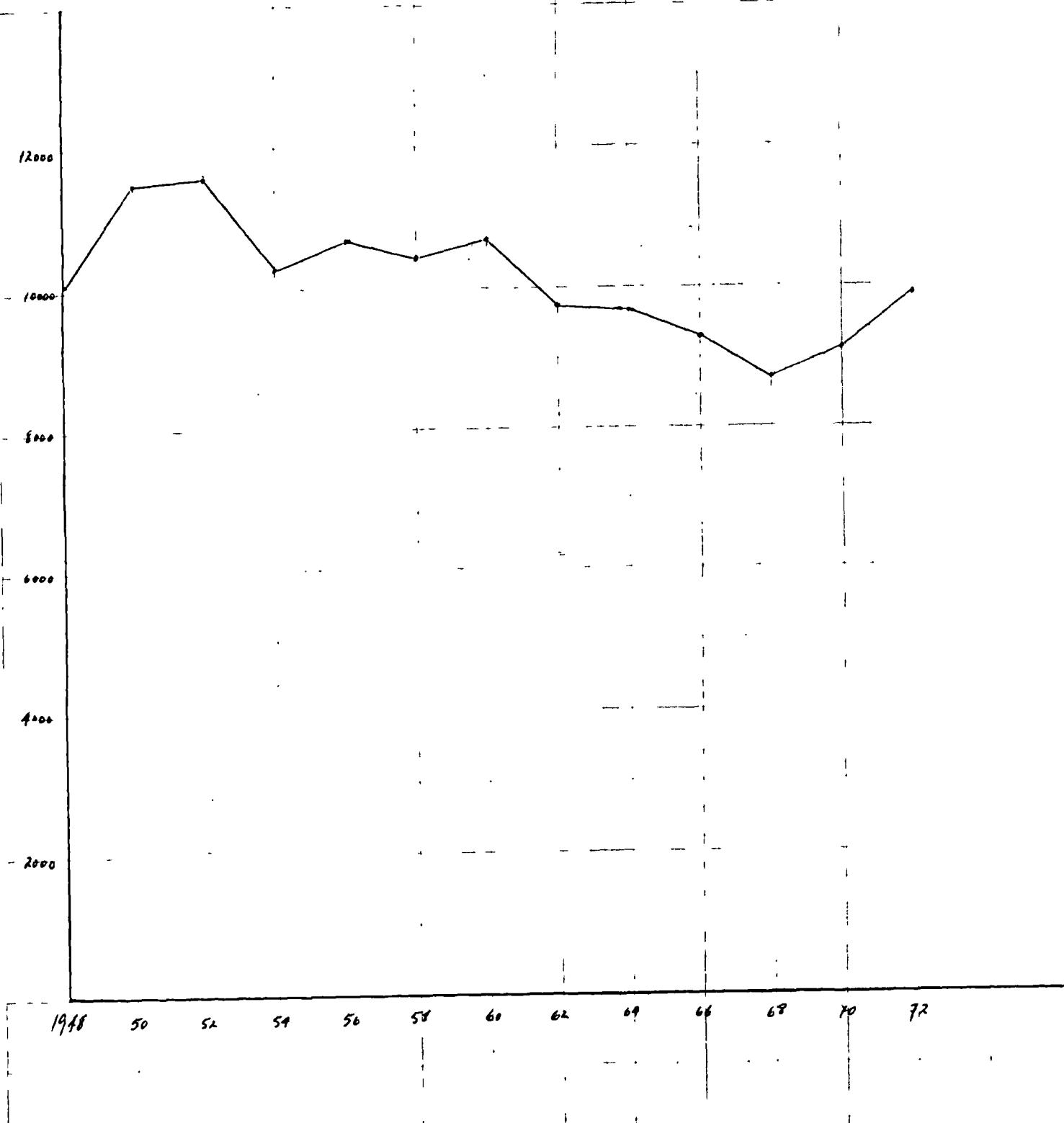
Out of Work AND Dispute PAY

PER MEMBER.



*NUFTO/FTAT 1948-1972*

*WOMEN MEMBERS.*



Year	Membership	Added	Deleted	Total Funds Arrears	Out of Work Support £	Dispute Support	Sick Fund	Funeral Fund	Emigration Fund
1866	800	-	-	156	-	58	-	-	-
1867	412	-	-	164	-	41	52	-	-
1868	159	-	-	206.13. 9	8.14. 0	16. 7. 4	8. 8. 0	2. 0. 0	-
1869	203	44	-	273.10. 6	49. 0. 8	26. 9.10	17. 4. 4	7. 0. 0	3. 0. 0
1870	242	39	-	330. 6. 0	82. 9. 2	32.10. 6	35. 8. 4	-	3. 0. 0
1871	265	23	-	479. 6. 2	26. 3. 6	7. 0. 6	35.16. 8	3. 0. 0	3. 0. 0
1872	729	464	159	959.15. 0	11.17. 2	18.19. 4	55. 1. 8	14. 0. 0	6. 0. 0
1873	1017	288	-	1415. 0. 0	11.19. 6	36. 5. 1	80. 1.8	27. 0. 0	3. 0. 0
1874	1722	747	283	2095. 0. 0	78.19.11	145.19. 7	144.10. 0	29. 0. 0	12. 0. 0
1875	1965	871	555	2183. 0. 0	172.17. 0	160. 5. 9	225.18. 8	54.10. 0	6. 0. 0
1876	1998	593	667	1372. 0. 0	455. 0. 0	1064. 0. 0	286. 3.10	60.10. 0	73.14. 6

Year	Out of Work/Worker	Dispute/Worker	Expelled Members	Branches
1866			1	
1867	1/-	2/-		1
1868	2/-			2
1869	4/10	2/ 7		2
1870	6/10	2/ 7		2
1871	1/11	6d.		2
1872	3d.	6d.		3
1873	2d.	8d.		8
1874	11d.	1/-	5	20
1875	1/- 8	1/-	5	28
1876	4/- 6	10/-	24	40

<u>Year</u>	<u>Out of Work/Worker</u>	<u>Dispute/Worker</u>	<u>Expelled Members</u>	<u>Branches</u>
1877	5/ 8	4/ 6	10	48
1878	9/11	4/-	22	44
1879	1. 3. 6	7/ 1	16	40
1880	16/ 9	2/ 5	8	37
1881	12/10	3/ 4	4	36
1882	11/ 3	1/11	10	37
1883	14/10	2/10	7	38
1884	1. 2.10	1/ 7	2	37
1885	1. 9. 6	2/ 3	6	37
1886	1.13. 0	1/ 4	3	33

Year	Membership	Added Arrears	Deleted Arrears	Total Funds	Out of Work Support £	Dispute Support	Sick Fund	Funeral Fund	Emigration Fund
1877	2030	839	663	1375	576	456	329	63	51
1878	1737	583	669	1274	945	378	357	86	32
1879	1412	450	631	693	1852	557	329	75	33
1880	1346	544	490	773	1160	168	234	43	27
1881	1543	773	437	1018	931	242	253	46	63
1882	1597	778	564	1519	888	152	292	76	72
1883	1463	550	511	1718	1135	222	344	62	88
1884	1278	384	463	1537	1566	108	330	100	48
1885	1246	348	308	1078	1866	145	432	80	58
1886	1052	267	389	876	1896	78	343	78	46

Year	Membership	Added	Deleted	Total Funds Arrears	Out of Work Support £	Dispute Support	Sick Fund	Funeral Fund	Emigration Fund
1887	1101	352	238	515	1384	125	328	41	36
1888	1462	575	226	879	1100	114	345	40	46
1889	2383	1427	371	1919	715	112	423	64	27
1890	4298	2772	657	1824	692	1871	570	77	50
1891	5312	2632	1298	1837	2018	1057	866	119	66
1892	5337	1962	1862	1870	2996	1573	1078	137	98
1893	4814	2303	2390	928	4315	2350	1312	200	104
1894	4149	1578	1387	2243	3505	843	1181	135	59
1895	3863	1549	1494	3508	2392	606	1197	222	72
1896	5431	2847	988	3451	1230	2506	966	162	62

<u>Year</u>	<u>Out of Work/Worker</u>	<u>Dispute/Worker</u>	<u>Expelled Members</u>	<u>Branches</u>
1887	1. 5. 8	2/ 3	8	34
1888	17/ 6	1/ 9	3	35
1889	7/ 6	1/ 2	10	37
1890	3/ 1	9/ 4	24	54
1891	7/ 7	4/ 4	59	66
1892	11/ 2	5/10	23	75
1893	17/11	9/ 9	26	84
1894	15/ 7	4/ 1	24	81
1895	11/11	3/ 3	23	76
1896	4/ 6	8/ 3	18	78

Year	Membership	Added	Deleted	Paid GFTU Arrears	Total Funds	Out of Work Support £	Dispute Support	Sick Fund	Funeral Fund	Emigration Fund
1897	5697	2243	1594	—	1817	1785	5574	1080	227	126
1898	4729	1416	2021	—	2347	1946	7130	1194	184	265
1899	5455	2224	1064	16.18. 0	4577	1976	2429	1129	223	122
1900	5270	1281	1056	427	4791	3562	1853	1532	164	143

<u>Year</u>	<u>Out of Work/Worker</u>	<u>Dispute/Worker</u>	<u>Expelled</u>	<u>Branches</u>
1897	6/ 5	1. 0. 0	15	77
1898	7/ 8	1. 8. 0	77	77
1899	7/ 9	9/ 4	61	79
1900	13/3	6/11	24	77

Year	Membership	Added	Deleted	Paid to GFTU	Total Funds	Out of Work Support £	Dispute Support	Sick Fund	Funderal Fund	Emigration Fund
1901	5251	1230	1086	855	6110	4731	1059	1497	260	182
1902	6248	1150	1143	536	7262	5377	539	1427	342	309
1903	6402	1297	906	558	8053	5592	955	1450	295	349
1904	5871	962	1218	564	5378	8979	1167	1595	291	346
1905	5910	1229	969	365	8169	6681	797	1422	374	220
1906	6400	1921	1217	351	9864	5572	565	1535	366	213
1907	7007	1995	1072	364	10719	6527	1619	1837	296	272
1908	6636	1005	1343	396	7506	11637	2262	2441	411	210
1909	6412	1336	1320	403	6991	10343	1116	2636	327	331
1910	6685	1573	1028	385	8282	6941	1094	2243	403	352
1911	10122	4591	854	343	10225	5441	4152	2382	408	416
1912	10234	3916	3161	926	9638	7732	16697	2991	528	365
1913	15707	7221	1388	1008	7883	5174	17248	3567	415	124
1914	13796	2911	4539	1101	8336	11998	14877	4203	539	47
1915	12096	1737	3207	1133	17387	6390	1036	3463	601	10

Year	Out of Work/Worker	Sick Pay Worker	Expelled Members	Deceased	Emigrated	Dispute/Worker	Women Members
1901	17/11	13/ 6	54	34	18	4/-	
1902	17/-	12/ 5	19	45	48	1/ 8	
1903	17/ 8	12/ 4½	17	38	53	3/-	
1904	1. 9. 3	13/ 9	15	38	119	3/ 9	
1905	1. 2. 8	12/ 5	29	41	61	2/ 8	
1906	18/ 1	12/-	13	49	87	1/10	
1907	19/ 5	12/ 6	27	34	148	4/10	
1908	1.14. 2	15/ 7	34	47	67	6/ 7	
1909	1.11. 8	16/11	25	35	96	3/ 4	
1910	1. 1. 2¼	15/ 1	26	51	138	3/ 4	
1911	12/11	13/ 8	25	51	166	9/10	
1912	15/ 2	15/-	262	90	203	1.12. 9	
1913	8/ 1	17/ 8	92	61	109	1. 6. 7	
1914	16/ 3	1. 1. 3	51	84	213	1. 0. 2	
1915	9/10	19/ 1	22	107	18	1/ 7	

Year	Membership	Added	Deleted	Paid to GFTU	Total Funds	Out of Work £	Dispute Support	Sick Fund	Funeral Fund	Emigration Fund
			Arrears							
1916	12534	1928	1253	817	20823	2814	4070	2612	759	1. 0. 0
1917	16123	4693	746	712	25522	1501	5624	1956	1108	-
1918	22442	8581	1850	851	29443	1207	6041	2151	1089	-
1919	30901	10661	1000	1291	50777	3848	60758	2022	956	12
1920	32987	8658	4424	2301	49715	8915	84420	2242	950	69
1921	25263	1940	8084	2745	29767	59357	18509	2530	1075	26
1922	22449	2775	4706	2359	26537	30014	15597	2715	1299	-
1923	21819	2668	2589	2043	29865	17377	11459	2909	1328	-
1924	22820	3658	2026	1934	32065	17553	22943	3313	1894	-
1925	23705	3228	2027	1963	43475	15621	16615	3486	1393	-
1926	19760	2129	2185	2048	26563	33680	21596	3655	1547	-
1927	19485	2425	2124	1822	34405	19777	2796	3831	1583	-
1928	19989	2792	1832	1714	41611	20312	3405	3870	1566	-
1929	21071	3214	1652	1742	42927	19607	7922	4274	2356	-
1930	20243	1741	2041	1827	26264	37506	6146	3880	2019	

<u>Year</u>	<u>Out of Work/Worker</u>	<u>Sick Pay/Worker</u>	<u>Expelled Members</u>	<u>Deceased</u>	<u>Emigrated</u>	<u>Hi spute Pay /Worker</u>	<u>Women Members</u>
916	4/ 6	15/ 2	10	138	9	6/ 7	159
917	2/ 1	11/ 8	23	194	-	7/ 1	1303
918	1/ 3	12/ 6	17	215	-	6/ 3	3000
)19	2/10	11/ 6	76	154	4	2. 5. 6	2739
920	5/ 6	12/10	156	182	17	2.12.10	2382
)21	2. 0. 9	14/ 4	159	176	30		
)22	1. 5. 1	16/ 6	112	187	-	12/ 8	1433
)23	15/ 8	18/ 1½	135	173	-	13/-	1335
)24	15/ 8	15/ 8	210	185	-	10/ 4	1283
)25	13/ 1	1. 1. 3	102	168	-	1. 0. 6	1432
)26	1 .10.11	1. 2. 1	67	167	-	13/11	965
)27	1. 0. 8	1. 3. 0	56	173	-	19/10	1296
)28	1. 0. 4	1. 2.10	47	2/11	-	2/11	814
)29	19/11	1. 4. 0	38	38	-	3/5	876
)30	1. 15.10	1. 0.11	92	221	-	7/ 8	1048
				189	-	6/ 1	899

Year	Membership	Added	Deleted	Paid to GFTU £	Total Funds	Out of Work Support £	Dispute Support	Sick Fund	Funeral Fund	Emigration Fund
				Arrears						
1931	17894	1242	2862	1795	13920	39093	7315	4056	1863	-
1932	15829	992	2636	1601	10577	17439	2635	3141	1860	
1933	15036	1323	1614	1060	10331	8134	1091	2883	1800	
1934	14902	1932	1673	1319	16304	5858	991	2250	1862	
1935	16280	3013	1273	1290	23038	7388	3117	2130	1697	
1936	17830	3587	1628	1370	26193	10635	7413	2146	1811	
1937	20391	5045	2097	1502	28953	12292	6548	3120	2276	
1938	21251	3724	2340	1698	27107	16274	7093	3071	1624	
1939	20631	3836	3817	1806	24681	18334	9832	3311	2021	
1940	23389	6741	3803	1762	28384	13737	129	3379	2180	
1941	26834	5467	2022	1732	39205	5681	770	2811	1982	
1942	31674	8756	3916	1418	54429	2727	65	2565	1789	
1943	36211	-	-	1327	92264	3160	20	3037	1892	
1944	36707	-	-	1488	113296	2915	9	2789	2025	
1945	34642	-	-	1493	134549	2485	169	2366	2183	
1946	44927	-	-	1564	179703	3301	443	2147	2349	
1947	61169	-	-	2115	249182	3451	459	2307	1736	

Year	Out of Work/Worker	Sick Pay/Worker	Expelled Members	Deceased	Emigrated	Dispute Pay/ Worker	Women Members	Forces	Political Fund
1931	2. 0.10	1. 2. 8	184	165	-	7/ 7	827		
1932	1. 0. 7	19/ 3	71	155	-	3/ 1	727		
1933	10/ 6	19/ 8	64	150	-	1/ 4	736		
1934	7/ 9	16/ 5	46	161	-	1/ 4	705		
1935	9/ 6	16/-	45	132	-	4/-	811		
1936	12/ 5	17/ 5	64	135	-	8/ 8	864		
1937	12/10	1. 5. 0	82	176	-	6/ 1	967		
1938	15/ 7	1. 4. 5	66	142	-	6/ 9	903		
1939	17/ 6	1. 6. 0	91	168	-	9/ 4	1071	500	
1940	11/ 9	1. 7. 7	-	180	-	1½	1312	2287	1420
1941	4/ 4	1.10. 9	-	183	-	7¾	2317	3358	1450
1942	4/ 7	1. 4. 0	-	-	-	3/ 5	No Fig.	No.Fig.	1530
1943	4/ 8	1. 6. 8	-	-	-	¼	5500	4300	1660
1944	4/ 2	1. 6. 7	-	158	-	1/16d.	9286	6770	1900
1945	3/ 4	1. 1.10	-	-	-	½	5465	5596	2080
1946	3/ 1	17/ 9	-	-	-	5	5100	2564	2570
1947	4/ 3	7/ 3	-	-	-	1¾	9582	1518	13725

Year	Membership	Added	Deleted	Paid to GFTU Arrears	Total Funds	Out of Work Support £	Dispute Support	Sick Fund	Funeral Fund
1948	66376	-	-	3767	272646	6356	2340	4279	3193
1949	59054	-	-	4148	306056	6290	6150	5064	3496
1950	74063	-	-	1697	335605	10248	3055	4520	3479
1951	74746	-	-	2340	377933	13118	2764	4679	4003
1952	73351	-	-	2356	488675	16088	18326	3842	3516
1953	72438	-	-	2330	527174	9061	2228	3711	4053
1954	74815	-	-	2307	570740	8726	4726	4842	4687
1955	73622	-	-	2373	607661	11747	6524	4755	4230
1956	70688	-	-	2346	651459	13002	1916	4539	4103
1957	70356	-	-	2276	663086	10605	19464	4893	3990
1958	68933	-	-	2226	708261	11040	11867	4381	4788
1959	69033	-	-	2222	715712	19770	14634	4355	4422

Year	Out of Work/Worker	Dispute/Worker	Sick Pay Worker	Women Members	Armed Forces	Political Fund
1948	8/- 4	8 <sup>3</sup> <sub>4</sub>	12/10	10099	1386	16251
1949	9/- 1	1/- 9	15/- 8	9769	1383	15497
1950	15/- 2	10 <sup>1</sup> <sub>4</sub>	16/- 1	11477	1703	19353
1951	19/- 1	9	14/- 2	12417	1868	19280
1952	1. 4.11	6/- 2	11/- 6	11538	2110	18818
1953	13/- 1	8	11/- 5	10613	2129	24802
1954	13/- 6	1/- 4	12/- 6	10170	2020	27005
1955	15/- 6	1/10	12/- 9	11177	1905	25990
1956	18/- 4	7 <sup>1</sup> <sub>2</sub>	12/-11	10655	1807	25665
1957	15/- 5	6/-	13/-10	11037	549	26367
1958	17/- 6	3/- 6	14/- 1	10405	1433	25901
1959	16/- 3	1/- 6	13/- 6	10469	1151	24008

Year	Membership	Paid to GFTU	Total Funds	Out of Work Support £	Dispute Support	Sick Fund	Funeral Fund
1960	6973	2204	788955	7980	15745	4911	4832
1961	67424	2253	820941	7656	18788	5555	5005
1962	64688	2212	879826	8774	18923	5541	5217
1963	63488	2127	923767	11233	9276	5516	5220
1964	64597	2084	978784	6694	1898	5190	4320
1965	63607	2094	1060598	3987	1524	5352	5624
1966	61517	2087	1071929	6424	9104	5776	5245
1967	60142	2049	1191539	9985	5304	5856	5512
1968	59723	1967	1269541	7305	8972	6490	5095
1969	58759	1933	1334865	9606	3670	5930	5376

Year	Out of Work/Worker	Dispute/Worker	Sick Pay/Worker	Women Members	Armed Forces	Political Fund
1960	14/ 3	4/ 8	15/ 6	10609	961	38792
1961	14/ 9	5/ 8	17/ 6	10370	571	37945
1962	18/ 2	6/ 1	18/ 6	9895	192	37308
1963	1. 4. 6	3/ 2	19/ 1	9606	104	36718
1964	16/ 1	7	18/ 9	9679	-	40699
1965	10/ 6	6	19/-	9532	-	43381
1966	18/ 1	3/-	1. 0. 3	9339	-	42642
1967	1. 9. 0	2/ 2	1. 1. 0	9138	-	40015
1968	1. 4. 8	3/-	1. 3. 6	8661	-	39857
1969	1. 9. 6	1/ 6	1. 2. 0	8599	-	39469

Year	Membership	Paid to GFTU	Total Funds	Out of Work Support £	Dispute Support	Sick Fund	Funeral
1970	60754	1912	1425137	7711	3040	5920	5918
1971	83894	1881	2073793	6060	3294	4353	7944
1972	85377	2725	2170351	8227	4232	17934	10040
1973	89144	2709	2182786	3283	20400	16656	9308
1974							

<u>Year</u>	<u>Out of Work/Worker</u>	<u>Dispute/Worker</u>	<u>Sick Pay/Worker</u>	<u>Women Members</u>	<u>Armed Forces</u>	<u>Political Fund</u>
1970	1. 6. 6	1/-	1. 2. 0	9067	-	39355
1971	1. 0. 7	1/ 2	19/ 8	8615	-	40755
1972	No Figures	10	No figures	9919	-	50100
1973	No Figures	4/ 5	No figures	No Figures	-	No Figures

ALBERT ARTHUR (ALF) PURCELL

Born 3rd November, 1872, in Haxton East London, the son of a French polisher, he was educated at a Keighley, Yorkshire, elementary school before starting work at age nine as a half timer in a woollen mill. The family returned to Haxton where in 1890 he was apprenticed as a French polisher and became active in the London French Polishers Union becoming President some years later. By 1898 he was elected General Secretary of the newly formed Amalgamated Society of French Polishers. On the amalgamation of the A.S.F.P. with NAFTA in 1910 he became Trade Organiser for the Union.

Alf Purcell had joined the S.D.F. and the I.L.P. in the 1890's and in 1893 he joined the Legal Eight Hours and International Labour League.

Based in Manchester he was elected in 1905 and 1906, 1917 to 1919 and in 1922 as President of the Manchester and Salford Trades and Labour Council. From 1907 to 1912 an I.L.P. member of the Salford Borough Council. In January, 1910 he contested Salford West as an I.L.P. candidate but came bottom of the poll.

A close associate of Tom Mann and the work of the Industrial Syndicalist League formed in 1910 and was Chairman of the Conference on Industrial Syndicalism held in Manchester that year, and in 1920 at the Communist Unity Conference of 31st July and 1st August proposed the resolution that a British Communist Party be established. However, he resigned from the party in 1922 following the resolution of the second congress of the Communist International.

Purcell visited Russia twice in 1920 and 1924 and was prominent in the Hands of Russia movement and later Chairman of the Anglo-Russian Parliamentary Committee.

Elected to Parliament in 1924 as Labour member for Coventry he was also Chairman of T.U. Congress in Hull that year. A member of the Parliamentary Committee of the T.U.C. in 1919 (after 1921 the General Council) until 1927 when he lost his union nominations as a delegate to

T.U.C. to Alf Tomkins and with it membership of General Council.

At the 1924 election Purcell lost his seat in Coventry but won the Forest of Dean some eight months later at a by-election. As a member of the General Council of T.U.C. in 1926 he was with Ernest Bevin in charge of the Strike Organising Committee.

In the General Election of 1929 he chose for personal reasons to leave the Forest of Dean constituency and fought Manchester Moss Side but failed to win the seat and finding no position within the furniture union took the post of Secretary of the Manchester and Salford Trades Council in which he continued until his death in 1935 aged 63.

#### SIR JAMES (JIM) O'GRADY 1866 - 1934

The son of Irish parents he was born in Bristol in 1866 and educated at St. Mary's Roman Catholic School until starting work at the age of ten in a mineral water factory. He found himself an apprenticeship at the age of fifteen to a cabinetmaker but when he finished his time and finding no work, went on the tramp. Returning after three years to Bristol he involved himself in local politics and was elected to the City Council as a Labour candidate in 1897.

In 1898 at the age of thirty-two he was President of the Trades Union Congress which met that year in Bristol, and is credited with the first Presidential address which advocated Socialism as an objective of the trades union movement.

Elected as Trade Organiser for the Alliance Cabinetmakers union in 1899 he moved to London and in 1904 was chosen as prospective Labour candidate for East Leeds. At the election of 1906 he won the seat in a straight fight against the sitting Unionist member. He held the seat again in the 1910 elections and in 1918 was returned unopposed and in 1922 and 1923 had substantial majorities over his Liberal opponents.

During the war years O'Grady took a pro-war stance describing himself as a Labour Imperialist and in 1918 was given the rank of Captain for a recruiting campaign he undertook in Ireland. In 1917 accompanied by Will Thorne and W.S. Sanders he travelled to Russia with the objective of

persuading the new Russian Government to continue the war with Germany more successfully. In 1909 O'Grady travelled to Copenhagen to negotiate with Litvinov on the exchange of British prisoners of war and civilians in Russia. Relinquishing his post as Trade Organiser in 1911, O'Grady remained Parliamentary Secretary for NAFTA until 1919 when he refused to submit to the annual re-election process for Parliamentary candidates introduced to the union rules that year. He also was President of G.F.T.U. from 1912 to 1918 and Secretary of the short-lived National Federation of General Workers from 1917.

It was strongly rumoured that if the Labour Government of 1924 had recognised Soviet Russia, then O'Grady would be appointed the first Ambassador but in October, 1924 he was created a K.C.M.G. and appointed as Governor of Tasmania and retained that post for six years. In May, 1931 he was appointed Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Falkland Islands but returned to England in 1933 due to ill health and died in December, 1934 aged sixty-eight.

#### FRED BRAMLEY 1875 - 1925

Born in Bradford in 1875 he served his apprenticeship as a cabinet maker and joined the Alliance Cabinetmakers union at an early age. On finishing his apprenticeship he travelled the country as a lecturer on the Clarion Vans. After several years he returned to London to work as a cabinetmaker for Burble and Sons and took up a number of union duties within his Branch No. 2 West End Cabinetmakers.

In 1911 he succeeded Jim O'Grady as National Organiser for the NAFTA and was responsible for the control of the workers side in the High Wycombe lock out, where he formed the anti-violence brigade to protect meetings and pickets against police attacks.

On the outbreak of the war in 1914 he issued with Alex Gossip the anti-war manifesto, expressing absolute opposition to ~~imperialism~~ and what they saw as an imperialist struggle.

In 1919 he was appointed assistant Secretary to the Parliamentary Committee of the T.U.C. and later General Secretary of the General

Council of the T.U.C. where he was responsible for developing the organisation and power of the General Council.

He died of a heart attack on 10th October, 1925 in Amsterdam whilst attending a Joint Conference of the International Federation of Trade Unions and the International Labour and Socialist Party at the early age of 51.

### EMIGRATION FUNDS

The Emigration Fund was called upon by members to a substantial extent during the period 1901 - 1914 after which its use virtually died out:-

<u>Year</u>	<u>Members Emigrating</u>	<u>Sums Paid</u> £
1901	18	182
1902	48	309
1903	53	349
1904	119	346
1905	61	220
1906	87	213
1907	148	272
1908	67	210
1909	96	331
1910	138	352
1911	166	416
1912	203	365
1913	109	124
1914	213	47

There is no direct relationship between moneys paid and members emigrating since Rule 27 (4) allowed a payment of 10/- per year of membership up to a total of £5 if the member was not more than eight weeks in arrears of contributions. It is clear that many contemplating emigration did allow contributions to lapse beyond this point (note figures for 1914).

N.B. After 1914 only sixty members are recorded as having emigrated and the Fund was abandoned after 1922.

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