

MILITANCY AND INTER-UNION RIVALRIES IN BRITISH SHIPPING, 1911-1929¹

The aim of this paper is to trace two processes, interconnected in a large measure, in the labour relations of the British shipping industry from 1911 to 1929. One is the gradual transformation of the policy of the Sailors' and Firemen's Union² under Havelock Wilson from aggressive militancy to one of accommodation to the shipowners' point of view. The other process to be considered is the rise and fall of four rival organisations: the Cooks' and Stewards' Union, the British Seafarers' Union, the Amalgamated Marine Workers' Union, and finally the seamen's section of the Transport and General Workers' Union.³

What follows is in six parts:

1. The Sailors' and Firemen's Union and the shipowners, 1887-1911.
2. The Sailors' and Firemen's Union and the shipowners, 1911-1919.

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² 1887-1894: National Amalgamated Sailors' and Firemen's Union.

1894-1926: National Sailors' and Firemen's Union.

1926 onwards: National Union of Seamen.

³ Cooks' and Stewards' Union (properly: National Union of Ships' Stewards, Cooks, Butchers and Bakers): 1909-1921, hostile to the Sailors' and Firemen's Union only from mid-1921.

British Seafarers' Union: 1911-1921, a breakaway from the Sailors' and Firemen's Union.

Amalgamated Marine Workers' Union: 1922-1927, the product of the merger of the Cooks' and Stewards' Union and the British Seafarers' Union.

Seamen's section of the T.G.W.U.: 1928-1929.

3. The British Seafarers' Union, the Cooks' and Stewards' Union, and their merger to form the Amalgamated Marine Workers' Union.
4. Havelock Wilson's counter-attack and eventual victory.
5. Dissension, isolation, and the struggle with the T.G.W.U.
6. Summing-up.

I. THE SAILORS' AND FIREMEN'S UNION AND THE SHIPOWNERS 1887-1911

To see the eighteen years from the summer of 1911 to that of 1929 in perspective, we must first take a look at what went before.

Though there had been a national federation of local seamen's unions for a time in the 1850's, it was a loose-knit affair and did not in any case last beyond 1859 or 1860;¹ it was not until 1887 that a national seamen's union was formed. At first growth was slow, but in 1888 the new National Amalgamated Sailors' and Firemen's Union, as it was called, began to set up branches outside Sunderland, the port of its origin. By the end of 1889 it claimed a membership of 65,000² and branches in every port in the U.K. This rapid increase in strength was accompanied by a change to more aggressive tactics. The first serious strikes took place in 1889, and in that same year the union began to demand the closed shop.³ Then Havelock Wilson, founder and leader of the union, became in addition "General Manager" of an officers' union, and forbade N.A.S.F.U. members to sail in ships whose officers refused to become members of that officers' union; in some cases owners of ships under contract to charterers even paid officers' union fees for them rather than incur damages for breach of contract. In return for the help of the N.A.S.F.U., members of the officers' union signed on, as far as possible, only N.A.S.F.U. members. Meanwhile the dockers' union at various ports was also helping the N.A.S.F.U. to enforce the closed shop. By the summer of 1890 the shipowners had had more than enough, and determined to unite to counter the N.A.S.F.U., and in particular to fight to ensure "freedom of contract" between employer and employee – in other words to prevent the union from holding a monopoly of the labour supply.

¹ See Royal Commission on Labour, Fifth and Final Report, Part. II. Secretary's report [...] and Summaries of Evidence (1894), p. 173; and S. and B. Webb: *History of Trade Unionism* (Longmans, 1920), pp. 405-6.

² Membership on which the union affiliated to the T.U.C.

³ Throughout this paper the term "closed shop" is used to denote the one-union shop, under which membership of a single specified union is a condition of employment.

In September 1890 therefore the shipowners formed an organisation of their own, the Shipping Federation.

The Federation immediately introduced a "ticket" giving holders preference in obtaining employment,¹ in return for payment of a shilling and the pledge to sail on any ship on which they had signed articles, "notwithstanding that other members of the crew may, or may not, be members of any Seamen's Union". Strikes against the ticket followed, but by February 1891 the Federation felt strong enough to make that pledge a condition of employment. The parchment ticket giving preference² was retained, but its issue was henceforward confined to "the better class of seamen"; at the same time a paper ticket was introduced, which cost nothing and gave no preference but still contained the pledge to sail regardless of whether other crew members belonged to a union or not. For those who did not take out a parchment ticket the paper ticket was imposed as a condition of employment; the power of the Federation at this time was such that strikes proved fruitless and port after port accepted the ticket. By this device the Federation not merely prevented the union from holding a monopoly of the labour supply but also secured that monopoly for itself. Moreover, members of the N.A.S.F.U. were apparently disfavoured for jobs, though this was not an overt part of the scheme.³

This new system, then, was introduced early in 1891. By then trade conditions had changed. For the first three years of the union's existence the movement of the trade cycle had been upward, and the union had been borne on the crest of a wave. But now the tide had turned. It was at a time of increasing unemployment that the Federation introduced the compulsory Federation ticket and developed what was to be the other major weapon in its armoury – a large, flexible and efficient strike-breaking apparatus. It brought the recruitment and deployment of "free labour" (organised strikebreakers) to a fine art, the most notable feature of the system being the "depot ships" used to accommodate strikebreakers, who were guaranteed food and lodging in return for their availability as required.⁴ At the same time shipowners were using their considerable financial resources against

¹ Employment, that is to say, on Federation ships. In 1891 ships in membership amounted to seven million tons, or some seven-eighths of total U.K. tonnage.

² From 1892 to 1906 the Federation operated a Benefit Fund, and the parchment ticket also gave membership of that.

³ This paragraph and the preceding one are based primarily on Royal Commission of Labour: *op. cit.*, pp. 172-5. A slightly different version is given in the official history of the Federation: L. H. Powell, *The Shipping Federation. A History of the First Sixty Years 1890-1950* (Shipping Federation, 1950), pp. 2-7.

⁴ A depot ship was used as late as 1925.

Wilson and his union in the law courts,¹ and to support rival unions,² none of them large, but all serving to promote division and confusion. All these external pressures bore particularly hard on the Sailors' and Firemen's Union, already suffering from internal weaknesses.

Some of these internal weaknesses were shared by other representatives of the "New Unionism". Excessive local autonomy and lavish branch expenditure on such things as union banners and members' funerals were common failings at this time.³ Many of these "New Unions", recruiting from the ranks of the less skilled, and having little or no union tradition to draw upon, made serious mistakes as a result of this lack of experience; the Sailors' and Firemen's Union was no exception. But in the case of that body some of these problems were rendered particularly acute by the nature of the industry. Five factors may be mentioned in this connection. There was, first and foremost, the roving inherent in the work – for any seamen's union the potential membership is scattered across the globe, and continually on the move. Secondly, the long and unnatural periods of confinement at sea – voyages were long drawn out affairs in those days – inclined this potential membership to overspend when on shore. Thirdly, the rough discipline of the times and the enforced dependence often conditioned men to a state of mind far from conducive to responsible trade unionism.⁴ Fourthly, the industry tended to attract those who, for one reason or another, did not fit into shore life. Fifthly, a large proportion of the labour force employed was foreign, and often possessed of a grasp of English that was no more than rudimentary. These features of the industry made it especially difficult to recruit members and collect union dues, to find suitable officials in sufficient number,⁵ and to exercise proper democratic control over those that

¹ As Wilson admitted in his autobiography (p. 236), he "had almost a mania for law"; the shipowners were only too willing to make the most of this expensive taste. (The first volume of his autobiography came out in 1925: Joseph Havelock Wilson, *My Stormy Voyage through Life*, Co-operative Printing Society. The second volume never appeared, though it was written; according to Mr. Borlase, the manuscript was taken to America by V. Brodzky of the "Herald", and has vanished.)

² A rare admission of such support was given by Cuthbert Laws, Manager of the Shipping Federation, in February 1892: see Royal Commission of Labour, *Minutes of Evidence*, vol. II (1892), p. 263. Much of the evidence to the Commission on this matter was conflicting, but see J. Saville, *Trade Unions and Free Labour*, in: A. Briggs and Saville, eds.: *Essays in Labour History* (Macmillan, 1960), p. 335.

³ One example is the National U.P., 1950, pp. 12-14.

⁴ On the general problem of "under-socialisation" among seamen, see Robert Strauss, *Medical Care for Seamen* (Yale U.P., 1950), pp. 12-14.

⁵ All branch officials must, in a seamen's union, be full-time.

were found. In addition to all this, the leadership of Havelock Wilson meant, alongside his undoubted gifts,¹ financial and administrative mismanagement; thus the Sailors' and Firemen's Union suffered from grave weakness at the top as well as in the branches.

To these internal failings then were added the new pressures of adverse economic conditions and the shipowners' vigorous combined attack. The union was soon losing ground, and membership declined drastically – from 78,000 in 1891 to 5,000 in 1894.² By the latter year the union was on its last legs; furthermore, its debts were being bought up, the idea behind this expensive operation being that it would then be sued and compulsorily closed down. So the union leadership decided to forestall such action by going into voluntary liquidation. One summer's morning in 1894 the National Amalgamated Sailors' and Firemen's Union was wound up; its leaders then adjourned for lunch and a drink, re-entering the building in the afternoon to start up a new union with a slightly different name – the National Sailors' and Firemen's Union. The title of Havelock Wilson's office was changed from Secretary to President, but he remained in control. The fundamental difference between the new union and the old one lay in the constitution; in particular, the new version provided for complete centralisation of the union's funds. Under the constitution with which the N.A.S.F.U. (1887-1894) had been saddled, all entrance fees and a third of weekly contributions remained in the hands of the branch, which might thus accumulate as much as £3,000 to do as it liked with. Apart from extravagant expenditure on banners and funerals, branches frequently undertook ill-considered strike action. One way and another money had been frittered away, and financial difficulties had brought defections and disillusionment. Branch autonomy might have been a fine idea, but in practice it had cost the union dear, and Havelock Wilson did not forget the lesson so hardly learnt. Centralisation of finance and power has been one of the guiding principles of the union ever since; so much so indeed as to be itself an abiding source of tension within the union.³

After some difficult months the reborn Sailors' and Firemen's Union began to make appreciable progress. In 1896 membership (as affiliated

¹ Three of the most notable were his oratorical power; his resourcefulness in industrial warfare; and, in some matters, his farsightedness.

² Membership as affiliated to the T.U.C.

³ Though the seamen's union is an extreme example, the problem of overcentralisation and resultant dissatisfaction is of course a general one; see for example Shirley W. Lerner, *Breakaway Unions and the Small Trade Union* (Allen and Unwin, 1961), esp. pp. 188-91.

to the T.U.C.) reached 15,000, but then it sank back again. Indeed in the whole period from 1894 to mid-1911 the union was only a shadow of its former self, though still a keenly militant body. There were a number of strikes in the course of these years, but the chief gains made by the union were on the political front and concentrated in 1906. The General Election in January of that year resulted in a massive Liberal victory; one consequence was the extension of industrial accident insurance to seamen. Another was some amendments to the Merchant Shipping Acts; the antiquated penal sanctions for strike action remained,¹ but there were two important innovations – a statutory scale of provisions, and an obligation on shipowners to pay the repatriation of seamen discharged abroad through sickness or accident.

But 1906 also saw the raising of the loadline, thus increasing the carrying capacity of the British merchant fleet at the cost of increased risk to life. The following year came a still more forcible reminder of the shipowners' strength, with the convening by the Shipping Federation of a closed conference of that body and its continental counterparts; as a result 1907 and 1908 witnessed the massive importation of strikebreakers from England to smash strikes of seamen and dockers in Germany and Sweden.² In 1909 the new international grouping of shipowners was formalised in the creation of an International Shipping Federation;³ there could be no doubt as to its aims. Against all this the International Transportworkers' Federation proved largely ineffective.

When Wilson pressed for international strike action in the latter part of 1910 and early 1911, the I.T.F. counselled caution and patience. In March 1911 Wilson, who had been privately planning with his continental colleagues for some months, appears to have decided to go ahead without the I.T.F. But as the weeks went by the number of seamen's leaders on the continent who were prepared to go into an international strike under Wilson's leadership dwindled, and in the end only Belgium and Holland were left.⁴

Meanwhile a similar process was taking place in England. In the autumn of 1910 a National Transport Workers' Federation was set up,

¹ They are still in force at the time of writing.

² I.T.F., Proceedings of the VI. International Convention [...] 1908. Report of the Central Council for 1906, 1907, 1908 (Jochade, Hamburg, 1909), pp. 9 and 131-2.

³ See Powell, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-111.

⁴ Report of the Central Council to the I.T.F. Congress of 1913 (Jochade, Berlin, 1913), pp. 42-5; Times, June 14 and 15, 1911.

and in the months that followed the leaders of the new organisation and its constituent unions toured the ports, popularising the N.T.W.F. and the idea of transport workers' solidarity. The growing belief in the power of solidarity was further stimulated by the campaign, that same winter of 1910-11, of the new Industrial Syndicalist Education League. But when it came actually to planning and carrying out, under Wilson's leadership, a major strike, Wilson and his colleagues in the N.T.W.F. did not see eye to eye. The strike was due to begin on June 14, and less than a week before the scheduled start the N.T.W.F. finally decided not to take part.¹ Robert Williams said later of the Sailors' and Firemen's Union and the 1911 strike, "It certainly appeared to those who knew that this Union's fortunes were at a very low ebb that this proposed international strike was a gambler's last chance."²

Like Wilson's fellow union leaders in the I.T.F. and the N.T.W.F., his bitter opponents in the Shipping Federation were certain that the strike would be a failure. To Wilson's final appeal the Shipping Federation disdained to reply – it had treated his previous submissions with a like contempt – but rejected the seamen's demands point by point in an interview which the Federation's General Manager gave to the Liverpool *Journal of Commerce*, assuring the paper and its readers that "a general cessation was out of the question."³ Indeed, he was sure that there were "only 200 sailors and firemen who would respond to the strike."⁴

But in spite of the complete confidence of the Shipping Federation and the grave doubts of the I.T.F. and the N.T.W.F., Wilson went ahead with his plans for a seamen's strike.⁵ In the event his gamble paid off handsomely.

¹ See Times, June 10, 1911. The N.T.W.F. withheld its support until the strike had been going on for a fortnight, and even then issued only a threat of action. It did not actually join in until a few days later again, though locally thousands of members of affiliated unions had already come out. In the case of the seamen the 1911 strike was a national strike called by the union headquarters; with other sections of transport workers it was originally a case of independent local action, with the strike spreading from port to port "like a bush fire" as the Times put it (July 11). But though the N.T.W.F. was slow in joining in, the fact of its existence and propaganda previously done on its behalf did much to create the solidarity which played so large a part in determining the outcome of the strike.

² Robert Williams' report in I.T.F., Reports of the Organisations (Jochade, Berlin, 1913), p. 3.

³ Father Hopkins' report in the same, p. 22, quoting *Journal of Commerce*, May 11, 1911.

⁴ Quoted in Labour Research Department, Shipping. Studies in Labour and Capital No. VI (Labour Publishing Co., 1923), p. 51.

⁵ With him in this were the Belgian and Dutch unions, and at home the Cooks' and Stewards' Union, then only two years old and still small and weak.

2. THE SAILORS' AND FIREMEN'S UNION AND THE SHIPOWNERS, 1911-1919

The very day the seamen's strike was officially declared, June 14, 1911, saw the conceding of the demands of those sailors and firemen already on strike at Southampton (where a number serving on the *Olympic* had jumped the gun by coming out five days early). This proved to be only the first of a whole series of concessions, as owners in port after port made their terms with the striking seamen. Each concession made served to encourage the strikers and to weaken the resistance of the employers, and the whole affair gathered momentum when dockers began coming out in sympathy. The kind of thing that happened is well illustrated by the example of Liverpool; there the dock labourers who had come out in support of the seamen, refused to go back unless their own union was recognised, whereupon the seamen – though their own dispute had been settled to their satisfaction – came out again in sympathy with the dock labourers.¹ Before the strike, or rather wave of strikes, of June-August 1911 was over, 120,000 transport workers had been out at one stage or another.² Though no breakdown of that figure is available, it consists primarily of three sections: seamen (sailors and firemen, cooks and stewards), dock workers, and carters; the seamen may perhaps have accounted for a quarter of the total.

The Shipping Federation, which had been breaking strikes for over twenty years, suddenly found that it could not cope when faced with solidarity of that order. It was quite impossible to find sufficient strikebreakers, and the Federation was hampered in using those that it had by the Government's newfound distaste for depot ships.³ In any case most owners were anxious to get the ships moving again to take advantage of the sellers' market in shipping space, and the Federation's lockout indemnity to enable owners to lay up rather than give way seems to have come too late to have much effect.

This 1911 seamen's strike had at least two results of long-term

¹ Times, June 29, 1911.

² Ministry of Labour Gazette, July 1925, p. 231. (The figure of 120,000 does not include the railway strike which, though it began before the other wave had finished, was a separate affair.)

³ Powell's history of the Federation lays great stress (op. cit., p. 22) on "the entire helplessness of the authorities", and states: "Although the Federation was in a position to obtain the services of large bodies of men to replace strikers, the necessary protection for them could not be obtained." The availability of these "large bodies of men", for which Powell's evidence appears to be Federation statements made during the strike, may be doubted.

significance: the Shipping Federation began to take a direct interest in wages, and the union achieved a measure of "recognition".

As company after company bought peace with a wage rise (and other concessions too) the reliance on individual settlements did not seem altogether satisfactory to some shipowners, and the contrast between militant solidarity among the workers and the broken ranks on the employers' side gave much food for thought. So on June 28 nearly 100 shipowners from all ports of the U.K. met in London and decided, amongst other things, on local standardisation of wage rates. Over the next few days the local shipowners' associations proceeded to fix the rates they thought appropriate for their particular locality, and these were then collected and published by the Shipping Federation, doubtless not without some informal coordination behind the scenes. Be that as it may, it is a fact that the Federation, formed in 1890 to fight in the matter of labour supply, was now, in 1911, beginning to take a direct interest in the price of labour – though it was not till 1913 that the first national wage rise was given, and not till four years after that national standardisation of rates was achieved. This introduction of local standardisation in 1911 was far from being a concession. Its main purpose was to enable shipowners, at least in the local wage market, to present a united front. And local standardisation had another advantage from the owners' point of view: it enabled the Federation to fix lockout indemnity rates, since these were calculated to help owners who could not find crews at the local wage rate and might choose to lay up if an inducement were provided.

The other result of lasting importance concerns "recognition". This was one of the union's principal demands, and before the end of June several companies had conceded recognition though the great majority were still resolutely opposed to it. In July however far-reaching developments began. Early in the month the North of England Steamship Owners' Association, which had its headquarters on the Tyne,¹ was asked by the local branch of the Sailors' and Firemen's Union to receive a deputation. It refused, on the grounds that the union was not a registered one. Thereupon Wilson travelled north, and on the 15th made a speech at Newcastle in which he stated that he would get the union registered, but as that would take some weeks he invited the Association to "appoint any three North-Country shipowners they liked" to visit the London headquarters of the union, "where he would place at their disposal, all the books and documents

¹ The North of England Steamship Owners' Association covered an area less wide than its name implies; the Liverpool owners, for instance, had their own association.

relating to the membership and the finance, so that they could satisfy themselves as to whether the union was a *bona fide* organization or not.”¹ This offer, probably unique in the history of independent trade unionism and startling at the height of a strike the union was winning, struck a responsive chord. The Tyne and Blyth District of the Federation met and passed a resolution requesting the Association to appoint three of its members to make the suggested examination, and if the report was satisfactory to recognise the union provisionally.

The action of the Tyne District naturally caused a great stir in the Federation, and the national executive council was summoned to a special meeting on July 21 to consider it. After a long and acrimonious discussion a resolution endorsing the Tyne District's action was carried 33 to 11.² The three-man commission duly visited the union headquarters to conduct its inspection of the books, and reported back favourably, to the effect that the nucleus of a *bona fide* trade union existed, and recommending recognition, provisional until the union was registered. This report, accepted by the Tyne District, came before the executive council of the Federation on November 17; once again there was heated argument but in the end, once again, the council concurred, and passed a resolution “That the recognition of the Seamen's Union should be based on freedom of contract and the employment of union and/or non-union seamen and firemen, free from interference of one with the other.”³ Recognition in these terms was no more than a *modus vivendi*; there was still no national negotiating machinery and no closed shop, and “no form of friendship or co-operation was intended by either side.”⁴ Still, it represented considerable progress. Hitherto the Federation had insisted on the possession of the Federation ticket and denied union men employment where possible. Now, while union membership was not yet obligatory, it was at least explicitly tolerated; and nowhere was the Federation ticket to remain compulsory. But in cold fact the struggle to secure a monopoly of the labour supply continued, each side seeking to make its own ticket supreme; and there were as a result recurrent stoppages, including one major strike, in the three years that were to elapse before the outbreak of war.

A portent of future harmony was the presence of several leading shipowners at the union's annual dinner after the 1911 strike;⁵ mutual

¹ Times of July 22, 1911.

² Powell, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

³ *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

wining and dining gradually became established practice,¹ but for the next few years the friendliness on the owners' side was confined to individuals – the Federation remained implacable in its hostility. The first real trial of strength after the 1911 strike came the following summer. Trouble was brewing in London on the closed shop issue, particularly in the lighterage trade, and on May 23 the National Transport Workers' Federation called out all the transport sections of its member unions in the London area, in support of the lightermen and the closed shop principle. Although the Sailors' and Firemen's Union, not being represented on the executive council of the N.T.W.F., was apparently not consulted before the decision was made, it stood by it and brought its London members out.² When the extension of the strike to other ports was mooted however the union strongly opposed the idea, and helped secure its postponement;³ and when a national strike was finally declared, on June 10, the union issued a manifesto stating that none of its members was authorised to comply with the N.T.W.F. decision until the union's rule requiring a ballot of members in U.K. ports had been carried into effect.⁴ The union was, it appears, short of funds.⁵ Nor was there any enthusiasm among the other unions affiliated to the N.T.W.F., and the national stoppage, very partial in its incidence, was called off within a week of its commencement. The strike in London dragged on into August;⁶ the final factor making the N.T.W.F. strike committee call it off was the action of the Sailors' and Firemen's Union: Wilson, with the support of his colleague, Father Hopkins,⁷ persuaded the executive council of the union to send the strike committee "an emphatic intimation that the strike must be brought to an end. Over 3,800 members of the union were involved in the strike, and the executive let it be understood that, unless their advice was complied with, these men would be ordered

¹ See for example Martin Eden, *Saviours of the Empire*: J. Havelock Wilson, C.B.E., and "Captain" Tupper (Reformers' Bookstall, Glasgow, 1918), p. 5; *Times* of September 27, 1916, p. 5; Sir Walter Runciman's foreword to Wilson, *op. cit.*

² *Times* of May 24 and 31, 1912.

³ *Times* of May 31–June 3, 1912.

⁴ *Times* of June 11, 1912.

⁵ *Times* of June 1 and 13, 1912.

⁶ Though the order to return to work was given by the strike committee on July 27.

⁷ In 1911 Wilson had secured for his union the services of several colourful characters, among them "Captain" Edward Tupper, "V.C.," and Father Charles Hopkins, O.S.P. Father Hopkins – cathedral organist in Rangoon, chaplain there and in Arakan and Calcutta, founder and Superior-General of the Anglican Order of St. Paul – helped organise the seamen's strike of 1911, and became a trustee of the union and a member of its executive council.

back to work.”¹ By this time the situation of the strikers and the strike funds was getting desperate,² and the threatened return to work of the sailors and firemen was the final blow; the strike committee decided to call the whole thing off.

As far as the national strike was concerned, the opposition of the Sailors’ and Firemen’s Union was essentially one of realism: the funds would not stand it. Wilson’s action in getting his executive to threaten to withdraw from the London strike was, however, in part a result of some personal meetings he had had with employers, as well as members of the Government,³ and is thus in part attributable to growing confidence between him and at least some people on the other side of industry. But the hostility of the Shipping Federation continued unabated; the 1912 strike showed clearly that the Federation had recovered from the shock of its failure the previous summer, and was apparently as determined as ever to get the better of Wilson and his union.

Though, looking back, we see the London strike of 1912 as the union’s last official strike⁴ (apart from holdups to odd ships), it did not seem so at the time. The position when war broke out was that, in the three years since the end of the 1911 strike, relations between the Federation and the union “had, if anything, been getting worse”,⁵ and both organisations were building up fighting funds in preparation for a showdown.

Then came the war, and things changed. It would be misleading to suggest that all the old bitterness dissolved overnight, or that the ground had not been prepared – the Federation’s antiquated approach to industrial relations was not shared by a number of influential owners, and in several ports there were joint boards providing negotiating and conciliation machinery.⁶ But the war did bring a new element into

¹ Times of July 29, 1912.

² Tom Mann: *Tom Mann’s Memoirs* (Labour Publishing Co., 1923), p. 163.

³ Times of July 29, 1912.

⁴ Many misleading statements are made in this connection. The last official strike which the N.S.F.U./N.U.S. called nationally was 1911; the last it called anywhere, apart from holdups of odd ships, was 1912. But *other* unions have called official strikes of seagoing personnel – navigating officers, engineers, radio operators, cooks and stewards, seamen and firemen – and the last of these was not till 1929. There have been important unofficial strikes since then too, notably in 1933, 1955 and 1960.

⁵ Charles P. Hopkins, “National Service” of British Seamen, 1914-1919 (Routledge, 1920), p. 5.

⁶ Hopkins (op. cit., p. 5), writing after the war, recollected only two, but there were others also; see N.S.F.U., *Official Wages and Overtime Lists. Agreements* (June 1913). That such machinery existed, in fact as well as on paper, is confirmed by Mr. Borlase, the historian of the union.

the relationship between the two sides; their own battles within the industry took on a different complexion when the country itself was at war. Britain's entry into the struggle had some immediate effects. One was that the (seagoing) engineers' union, which had recently embarked on a strike, called it off. Another was that the executive of the Sailors' and Firemen's Union met and decided to cooperate fully in the war effort, shelving for the time being all campaigning on the seamen's grievances;¹ that was a momentous decision.

As the war progressed the increased recruitment of foreign seamen (partly necessitated by the wartime shortage of British seamen),² and the enormous (if, in retrospect, short-lived) profits of the shipowners, were a considerable irritant; but the war situation restrained the union from drastic action. An additional factor lessening the discontent among the rank-and-file was of course the appreciable rise in wages which took place during the war; at its end the money wages of seamen and firemen were from 150 to 190 per cent higher than at the beginning.³ But perhaps the most potent factor influencing both leaders and rank-and-file was the German conduct of the war at sea, and above all the sinking of the *Lusitania*. This unarmed passenger liner was torpedoed on May 7, 1915, with the loss of 1,198 lives. A great wave of revulsion swept the country; for Wilson the event left a particularly unpleasant taste, as he witnessed the apparently jubilant reaction of interned German seamen.⁴ He developed a particularly intense hatred of the Germans; and when the foreign enemy was detested as Germany was by Havelock Wilson, the domestic "enemy" – the Shipping Federation – was bound to appear in a more favourable light than formerly.

Conversely, Wilson, seen from the point of view of the Shipping Federation, began to seem a less unattractive figure. He had thrown himself into the war against Germany with all the fierce energy and virulent oratory that had previously been directed against the Federation. Moreover, in the course of the war his long-standing opposition to the Labour Party⁵ developed into a bitter contempt,

¹ Hopkins, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

² How far it really was necessary is arguable. See on the one hand Hopkins, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22, and on the other C. Ernest Fayle, *The War and the Shipping Industry* (O.U.P., 1927), pp. 97-8 and 260-1.

³ Hopkins, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18, and Edward Tupper, *Seamen's Torch. The Life Story of Captain Edward Tupper* (Hutchinson, 1938), pp. 111-4.

⁵ In 1903, for example, he was busy organising opposition to the Labour Representation Committee throughout the North-East (F. Bealey and H. Pelling, *Labour and Politics, 1900-1906*, Macmillan, 1958, p. 152).

as was demonstrated in the summer of 1917 in the matter of the proposed international socialist peace conference to be held in Stockholm.¹ All this made him appear in shipowners' eyes a more responsible leader, and one more in tune with their fundamental outlook, than they had realised.

In addition to this, the exigencies of the war themselves brought the Federation and the union into closer contact; on the question of overtime in port they had even met in conference together.² Clearly, in spite of the past, cooperation was not impossible.

But among the seamen meanwhile there was growing unrest. In March 1916 those parts of the U.S.A.'s La Follette Act which removed the penalty of imprisonment for foreign seamen deserting in U.S. ports came into force. When America entered the war the following April the objection on patriotic grounds to deserting over there was greatly weakened; since the United States was with us in the war why not serve on her ships instead? Wages on American vessels were some 80 per cent higher than those on British ships, and it is not surprising that numbers of British seamen did desert in American ports in the spring and summer of 1917. The heavy sentences imposed in Britain on returning deserters may have acted as a deterrent to some, but their general effect was rather to increase the rising resentment among British seamen.³

By July of 1917 the unrest was such that the Ministry of Shipping determined to do what it could to calm things down. It set up a conciliation committee (composed of civil servants) and in August invited the Federation and the union to meet in conference with the committee to discuss the possibility of a national wage, the supply of seamen, and the regulation of the employment of "Chinese and other Natives". These were hoary questions, but the unrest they were causing, at a time when the submarine warfare was at its height, made their settlement a matter of national urgency. Both sides accepted the invitation; the meeting took place on August 14, and it was agreed to set up a committee of representatives of the Federation and the union, under the chairmanship of a Ministry official. This new joint committee – the first in the industry at national level – met on August 22.

¹ Havelock Wilson was irreconcilably opposed to the whole campaign for an early peace, and used his hold over the seamen to prevent Labour Party delegates from leaving the country. See Hopkins, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-7 and 141-4, and Tupper, *op. cit.*, pp. 187-91.

² Fayle, *op. cit.*, pp. 265-6.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 261-2.

The first problem the joint committee considered was that of labour supply. The union representatives had proposed that the union should be the sole source of supply. The Federation was adamant in rejecting the idea – this was after all something it had been founded to combat, and had fought against ever since. It seemed that deadlock had been reached, but then Havelock Wilson came up with the suggestion that there should be a single source of supply, jointly controlled. His proposal was straightway accepted.¹ If one single event were to be pinpointed as the most important in the history of labour relations in British shipping, it would be this agreement on the principle of joint supply.

The joint committee then began discussions on a constitution for a national board to deal with wages and the supply of seamen. But meanwhile unrest was mounting, and at the end of September the crews of four transatlantic liners at Liverpool refused to sign on unless granted a substantial rise. The union was unable to persuade them to return to work pending a settlement. Within a day or two the Shipping Controller – the shipowner-civil servant whose powers in the wartime system of governmental control were extensive² – had not only granted a temporary rise, but had also agreed that national standard wage rates should be determined within four weeks. These terms had the support of the shipowners, and thus for the first time the principle of national rates had been conceded. On November 2 he announced that he had secured agreement to the formation of a National Maritime Board, and three weeks later it had been formed; on November 22 it held its first meeting, and a week after that the first national rates were announced.

In four months the combination of unofficial strike action, national emergency, and government pressure had brought the owners to concede what they had been fighting against for years. The establishment of the National Maritime Board was an innovation even more radical than the introduction of national wage rates; Havelock Wilson had been advocating a joint board for the industry ever since the Federation had existed, but until the war the idea had been pooh-poohed as utterly out of the question. Now in 1917 it was agreed on, and set up, being formed on the basis of an equal number of representatives of either side, together with a chairman from the Ministry of Shipping. Separate “panels”, organised on the same

¹ Hopkins, *op. cit.*, p. 46, and Fayle, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

² See Fayle, *op. cit.*, chapter 13.

principle, were established for deck officers; engineers; sailors and firemen; and cooks and stewards.¹ The objects of the new body were threefold:

- “(a) the prevention and adjustment of differences between ship-owners and seamen;
- (b) the establishment, revision, and maintenance of a National Standard rate (or rates) of wages and approved conditions of employment for seamen;
- (c) the consideration, regulation, and supervision of the supply, nationality, engagement, and discharge of seamen on British vessels by means of the establishment of a single source of supply jointly controlled by employers and employed, in accordance with the following general principles:
 - (i) Equal rights of registration and employment must be secured for all seamen. Raw recruits to be registered as such.
 - (ii) The shipowner shall have the right to select his own crew at any time through a jointly controlled supply office. Special arrangements to be made by the National Board to meet special cases such as coasting trade and shipping of substitutes.
 - (iii) The seamen shall have the right to select their ship.”²

The constitution also stipulated that the parties would not institute or in any way support a strike or lockout until the dispute had been referred to the Board, nor would they in any way support one in defiance of a Board decision.

The National Maritime Board, running on these lines, functioned so well that when the Ministry of Shipping was to be dissolved and the Government suggested a bipartite Whitley council for the shipping industry, the Federation and the union welcomed the idea. So when the new constitution was drawn up in 1919 it no longer provided for a Ministry representative as chairman; there were to be no outsiders in the new Board.³

¹ The radio operators were not represented on the National Maritime Board until 1941.

² The constitution is given in full in Hopkins, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-8; the revised constitution of 1919 on pp. 87-92.

³ No one from outside the industry, that is. The Employers' Association of the Port of Liverpool, which had remained aloof from the first Board, joined in the new one, which came officially into existence on January 1, 1920. The composition remained practically as before, with the Sailors' and Firemen's Union (and a small Hull union, a satellite which the Sailors' and Firemen's Union was soon to absorb) representing ratings in the deck and

Thus in 1919 the National Maritime Board, which had been created in 1917 to meet a wartime need, was made a permanent institution, the only significant change being the withdrawal of the Government. The continuance in existence of the National Maritime Board meant an assured position for the Sailors' and Firemen's Union. "Joint control by employers and employed" meant in practice: joint control by the employers' organisations and *whichever union represents sailors and firemen on the Board*. From the text of the Board's constitution it would appear that a seaman may belong to any union he pleases, or to none; that is the clear implication of the first principle governing joint control – "Equal rights of registration and employment must be secured for all seamen." That implication was, however, tacitly ignored, and the Sailors' and Firemen's Union used "joint control" to enforce, as far as possible, the closed shop for the sections it represented. The union also ensured that no rival was admitted to the Board, by the simple expedient of threatening to withdraw if that did happen.¹

3. THE BRITISH SEAFARERS' UNION, THE COOKS' AND STEWARDS' UNION, AND THEIR MERGER TO FORM THE AMALGAMATED MARINE WORKERS' UNION

It will be recalled that Wilson founded his union back in 1887. It was rightly called the Sailors' and Firemen's Union, since it was among sailors and firemen that its interests lay, though it did have some members among the cooks and stewards on the tramps. In the liners, where the catering department² was represented in force, Wilson had no such success, though he spent a large sum in the attempt.³ Then in the years preceding the First World War another attempt was made, this time by a man with considerable experience in the catering department on the liners, who had been fired by Cunard for agitating

engine-room departments, and the Cooks' and Stewards' Union those of the catering department. The navigating and engineer officers continued to be represented by their own unions, the only difference being that one representing masters now joined the Board. (The radio officers' union did not join the Board till 1941.)

¹ See Sir Leo Chiozza Money's evidence to the Dock Labour Inquiry (Court of Inquiry concerning Transport Workers. Wages and Conditions of Dock Labour vol. 1: Report and Evidence, 1920, Cmd. 936), p. 171; Sir W. Raeburn in Hansard vol. 164, p. 380 (May 15, 1923); and Seaman of November 13, 1925.

² Merchant seamen are classified as belonging to three "departments": deck, engine-room, and catering, the latter including ancillary staff such as cabin stewards.

³ Cotter, speaking at the 1921 meeting of the N.T.W.F., quoted Wilson as having told him: "I spent £3,000 in trying to organise them but I could not do it." (Report, p. 133).

against the influx of continental cooks and stewards on British ships: Joe Cotter. In March 1909 he founded the union which became known as the Cooks' and Stewards' Union. To begin with the new union made little headway, but Cotter joined in the 1911 strike, and his union increased its following immensely in consequence. By September it could claim a membership of 15,000.¹

The Sailors' and Firemen's Union enjoyed a similar boost to its membership as a result of the strike. The strength of the Southampton branch, for instance, went – so it was claimed – from 400 at the beginning of 1911 to over 6,000 by October. Southampton being the first port to reach a settlement in the strike, the branch there was the first to reap the benefit: new recruits flocked in, and the branch had soon accumulated £1,000. Under the centralised system of finance² in the Sailors' and Firemen's Union this money should have been remitted to headquarters; that Southampton refused to do unless there was a full inquiry into the financial control and management of the union. The dispute with headquarters resulted in the secession of the Southampton branch in October.³

Ten months later the Sailors' and Firemen's Union suffered another breakaway, this time in Glasgow. In 1911 the Glasgow Trades Council had lent three of its prominent members, among them Emanuel Shinwell, to the Sailors' and Firemen's Union to organise the Clyde-side seamen, and after the strike Shinwell became assistant branch secretary. Considering that those shore-workers (such as boiler-scalers) who got ships ready for putting to sea would be valuable allies in any future dispute, he began recruiting them too. But Havelock Wilson strongly disapproved, and the upshot was that the committee and officials in Glasgow were dismissed; the branch broke away in consequence. This was in August 1912. It was only a couple of months before the Glasgow and Southampton groups joined forces.⁴

The British Seafarers' Union, as the breakaway union was called, was not able to extend much outside Glasgow and Southampton. But the wartime shortage of seamen and the sentiment of national solidarity strengthened the B.S.U.'s position vis-à-vis the employers; in Glasgow

¹ *Marine Caterer* of September 1911.

² See p. 379.

³ *Times* of October 7 1911.

⁴ Emanuel Shinwell: *Conflict without Malice* (Odhams, 1955), pp. 48 and 52; *Times* of August 21, 1912; *Seaman* of October 9, 1925.

⁵ British Seafarers' Union had been the name of the Southampton group, that in Glasgow being called the Scottish Sailors' and Firemen's Union.

the war brought official negotiations between the B.S.U. and the owners. But once the war emergency had passed the situation was different. The cooperation of Shinwell, the Glasgow B.S.U. leader, no longer seemed so important, and it also appeared less likely to be obtained, to judge by the militant company he kept. Mounting unrest among the workers on Clydeside culminated in riot and repression, accompanied by bloodshed, on January 31, 1919, and Shinwell was one of the labour leaders jailed for their supposed responsibility for the disturbance. By the time he came out again the B.S.U. in Glasgow had got into very poor shape. Some recovery was made, but all the while Havelock Wilson had been strengthening the position of his own Sailors' and Firemen's Union.

Since Wilson's union, unlike the B.S.U., was a national union and a large one – indeed by far the biggest of any of the seafarers' unions in Britain – it had considerable advantages over its struggling rival. As the predominant union organising ratings it had been the Sailors' and Firemen's Union that was originally invited to join in the discussions in 1917 which led to the formation of the National Maritime Board. And, again by reason of the size of its membership, the declared intention of the Sailors' and Firemen's Union to leave the Board if the breakaway B.S.U. were admitted was a threat of great force. By this means Wilson was able to exclude the B.S.U. both from the tripartite Board of 1917-19¹ and its bipartite successor.

Thus, when the bipartite Board came into existence in January 1920 the positions of the B.S.U. and the Cooks' and Stewards' Union were very different. The B.S.U., its membership still very largely in the two ports of its origin, was outside the Board, and thus unable to take part in national negotiations; by contrast the Cooks' and Stewards' Union, with practically all the liner cooks and stewards in its ranks, was the body representing the catering department on the Board. But in the spring of 1920 the postwar freight boom broke, and the ensuing depression had far-reaching consequences. All the seafarers' unions felt its effect to some extent; but one major change, for which the depression was in part responsible, was the drastic weakening of the Cooks' and Stewards' Union which took place during the summer of 1921.

By the spring of 1921 freights had fallen back to about their 1914

¹ This despite the B.S.U.'s strong desire to take part and the sympathy with which the Board's first chairman regarded that desire. (Sir Leo Money's evidence to the Dock Labour Inquiry, *loc. cit.*)

level,¹ and the National Maritime Board agreed to an all-round wage reduction of £2 10s. It was a year since the decline in freights had set in – the Chamber of Shipping index of tramp freights registered a drop of 74 per cent from March 1920 to March 1921; a wage cut was bound to come, as it already had in many shore industries. £2 10s., the cut agreed, was a much smaller one than the employers had sought,² and, though hardly a victory, at least a compromise which reflected little or no discredit on the union negotiators.³ Havelock Wilson's attitude, both in 1921 and in the years that followed, was that in these times of heavy unemployment and severe depression in the industry it was better to refrain from strike action and secure the best bargain that negotiation would yield than to strike and then be forced to accept whatever terms the owners cared to offer.⁴ He was able to carry with him all but two of the unions represented on the Board: one of the two which stood out was the Cooks' and Stewards' Union, led by Joe Cotter.⁵ Cotter went so far as to bring his men out on strike.

The strength of the Cooks' and Stewards' Union in the catering department of the liners⁶ was reflected in the response to the strike call – the Ministry of Labour estimated the number of cooks and stewards who came out as some 10,000.⁷ And yet in four weeks the strike had collapsed.

To suppose that a strike by the Cooks' and Stewards' Union in isolation, at a time when so many thousands were out of work,⁸ would be successful, was foolish. Nor were the shipowners lacking in resource; within six days of the start of the strike the Cunard company brought some 350 volunteers from its office staff in Birkenhead to Southampton to replace the strikers from the *Aquitania*.

¹ Fayle, *op. cit.*, p. 390.

² They had asked for a £4 10s. cut in the monthly pay of sailors, firemen, and officers, and a £5 10s. cut in that of cooks and stewards. In percentage terms that meant very different things for different sections, but for an A.B., for example, it was a cut of over 30 per cent.

³ We must distinguish between the outcome of the negotiations (which, though hard on the seaman, represented probably the best that could be got) and Wilson's cavalier treatment both of the other unions involved and of his own rank-and-file. On the resultant dissension within the Sailors' and Firemen's Union, see below, p. 407.

⁴ On Wilson's position during this period see *Seaman* of April 13, 1923, and United Operative Plumbers and Domestic Engineers Association, Quarterly Report no. 204 (October 1925), p. 2.

⁵ The other was the Association of Coastwise Masters, Mates, and Engineers, which four years later was absorbed into the T.G.W.U.

⁶ "Practically 100 per cent of the class of employee concerned" (*Times* of May 7, 1921).

⁷ *Labour Gazette*, July 1921.

⁸ By the early summer, when the strike took place, a third of insured seamen were registered as unemployed: in May 31.7, in June 32.6 per cent (*Labour Gazette*).

The ship was fully booked and something of a test case; it sailed on time. Not all the 350 clerks were finally needed, but their mass importation had the desired "demonstration effect".¹ For those cooks and stewards who were prepared to blackleg in an official strike of their own union the owners had another card to play: promotion.² And in the organisation of strike-breaking the shipowners were not alone; they enjoyed the active support of the Sailors' and Firemen's Union, which laboured mightily to keep the ships manned.³

Another major factor in the failure of strike was Cotter himself. Not for nothing did the *Seaman*, the journal of the Sailors' and Firemen's Union, refer to him as "Explosive Joe".⁴ The strike was a hasty and ill-advised undertaking. The conclusion that Cotter, having got too big for his boots, had this time overreached himself,⁵ was eagerly drawn by Wilson and his colleagues, and was lent some authority by the notorious "Circular no. 35" which went out during the strike over Cotter's name.⁶ In it the writer advocated the damaging of fittings and furniture on board ship, the destruction and mislaying of linen and cutlery, and the putting of passengers' luggage in the wrong places.⁷ The owners were infuriated, and the circular must also be blamed for some members losing confidence in Cotter and his union. On the Liverpool lines, for example, numbers of chief and second stewards broke away to form their own association – nothing so disreputable as a "union" – the Mercantile Caterers' Guild.⁸

What with the failure of the strike, the loss of members, the hostility of the shipowners, and the alienation of Havelock Wilson, Cotter began to feel the need of an alliance. At about this time Wilson, having

¹ Times of May 13 and 16, 1921; Ben H. Russell in *British Shipping*, November 1959.

² *Marine Caterer*, September 1921.

³ Tupper, *op. cit.*, pp. 259-60. In Glasgow, by contrast, the B.S.U. brought some seamen and firemen out in support of the strikers (*Times*, May 14 and 21, 1921).

⁴ The flavour of the twenties, as far as trade unionism in shipping is concerned, is well conveyed by the epithets used, of which "Havc-a-lot Wilson" was one of the more inspired. The *Seaman* referred to those who led the opposition to Wilson and his union, variously, as "job-seekers", "adventurers and gasbags", "rats", "Reds", "a crowd of unwashed aliens", "vultures", "loafers", and "parasites". Emanuel Shinwell, being from the formation of the Amalgamated Marine Workers' Union (see below) its National Organiser, was a key figure in that opposition, and a pet aversion; the *Seaman* descended to the vilest anti-semitism in the effort to discredit him. (See *Seaman* of August-December 1925.)

⁵ See for example *Seaman* of June 15, 1923.

⁶ He later denied responsibility for it. It would not be out of character if he were the author; by the same token one cannot rule out the possibility that Wilson or one of his colleagues "arranged for" the circular.

⁷ [*Liverpool*] *Journal of Commerce*, Dec. 2, 1921.

⁸ *Times* of May 21, 1921.

fallen out with the National Transport Workers' Federation, seceded from that body,¹ and the N.T.W.F. leaders then decided to try and promote an amalgamation of the Cooks' and Stewards' Union with the British Seafarers' Union, to form a new seamen's union.² The plan suited both the struggling B.S.U. and the now greatly weakened Cooks' and Stewards' Union.

Relations between the N.T.W.F. and the Sailors' and Firemen's Union had in fact been strained for some years. As one delegate from a land transport union³ complained at the 1921 meeting of the N.T.W.F., "Mr. Wilson has often told us that his connection with the Federation was held by a very thin thread [...]. We are continually chided, ridiculed and chaffed by Mr. Wilson on any occasion when we try to say that we are going to fight."⁴ There was, too, considerable personal antipathy between Robert Williams, the secretary of the N.T.W.F., and Havelock Wilson.⁵ Wilson's actions at the time of the miners' strike in April brought matters to a head; his union was apparently liable not merely to disregard N.T.W.F. policy and flout N.T.W.F. decisions but also to undertake determined strike-breaking action. Thus it was that in June 1921 the N.T.W.F. executive decided

¹ The N.T.W.F., linked with the striking miners through the Triple Alliance, had resolved to boycott the moving of coal stocks and the importing of coal. The Antwerp dockers responded by a general withdrawal of labour in support of the British miners; but the Sailors' and Firemen's Union under Havelock Wilson made a special effort to see that the flow of coal from Belgium continued unimpeded – its members not only shipped coal from Antwerp, they also loaded it. As a result the N.T.W.F. annual conference, meeting in June, instructed the N.T.W.F. executive to hold an investigation into the conduct of the Sailors' and Firemen's Union with regard to Federation policy and instructions. But the union sent in its resignation instead.

² The initiative seems to have been taken by the N.T.W.F. See Report of N.T.W.F. annual meeting, 1922, pp. 21–22 and 63.

³ The National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers.

⁴ Report of 1921 N.T.W.F. meeting, p. 126. See also Seaman of May 18, 1923.

⁵ Their differences were not confined to N.T.W.F. affairs, but went deeper. Bob Williams was a leftwinger. A conscientious objector during the war, he had campaigned for an early peace; he had welcomed the Bolshevik revolution, visited Russia, received the Soviet Military Medal from Trotsky; until his expulsion in April 1921 he was for a time a member of the Communist party. Havelock Wilson by contrast had been, for nigh on thirty years, an unswerving Liberal of the Lib-Lab variety; he was a biting critic of socialism, with a long record of opposition to the Labour Party, let alone the Communists, whom he abhorred. During the war he had stumped the country making jingoistic speeches; his services to recruiting had been such (together with his services to national savings) as to win him the C.B.E. He had used his position as President of the Sailors' and Firemen's Union to prevent several labour leaders (Macdonald, Jowett, Henderson, Huysmans) from leaving the country on wartime missions of which he disapproved, and through the agency of his right-hand man "Captain" Tupper regularly dispatched seamen to break up meetings of pacifists.

to foster a rival to Wilson's union. Bob Williams acted as chairman of the various conferences between the B.S.U. and the Cooks' and Stewards' Union which led to the decision to amalgamate, and he was the first trustee of the new organisation which resulted¹ – the Amalgamated Marine Workers' Union. It came officially into being on January 1, 1922.

4. HAVELOCK WILSON'S COUNTER-ATTACK AND EVENTUAL VICTORY

From the autumn of 1921, when the move to amalgamate came out into the open, to the final extinction of the A.M.W.U. in early 1927, Havelock Wilson waged unceasing war on this new rival to his union. His principal measures to counter it were four: recruiting campaigns; the "P.C.5"; strikebreaking; and litigation.

On October 18, 1921 he convened a conference of representatives of cooks and stewards from all the ports.² Prior to that summer and the disastrous strike of the Cooks' and Stewards' Union there had apparently been an understanding between Cotter and Wilson that Cotter's union (the Cooks and Stewards) would organise the catering department on the liners and Wilson's union (the Sailors and Firemen) the catering department on the tramps, and neither would interfere with the other.³ But now that Cotter was joining forces with the breakaway B.S.U. in a bid to supplant the Sailors' and Firemen's Union, Wilson began recruiting in what had formerly been Cotter's preserve. How representative the cooks and stewards were who attended Wilson's conference on October 18 is a matter of doubt,⁴ but it served to give his recruitment campaign a much-needed boost.

In spite of Wilson's impressive claims,⁵ his attempt to enrol the liner catering department in the Sailors' and Firemen's Union seems to have had very limited success. That a substantial decline in the membership of the Cooks' and Stewards' Union took place is borne out by a combination of pointers, each insufficient in itself, but together adding up to convincing evidence.⁶ Cotter lost several thousand

¹ *Marine Worker*, April 1922.

² See *Daily Herald*, Oct. 19, 1921.

³ *Seaman*, June 15, 1923.

⁴ *Daily Herald*, Oct. 27, 1921.

⁵ *Southern Daily Echo* (Southampton), Nov. 18, 1921; *Seaman*, Nov. 25, 1921.

⁶ Firstly the tone and phraseology of the editorial appeal for solidarity in the union journal, the *Marine Caterer*, of August 1921. Secondly the fact that the membership on which the A.M.W.U. affiliated to the T.U.C. in 1922 was no greater than that on which the Cooks' and Stewards' Union alone affiliated in 1921. Thirdly, the membership figures given by the *Times* on May 7, 1921, and by Ben Mollan in court on June 1, 1926 (*Times*, June 2, 1926); these suggest a decline of 10,000, or one third, from May 1921 to the end of the year.

members; but the number Wilson was able to get to join his union was apparently negligible.¹

With his next move, the "P.C.5", Wilson had much more success. The accession of the Liverpool employers' association to the National Maritime Board, when that body was set up anew at the beginning of 1920, meant that all but a tiny fraction of the country's merchant tonnage was now within the coverage of the Board, and subject to its regulations. Still, not quite all ships were included, and not all companies that belonged to the Board toed the line when it was inconvenient to do so. One way and another the British Seafarers' Union, though excluded from the Board and in opposition to Wilson, did manage during the first three postwar years to keep its head above water; it had a difficult time, but the localised nature of its membership had its advantages. Viewed nationally however the B.S.U. was an outsider; to Wilson and his union at best an irritant, at worst a latent threat. Once the Cooks' and Stewards' Union formally withdrew from the Board and proposed to merge with the breakaway B.S.U., it too posed a threat to the established order.

The contempt which Wilson poured on the projected merger, the misleading statements, the attempt to recruit liner cooks and stewards to his own union – all this was of no avail; the amalgamation went through. It soon became apparent that some new measure would be needed if the rival was to be killed off. Wilson and his colleagues decided that control of the labour supply must be tightened, by providing machinery, as foolproof as possible, to ensure that (as far as ratings were concerned) none but members of the Sailors' and Firemen's Union got taken on. The owners were on the whole only too glad to join in a scheme which promised to nip a militant union in the bud.²

Thus it was that April 1922 saw the introduction³ of the "P.C.5" system. Under this arrangement any sailor or fireman wishing to

¹ Speaking at the 1945 meeting of the National Union of Seamen (that was the name taken by the Sailors' and Firemen's Union in 1926), the Assistant General Secretary (Catering) said: "[...] prior to this [1942] the organisation of the Liner Catering personnel had never really been seriously tackled by us. Thousands of men had been outside of the movement since 1921 [...]". [Report, p. 45.] The same process as in 1921 – a special conference to launch a recruiting campaign in the liner catering department, and then extravagant claims on the response it was achieving – was tried again in 1925 (Seaman, Aug. 28 and Sept. 25, 1925), but once again the result was disappointing.

² See the judgment of Mr. Justice Sargent in the case of Reynolds v. The Shipping Federation, Wilson, and Clark (High Court, Chancery Division, July 25, 1923).

³ More precisely the reintroduction of a wartime measure (Seaman of April 1, 1936).

obtain employment had to obtain a card known as a P.C.5 from the Sailors' and Firemen's Union and stamped by it, and then get it stamped by the owners' organisation. In other words, "It is a form which shows that a man applying for a position has been passed as acceptable both to the owners and the union".¹ In fact of course the union passed only its own members, and they had to be paid-up members too.²

The P.C.5 had an immediate effect. One official of the Sailors' and Firemen's Union reported that, as far as his branch was concerned, it had brought about an amazing change. Men who had not paid up for a long period "came cap in hand to try and get the P.C.5 card. [...] On Saturday alone, a day when usually they could not collect a tanner, they had obtained the sum of £60 from men signing on. He was glad of the arrangement, because it established a better spirit with the Federation offices."³ The rank-and-file was apprehensive, resenting particularly having to enter the offices of the Shipping Federation; according to another branch official the older seamen suggested "that after having fought the Federation they are being driven back to them."⁴

To the Amalgamated Marine Workers' Union the new scheme was, as intended, a grave blow. There were protest meetings and protest marches, questions in Parliament, a T.U.C. inquiry. Harry Gosling spoke for many trade unionists when he said, in his presidential address to the National Transport Workers' Federation that June: "[...] we strongly advocate agreements which provide a monopoly of employment for our respective organisations; but when the monopoly is purchased at the price of violating all the best of our Trade Union traditions, some of us think the price is too high."⁵ But apart from protesting there was little that could be done.

The A.M.W.U. did not die an immediate death, however. The P.C.5 did not get applied universally; three and a half years after its intro-

¹ Ibid.

² Sometimes, of course, in a period of such high employment, a seaman had been out of work for several weeks or months, and was hard put to it to bring his union payments up to date. In principle latitude was given in such cases, but in practice not frequently enough to prevent there being many instances of real hardship. (See for example *Bristol Gazette*, Aug. 19, 1922; *Western Mail*, Sept. 2, 1922; *Pall Mall*, Feb. 15, 1923; *Hansard* vol. 164, p. 387 (May 15, 1923); *Marine Worker*, Oct. 1925.)

³ P.C.5. J. Havelock Wilson's attempt to enslave the British Seamen Exposed. Verbatim Report of an Extraordinary Meeting held at the National Sailors' and Firemen's Union, Head Office, April 23rd, 1922 (A.M.W.U., 1922). In *Shinwell cuttings book*, p. 42.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Report of 1922 meeting, p. 13.

duction it was still not in full swing on Merseyside, for example.¹ The A.M.W.U. managed to retain several thousands in membership, particularly in the liners sailing from Liverpool and Southampton. On the tramps the position was more difficult, as they signed men on and off at a variety of ports; some men found it advisable to carry both an A.M.W.U. card and a Sailors' and Firemen's Union card – but most found the latter sufficient.

Though the introduction of the P.C.5 did not bring about the immediate collapse of the A.M.W.U., it did weaken it considerably, since it made it much more difficult to recruit and retain members.² And on the rare occasions when the A.M.W.U. ventured strike action, the Sailors' and Firemen's Union did all it could to break the strike. In the course of the A.M.W.U.'s brief existence (from January 1922 to early 1927) it was involved in three strike episodes of importance: those of March–April 1923, August–November 1925 (both against wage cuts), and May 1926, the General Strike.

The first of these episodes, in the spring of 1923, involved only a handful of ships. Most of the strikers were A.M.W.U. members, out with the full backing of their union, but a few belonged to the Sailors' and Firemen's Union, and were on unofficial strike. The port chiefly affected was Southampton, where 200 firemen walked off on April 6; substitutes were found within a couple of days.³ To the rapid replacement of strikers the owners added the invocation of legal sanctions against the breaking of articles; at Southampton alone 134 strikers were arrested,⁴ and after that there was no more trouble.

In March 1924 the T.U.C. managed to get the two parties – the A.M.W.U. and the Sailors' and Firemen's Union – together, and negotiations under the auspices of the T.U.C. were begun, to see if this bitter inter-union strife could not be stopped, and some formula

¹ The writer of the "Man at the Wheel" column reported in the *Seaman* of November 27, 1925: "I find every time I go to the Humber ports quite a large number of Liverpool men shipping, and some of them have never had P.C.5 before. [...] I have often heard them say they wished it was in full swing on the Merseyside."

² John Bull of August 5, 1922 reported: "If one gets into conversation with a seaman – sailor, fireman, cook or steward – it is about three to one that he will say something disparaging about the officials of his Union. Should he belong to the Sailors' and Firemen's Union his grievance is generally that the chief concern of the officials is to see that he doesn't get a ship until he has paid up his dues. If he is a member of the Marine Workers' Union he will complain that the officials are not able to do anything for him, except at Southampton and Liverpool, and that membership absolutely bars him from getting a ship at most ports."

³ *Times*, April 7 and 9, 1923.

⁴ *Times*, April 26, 1923.

for amalgamation found. The talks dragged on for over a year, in the course of which time it became abundantly clear that the only terms on which Havelock Wilson was prepared to agree to amalgamation of his union with the A.M.W.U. were ones which left no doubt on the identity of the victor: "the three leading spirits"¹ of the A.M.W.U. – Shinwell, Lewis, and McKinlay, all ex-B.S.U. – were not to be offered posts in the enlarged Sailors' and Firemen's Union that would result from the absorption of the A.M.W.U., but compensated instead, each to the tune of £1,000; in other words, paid off, on the condition that in future they would keep strictly out of seamen's affairs.² These terms were refused, and in April 1925 the deadlock was so complete that even the patient T.U.C. peacemakers had to admit defeat, and the negotiations were abandoned.³

A curious feature of these terms was that the much abused Cotter – "Explosive Joe" – who had been President of the A.M.W.U. ever since its formation, was not among the A.M.W.U. leaders to be paid off; in contrast to Shinwell, Lewis and McKinlay his services apparently would be acceptable. His enthusiasm for the Amalgamated Marine Workers' Union had long since evaporated, and he had taken to pursuing an obstructionist policy. By June 1925 his colleagues had had enough, and at the annual general meeting held that month he was fired, in consequence of his "persistent refusal [...] to carry out his obligations to his members, by holding up the funds and the work of the Union, thereby failing in his position of trust, and further because of his advocacy of dissolution and neglect of the interests of the Union [...]"⁴ Within a few weeks Cotter was openly in the Wilson

¹ Shinwell, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

² The Seaman of November 27, 1925 put it thus: "As a final solution the N.S. & F.U. offered to compensate the non-seamen officials to the extent of £3,000, if they would clear out and leave the seafaring men to settle their own affairs. [...] There was one thing they would not have, and that was shoremen, especially Tailors, Watchmakers, and ex-Postmen, managing seamen's affairs." Thus the official journal of the Sailors' and Firemen's Union. It is true that none of the three had ever been a seafarer, but that had not prevented Wilson from giving them responsible posts in his union back in 1910-12 – Shinwell had been appointed Assistant Secretary of the Glasgow branch, Thomas Lewis Secretary of the Southampton branch, and James McKinlay head of the union's insurance department; but they had all left Wilson's union. As for not having shoremen managing seamen's affairs, since 1911 the most influential people in the Sailors' and Firemen's Union had been, apart from Wilson himself, Father Hopkins, an Anglican clergyman, and "Captain" Tupper, a bankrupt company promoter turned private detective. (Father Hopkins died in 1922, but Tupper was active for many years more, and in 1925 ran the union when Wilson visited North America.)

³ On these negotiations see Reports of Trade Union Congress, 1924, pp. 173-4, and 1925, pp. 219-21.

⁴ Report of A.M.W.U. annual meeting, 1925.

camp. In August there were reports that he was going to become an official of Wilson's union,¹ and they proved to be correct.²

On August 21 a strike of British seamen against a wage reduction broke out in Australia – within a day or two Cotter sent the Secretary of the Marine Stewards' Union there a telegram advising him that “the whole of the men in the catering department in Great Britain are standing loyally by Havelock Wilson.”³ (Wilson, whose union now represented cooks and stewards on the National Maritime Board, had just launched a second drive to get the liner cooks and stewards to join his union,⁴ and Joe Cotter supported this campaign.) Two or three weeks later Cotter, together with Havelock Wilson and others, addressed the crew of the *Mauretania* in New York; the *Seaman* reported Cotter's speech thus: “He candidly confessed that he had made mistakes in the past and was out to make good. He was determined to lend his aid to negotiations round a table, and he would steadily oppose strikes, which were simply the destroyer of the workmen's homes.”⁵ Evidently a transformation had come over “Explosive Joe”.

The cause of the strike, which was not limited to Australian ports, was a wage cut agreed on by the National Maritime Board. From August 12⁶ there was sporadic strike action in British ports. In London a Central Strike Committee was formed, with the active support of the seamen's section of the Minority Movement,⁷ and it was this Committee which alone ran the strike in Britain till the end of the month. Only then did the A.M.W.U. join in, making the strike an official one as far as its members were concerned.⁸ For a time the A.M.W.U. and the Communist-backed Central Strike Committee managed to work together, but difficulties soon arose, and by mid-September they were at loggerheads, particularly over the control of

¹ See for example *Syren and Shipping*, August 15, 1925.

² See below, p. 407, note 4.

³ *Times*, August 27 and 28, 1925.

⁴ See above, p. 398, note 1.

⁵ *Seaman*, September 25, 1925.

⁶ *Labour Gazette*, November 1925, p. 398.

⁷ Minority Movement was the name, from 1923, of the British section of the Red International of Labour Unions; this British section was “not an organisation of unions but only of revolutionary minorities of unions”, though that policy was later modified. (See H. Pelling, *The British Communist Party. A Historical Profile*, (Black, 1958), pp. 24-7, 56, 70-1.)

⁸ *Times*, August 31 and September 1, 1925.

pickets. But the tension really went deeper: each wanted to run the strike in its own way, and each had a different end in view.¹

Meanwhile the Sailors' and Firemen's Union was busy trying to break the strike. On September 2, for example, the *Times* reported that in Cardiff, where many seamen had been unemployed for twelve months, there were men to spare, and "[...] officials of the union [the Sailors' and Firemen's Union] sent a considerable number of surplus men to Southampton to take the place of strikers in that port." As Tupper wrote later, the Southampton representative of the Sailors' and Firemen's Union "fetched loyal Union crews from all over the shop and got them on board liners, down the Water at night, in their hundreds";² Tupper himself (he was running the show since Wilson was in North America at the time) was in daily consultation with the chairman of the Shipping Federation.³ The Federation for its part revived that well-trying strike-breaking device, the depot ship.⁴ The outcome of all this was that the Federation was able to man the ships with generally only minor delays; the historian of the Federation tells us that during the strike nearly 3,500 seamen were transferred from one District to another to fill the places of strikers, and over 17,000 seamen were supplied locally.⁵

In South Africa and Australia, however, British seamen struck in large numbers, and to much better effect. In neither of these two countries was there the reserve of labour both suitable and willing to blackleg striking seamen that there was in Britain.⁶ But the owners were determined not to be beaten. Here were men signing on in Britain, sailing to a Dominion port where strike action would be more effective than at home, and then – though under articles – coming out

¹ See particularly the *International Seafarer* (an M.M. journal) of August–September 1925, which says of the A.M.W.U.: "[...] they entered primarily to poach members from the N.S.F.U. – a tactic the Central Strike Committee disagreed with."

² Tupper, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

⁴ *Marine Worker*, October 1925, p. 10.

⁵ Powell, *op. cit.*, p. 33. In Federation terminology the "District" covers a sizeable area: in 1925 there were 21 in Great Britain, such as Southampton, Mersey, and Thames.

⁶ In South Africa, with its negligible maritime population, the companies contemplated importing lascars from India to break the strike, but public opinion, both English and Afrikaner, was so incensed at the idea that it had to be abandoned. Nor did the South African Government help the shipowners: it detained numbers of strikers as "prohibited immigrants", placing them in tolerably comfortable camps, the shipowners being liable for the cost of their keep. In Australia the strike enjoyed the support of influential trade unions, and became confused with domestic labour issues; the federal Government did what it could to smash the strike, but the mass recruitment of strikebreakers was out of the question.

in their thousands; this was a new tactic, bold and intelligent. To the owners it seemed explosive in its implications, and they resolved to hold out until the strike collapsed. Aided in Britain by the heavy unemployment and the collaboration of Wilson's union, and in Australia by the vigorous action of the right-wing federal Government,¹ the owners were in fact able to stand their ground until the strike disintegrated.

The end of the strike was as ragged as its beginning. On October 12 the A.M.W.U. called it off, in Britain and South Africa; but the Central Strike Committee did not concede defeat until a week later. In Australia the committee which had been set up to run the strike there kept it going till the end of November. All in all the strike, extending over sixteen weeks and affecting ports in three continents, had involved probably some 10-15,000 British seamen.²

The strikers gained nothing.³ But for Havelock Wilson the episode resulted in a victory; not merely was the strike broken, but the National Maritime Board survived. It had weathered the onset of depression, and its continuance; and now it stood the test of a major strike, which Wilson had been unable to prevent. When the owners' side of the National Maritime Board met, on October 31, 1925, to reassess their relations with the Sailors' and Firemen's Union, they noted that "Mr. Wilson had done everything in his power to stop the strike, but his remonstrances had no effect whatever upon the recalcitrant section of his members."⁴ The union had proved incapable of keeping its side of the bargain which was implicit in the P.C.5 system – that the owners would employ only union men, and the union keep the men in order. But the owners recognised that to dismantle any of the National

¹ The Government had been suffering from left-wing labour agitation for some time, and was anxious to put a stop to it; it had recently secured the passage of legislation to make deportation a possible counter-measure, and now sought to use this new power to deport certain Australian seamen's union leaders who were held to be responsible for the current trouble. The opposition was considerable, but the Government went to the country on this issue – and returned to power with an increased majority. Proceedings were instituted against the labour leaders in question, and the strike collapsed.

² This is necessarily a rough estimate, based on the Ministry of Labour figure of strikers in Britain (5,000 – *Labour Gazette*, Nov. 1925, p. 398) and reports in the *Times* relating to the strike at South African, Australian and New Zealand ports.

³ Though the A.M.W.U. branch in Glasgow did claim an increase in membership "by leaps and bounds" in the months following the strike; "The men have at last awakened to the fact that there is something in being members of a clean, fighting Union." (*Marine Worker*, January 1926.)

⁴ Powell, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

Maritime Board machinery could have consequences far graver than the occasional unofficial strike; and so it survived.¹

The following year was the year of the General Strike. When the General Council of the T.U.C. issued its strike call, the Sailors' and Firemen's Union was the only union included in those instructions which chose to disregard them.² In consequence most seamen did not strike. A.M.W.U. members came out however; so, unofficially, did a number of members of the Sailors' and Firemen's Union, notably in London, on Merseyside, and on Tyneside. The strike was most effective in London; there the Shipping Federation found to its surprise that it "could get no assistance in obtaining substitute crews locally",³ and the recruitment and deployment of strikebreakers had to be conducted with secrecy. The Federation (which lent its depot ship to the Port of London Authority to house volunteer dock labour) chartered two launches and borrowed a dockyard tug from Chatham; in this way, "Except in one instance, no vessels requiring crews in London were detained."⁴ With the notable exception of the Tower Hill and Mersey branches, where the officials revolted against Havelock Wilson, the organisation of the Sailors' and Firemen's Union was once again used to help the Shipping Federation break a strike.

That summer of 1926 also witnessed Wilson's master stroke in the war against the Amalgamated Marine Workers' Union. An A.M.W.U. official by the name of Booth,⁵ who had gone over to Wilson, went to the High Court for a declaration that the amalgamation between the Cooks' and Stewards' Union and the B.S.U. four and a half years before was null and void, and an injunction restraining the A.M.W.U. from dealing with the property or assets of the Cooks' and Stewards' Union. Former officials of that body gave evidence purporting to show that the ballot in the Cooks' and Stewards' Union had been a fraud,⁶ that the 50 per cent poll required by law had not been obtained,

¹ One significant innovation in the system was made: it was agreed to engage only men who signed a pledge that they would abide by the wages and conditions agreed by the Maritime Board (*ibid.*, p. 34).

² Havelock Wilson refused to call a strike until he had taken a ballot of members in U.K. ports, as required by the union constitution. (The same rule, which applied to any general – i.e. other than local – strike of seamen, had enabled him to refuse to join in the national sympathy strike in 1912; see above, p. 385.) On May 5, the day the strike call from the General Council went out, the ballot was already in progress, but had not yet been completed. Its result (which was against striking) was announced the same day that the General Strike was called off.

³ Powell, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁵ Formerly an official in Cotter's Cooks' and Stewards' Union.

⁶ One branch secretary said that he had personally filled up 200 ballot papers.

that Cotter's declaration that the provisions of the relevant Acts had been complied with was untrue, and that he himself had falsified the official return on the number of members. In consequence, on June 1, the judge made a declaration that the amalgamation was not valid, and granted an injunction restraining the A.M.W.U. from dealing with the funds or property of the Cooks' and Stewards' Union.¹

The disentanglement, to the satisfaction of the law and the notoriously litigious Havelock Wilson, of the A.M.W.U. funds and property, separating out what belonged to the Cooks' and Stewards' Union and what to the B.S.U., would have cost a fabulous sum, considering the scope for argument and the length of time the two unions had been operating as one. Worse still, even to begin to spend money on sorting the business out – or on anything else – would have laid the A.M.W.U. wide open to the charge of illegally spending Cooks and Stewards money, in defiance of an order of the High Court... Wilson had effectively hamstrung the A.M.W.U. A number of officials carried on for a time without pay, but that could not continue indefinitely, and finally, early in 1927, the Amalgamated Marine Workers' Union quietly folded up. Its membership by then had dwindled drastically, but its funds – which it could not touch – were considerable. The Registrar of Friendly Societies has them still.

Thus was the strange demise of the Amalgamated Marine Workers' Union. Born, it was claimed, to be the long-awaited "One Big Union" for seamen, it was finally wiped out after five years by the union it had sought to replace. Now, the A.M.W.U. having gone, the position of Havelock Wilson's union seemed unassailable. But the next three years were to bring a fight with a mightier rival – the Transport and General Workers' Union.

5. DISSENSION, ISOLATION, AND THE STRUGGLE WITH THE T. G. W. U.

Ever since the infancy of his union, back in the 1880's, Wilson had had trouble with his officials. Some, doubtless, particularly in those early days, were lazy, incompetent, or dishonest. Others, certainly, were able, and devoted to the interests of seamen, but unable to reconcile themselves to Wilson and his methods. We have seen how breakaways in 1911 and 1912 involved the parent union in prolonged struggle, ending only in 1927. After 1917, and particularly in the 1920's, Wilson's increasingly harmonious relations with the Shipping Federation brought renewed dissension within the union.

¹ Times, June 2, 1926,

In 1921 his first acceptance of a wage cut, following the postwar slump in freights, gave rise to a wave of unrest (on which the Communists capitalised) and “vigilance committees” and “solidarity committees” were set up in a number of ports. The union held a ballot on the reduction, but the result was never announced.¹ Other wage reductions followed, in 1922, 1923, and 1925,² and each occasion brought renewed unrest, caused, as had been the case in 1921, as much by the manner of the acceptance of the cut as by the cut itself. In 1925, for example, the executive council of the union was not given a chance to vote until the news of agreement on the cut had already appeared in the press.³ In 1926 the officials of the Tower Hill and Mersey branches brought men out in compliance with the strike call of the T.U.C. General Council, but in defiance of Havelock Wilson; he sacked them. The year after that he fired eight more of the union’s officials – including the then General Secretary (Wilson himself was “General President”) and the National Organiser of the Catering Department – because they opposed his policy of support for break-away company unions in the minefields of Nottinghamshire and South Wales.⁴

Meanwhile the isolation of Wilson’s union from the wider labour movement was growing. In the international sphere Wilson had refused to rejoin the I.T.F. after the war, until the summer of 1925, when his union re-entered, only to withdraw the following year.⁵ At home the position went from bad to worse. In 1921 the union left the National Transport Workers’ Federation.⁶ In 1922 it was disaffiliated from the Labour Party by a rule designed especially for the case of the union, which had been financing Wilson’s candidature against Labour;⁷ in 1923 it was readmitted, but it withdrew in January

¹ *British Seafarer*, June 1921.

² There was a rise in 1924, but this was nullified by the cut the following year. Significantly, while the rise came into effect in two stages, months apart, so as to oblige the owners, the cut was implemented at one go.

³ *International Seafarer*, August–September 1925.

⁴ See *Times* of Aug. 2, 11, 18, and Sept. 24, 1927. The Catering Department Organiser was none other than Joe Cotter.

⁵ I.T.F. Report on Activities [...] for the Years 1924 and 1925 (Amsterdam, 1926), p. 11, and Report and Accounts for the Years 1926 and 1927 (Amsterdam, 1928), p. 64.

⁶ See above, p. 396. When the N.T.W.F. was reconstituted in 1924 Wilson’s union rejoined; but the union formed the greater part of the membership of this new N.T.W.F., which was a body of no importance.

⁷ See Reports of Labour Party Conferences of 1922 (pp. 177–8, 180–1) and 1923 (pp. 85, 181–2).

1927.¹ In that year even the T.U.C. was forced to move against Wilson's union, though it had not done so after the General Strike.

Most came to regard the General Strike as a grave error; but Havelock Wilson saw it in far more lurid terms, and castigated it as "a deliberate, well-planned plot on the part of certain sections to bring about a revolution".² He was more than ever convinced of the folly and danger of extremism and industrial discord, and set about gathering support for a movement to promote industrial peace. In October he succeeded in launching the Industrial Peace Union of the British Empire,³ to which the seamen's union was to contribute £1,000 a year.⁴ A few months later he gave further demonstration of his interpretation of "industrial peace" by giving a breakaway company union in the Nottinghamshire mines the lavish support of the seamen's union.⁵ This was too much, and on November 23, 1927 the T.U.C. General Council decided to take action to secure the exclusion of the seamen's union from the T.U.C. So at the next Congress, in September 1928, it recommended the union's disaffiliation, and the resolution to that effect was passed unanimously.⁶

The expulsion of the seamen's union from the T.U.C. meant that the Transport and General Workers' Union was now free to proceed to organise a seamen's section; Bevin and his colleagues at the head of the T.G.W.U. had long been pressed to do so,⁷ but had hitherto refused on the ground that it could not set up to recruit members from another T.U.C. affiliate. The path was now clear. Bevin learnt that the seamen's union had pledged itself to vote against the eight-hour day for seamen at the International Labour Conference to be held in 1929; he also became convinced "that, in the event of any

¹ Times, April 11, 1929; Report of Labour Party Conference, 1927, p. 15.

² Times, Oct. 7, 1926.

³ Times, Oct. 14, 1926.

⁴ Times, Oct. 1, 1926.

⁵ The loan of N.U.S. (National Union of Seamen) officials and N.U.S. cars, and the issuing of the breakaway union's journal from the N.U.S. offices; and at least the promise of a loan of £10,000 of N.U.S. money. (See K.G.J.C. Knowles, *Strikes*, Blackwell, 1952, p. 85.)

⁶ T.U.C.: Report of 1928 Congress, pp. 101-3, 304-5.

⁷ See for example *International Seafarer*, August – September 1925. In point of fact, ever since the formation of the National Transport Workers' Federation in 1910, it had always been hoped that the big all-embracing transport workers' union which would one day be formed would include the seamen. But Wilson had other ideas, and in any case was out of the N.T.W.F. by the time the T.G.W.U. was actually brought into being. After he had withdrawn his Sailors' and Firemen's Union from the N.T.W.F. in the summer of 1921, the N.T.W.F. leaders hoped that the new amalgamation – the A.M.W.U., as it became – would one day join forces with the T.G.W.U.

section of this union [the T.G.W.U.] being engaged in an industrial dispute, there was every likelihood of our members being subjected to the same kind of disruptive and "blacklegging" tactics as were recently experienced by the Miners." ¹ So in the latter part of 1928 the T.G.W.U. launched its own seamen's section.

The P.C.5 made it hard to recruit members; but for a long time Bevin refrained from forcing the issue, in spite of the power which the large T.G.W.U. membership among the dock workers gave him. From October 1928 Havelock Wilson was a very sick man, and Bevin knew that some of the other N.U.S. officials were out of sympathy with Wilson's policy. Early in February 1929, indeed, the N.U.S. General Secretary, W. R. Spence, tried to get Bevin to agree to unofficial talks before Wilson was up and about again; but after consulting the executive council of the T.G.W.U. Bevin declined.² In April Havelock Wilson died. Still the N.U.S. did not offer official talks, and Bevin went ahead and organised the first delegate conference of the seamen's section of the T.G.W.U.³ Finally he took the opportunity presented by the renewal of half-yearly articles in the coasting trade, and tried strike action, backing up that of seamen by bringing out dock labourers working on the vessels concerned. By now things were a little more settled in the N.U.S. – it must be remembered that the man who had just died had run the union for more than forty years – and within a few days a truce had been agreed between the two unions; negotiations were got under way, and by the end of the month had resulted in a full agreement. The essence of this was that the T.G.W.U. would cease recruiting seamen, and the N.U.S. would stop supporting "non-political" unions like the breakaway miners' union and would apply for re-affiliation to the T.U.C.⁴

6. SUMMING-UP

It was undeniably the unrest of the rank-and-file, at a time when shipping was desperately needed and threatened by submarine warfare, that in 1917 forced the Government (acting through the Shipping Controller) to intervene, and thus the Shipping Federation to concede a national joint board for the industry – something it had consistently opposed since its own inception in 1890. But this innovation, the

¹ T.G.W.U., Seventh Annual Report, 31st December, 1928 (1929), p. 8; see also *Seafarers' Record*, Nov. 21, 1928.

² *Seafarers' Record*, Mar. 9, 1929.

³ Alan Bullock, *Life and Times of Ernest Bevin*, vol. 1 (Heinemann, 1960), p. 412.

⁴ *Times*, July 2-8 and 31, 1929; *Seaman*, Aug. 12, 1929.

National Maritime Board, would hardly have seen so smooth-running, and subsequently made a permanent, bipartite, institution, had not the ground been prepared.

The preceding few years had seen the growth of a new spirit on both sides of the industry. Between the end of the 1911 strike and 1914 there were already some signs of this: one was the attendance of some leading shipowners at the union's annual dinner following the strike; another was the setting-up of several local joint boards; and there was, too, for what it was worth, the "recognition" of the union by the Federation. The war gave great impetus to this hesitant trend towards a more harmonious relationship: of course there were still differences, but owners and union alike were convinced of the primordial importance of the national interest. Wilson's attitude to the war, to the Germans, and to international socialism, all made him more respectable in the eyes of the shipowners, and more disposed to cooperate with them. The shipowners' attitude was modified too by the change in the relation between supply and demand, where sea-going labour was concerned; the shipping boom of 1911-13 had already strengthened the workers' bargaining position, and the progress of the war had brought a growing labour shortage.

The Board was not a one-sided concession by the shipowners; the relations it formalised and fostered have been such that there has been no official strike by the union since the Board was created. The Board was not merely negotiating machinery on wages, hours and the like; it also provided the framework regulating the supply of labour. To share control of supply with the union was as far as the owners were prepared to go; and in the war situation Wilson did not try to insist on sole control for the union. When the postwar depression in shipping drastically weakened the union's position vis-à-vis the employers, there was no question of winning any such additional concession. In these circumstances Wilson clung tenaciously to those which had already been secured: the national joint board and the principle of joint control of supply. Throughout the 1920's the preservation of these gains was evidently his top priority; understandably so when we recall the long and exceptionally bitter struggle between the Federation and the union, and consider all that the Board and joint supply meant to the union – notably an assured membership and income.

That the Board, and all what went with it, did survive the first critical years of the postwar depression is largely attributable to Havelock Wilson and his policy. But the price paid was a high one – probably a greater price than was necessary to ensure the preservation

of the Board and its concomitant advantages. It is possible, for example, that a less conciliatory attitude on Wilson's part might have resulted in somewhat higher wages and somewhat shorter hours¹ than was in fact the case, though clearly the heavier labour costs were, the fewer ships would have been able to operate economically, and the more seamen would have been unemployed. Certainly the manner and the extent of Wilson's cooperation with shipowners (and shore employers too) were bound to scandalise. In the early 1920's he appears to have regarded employer-union harmony as a necessary means to safeguard the union and its members; but as the decade wore on he treated this harmony more and more as an end in itself, and one to which other considerations must be subordinated.

The application of this principle of employer-union harmony was far from being confined to the negotiating table; there was also the mutual wining and dining – hardly conducive to concord within the union at a time when thousands of seamen were out of work.² In any case rank-and-file unrest he tended, by the 1920's, to regard as inherently subversive, and usually Communist-inspired.³ Moreover, as the P.C.5 became established, the views of the rank-and-file could be increasingly disregarded: the men became dependent for their jobs on the union, as the union officials were on Havelock Wilson for theirs. Not even apparent militancy was necessary to retain the rank-and-file in membership.

The rival unions were in a different position. Certainly neither the secession of Southampton in 1911 nor that of Glasgow in 1912 was caused by any lack of militancy on the part of the leadership of the parent union: the issues were other – the financial control and management of the union, and its demarcation policy. But in the 1920's the question of militancy began to play the major part in inter-union rivalries in shipping. In one form or another, this issue was behind all the main factors responsible for the amalgamation of the

¹ In 1919-20 Wilson's union campaigned vigorously for the inclusion of seamen in the provisions of the Eight Hours Bill. But in the years that followed union policy on hours underwent a radical change. In 1926 Wilson boasted at having lengthened the seaman's working week by fourteen hours, in order to help meet foreign competition (*Times*, Oct. 1, 1926). And in 1928, as Bevin discovered (see above, p. 408), Wilson pledged that the union would vote against the eight-hour day at the International Labour Conference.

² Few enjoyed a reasonably full year's work. One estimate in the mid-twenties put the average term of employment for seamen in this country at seven months in the year (*Marine Worker*, Oct. 1925).

³ That the Communists capitalised on discontent in the industry is beyond dispute; but they did not originate it.

B.S.U. and the Cooks' and Stewards' Union to form the new union. The Cooks' and Stewards' strike and Wilson's newfound hostility to Cotter, Wilson's actions in the coal strike of that spring and the consequent N.T.W.F. sponsorship of a merger to rival his union – all these reflected divergent standpoints on militancy. But, once formed, the A.M.W.U. was caught in a dilemma: its *raison d'être* was to pursue a more militant policy than Wilson's union; but to demonstrate its militancy in negotiations was impossible, since it was allowed no part in them, and if it attempted strike action it was met there too by the close cooperation of Wilson's union and the shipowners, the facility with which this combination could break strikes being greatly intensified by the employment situation.

Wilson was able to kill off the A.M.W.U. But his increasingly ready acceptance of the shipowners' wishes on wages and hours, his strike-breaking activities, and his support for the breakaway company union in the Nottinghamshire coal mines, brought growing hostility from the rest of the labour movement. In particular these things earned him the active opposition of Bevin and the T.G.W.U. – an immensely more powerful adversary than the A.M.W.U. ever was.

Had the struggle between the T.G.W.U. and Wilson's union gone on, the latter could hardly have maintained its closed shop intact. Any weakening of the union's hold on the labour supply would have entailed a corresponding loss of members; in the face of a real onslaught from the T.G.W.U., Wilson's union would certainly have suffered a severe reduction in membership. If the National Maritime Board had survived the upheaval, the seamen's section of the T.G.W.U. would have had to be admitted to the Board, perhaps alongside the National Union of Seamen, perhaps even replacing it. What in fact happened was that Wilson died and, the struggle with the T.G.W.U. being brought to a peaceful conclusion, his creation was saved. His successor at the head of the seamen's union, W. R. Spence, was to heal the breach with the T.G.W.U.,¹ the T.U.C., the Labour Party and the I.T.F., and to prove moreover that, whatever the experience of the last few years might have suggested, the National Maritime Board system was not inconsistent with the energetic defence of the seamen's interests.

¹ To such good effect indeed that Bevin became a formidable ally in the fight for improved safety, working conditions, and wages. (See Bullock, *op. cit.*, pp. 554 and 576-9.)