

SWU offers a hearty congratulations to Dr Edda Nicolson on the publication of her PhD thesis focusing on the early history of the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) from its creation in 1899 until the events surrounding the 1926 General Strike. SWU is a proud member of the GFTU and has invited Edda to share her knowledge and insights into the GFTU's history with our members in this special question and answer session.

SWU also offers warm congratulations to Gawain Little who has been appointed as the new GFTU General Secretary from May 2023, following the retirement of current GFTU General Secretary Doug Nicholls. We look forward to supporting Gawain in his new role!



Dr Edda Nicolson is a historian of early twentieth century British trade unionism and a Lecturer at the University of Wolverhampton. Prior to attending University as a mature student, she had worked in customer service before teaching English as a Foreign Language. Her thesis - 'Under One Banner: The General Federation of Trade Unions' - was published this year, and she is currently working on a book under the same title for Liverpool University press. She has written articles for Times Higher Education and the Tribune, and continues to work within the trade union movement to build membership and particularly to enhance educational opportunities for underrepresented groups.

What inspired you to specialise in trade union history?

When I was doing my History BA at the University of Wolverhampton, I had to choose modules that worked around my children's nursery opening hours. At that point I preferred to study the 17th and 18th centuries, so when I realised that the only option I had for one particular semester was a 20th century module, I was quite disappointed. It felt far too modern! The first class was a quick tour of the module and I was relieved to find that it sounded more interesting than I'd given it credit for. The second class was all about the rise of the Labour party, and the convoluted relationship between all those early organisations - the Independent Labour Party, the Fabians, the Social Democratic Federation, etc - left me absolutely reeling.

It was the third class that got me hooked: It was about the 1926 General Strike and, sitting there at the age of 29, I was utterly amazed that nearly 3 million workers had downed their tools... and I'd never even heard of it. I wasn't raised in a left-leaning home, even though I have been involved with UNISON when I worked in a call centre in my early twenties. I hadn't put history and trade unionism together until I took that module, so I'm very glad that the University nursery wasn't open past 5pm!

Was there anything specific that drew your interest to researching the first three decades of the GFTU's 124-year history?

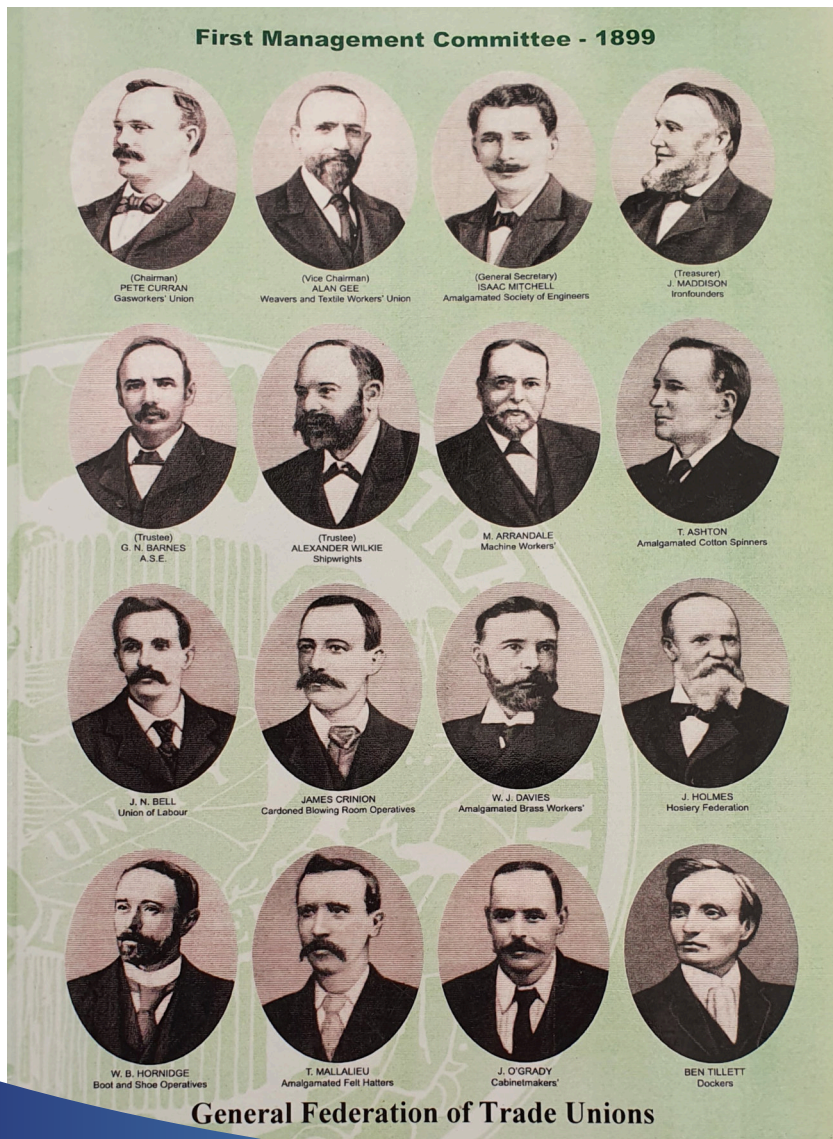
See above! The early twentieth century labour movement was incredibly dynamic, with significant changes to the lives of working people being won over and over again. What really grabs me about this time period is the jostling for control within the labour movement. There was a definite appetite for change, with a heightened general awareness that conditions of working people should be better.

The poorest of the poor - people with absolutely no agency, no welfare state to fall back on, very little education or even access to a safe living space - had new ways to make themselves heard through politics, trade unionism or both. It wasn't a workers' utopia, and there were significant losses as well as gains... but it's the sense of possibility of this period that entices me.

Why was the GFTU created?

Plans for the GFTU had been around for years before they were finally established. There had always been a concern that many workers were simply starved back to work because their unions very quickly ran out of strike pay. Instead of relying on donations from other unions during a dispute, the central argument for the creation of the GFTU was that there should be a centralised strike fund for all unions to pay into and draw from when needed. The problem was that no one agreed on how it should be managed and who could decide which unions were entitled to what amount.

Eventually, it was a high-profile loss that convinced the sceptics. A London branch of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) - a wealthy union that enjoyed significant workplace control - decided to agitate for an 8-hour day. However, the employers were also learning the power of collective action and, through their own Engineering Employers' Federation, they instigated a rolling lockout of workers across the country. The ASE were forced into capitulation after six months of intensifying pressure and vastly depleted bank accounts. It was clear that the wealthy employers could afford to sit out the dispute for longer than the workers could.



This was a turning point for the movement. It was clear that collective action would not always be strong enough if trade unions could not afford to at least give their members enough to live on during disputes. The GFTU was the answer to this: a committee, separate to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), that could collect and administer a strike fund for all. This was quickly changed into a conciliation service, with committee members cross-crossing the country and holding talks between union and employers in order to prevent unnecessary pressures on the GFTU's purse strings.

The first provisional GFTU committee meeting was held on 7th February 1899 and focused on strike fund eligibility rules for Trade Union affiliates.

Gradually, as it became evident that the financial purpose of the GFTU would only work if every union signed up (which they didn't), the conciliatory role they played became their most important function. They acted as spokespeople for smaller, craft-based unions that found themselves drowned out by the larger unions that took up a lot of space in these first few decades. They were rarely involved in high profile strikes; instead, they were central to the day-to-day running of industry by conducting health and safety research, establishing education programmes and reporting to parliament on pay and working conditions. Over the last few decades, the GFTU has quietly performed the mundane but vital work of trade union advocacy, which has guaranteed their longevity during a tumultuous century.

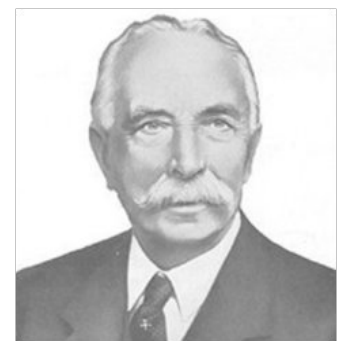
What role did the GFTU play in the broader international labour movement?

The founding members of the GFTU were enthusiastic internationalists. The first general secretary, Isaac Mitchell, worked closely with his German, French and Belgian counterparts in organising regular conferences designed to share information and strategies. This was crucial in ensuring the longevity of international conferences, which hadn't been all that successful up to this point. His successor, William Appleton, was also very interested in establishing a strong international network. He formed close, personal friendships with Carl Legien, leader of the German Federation of Trade Unions, and their American counterpart, Samuel Gompers. Sadly, the outbreak of the First World War put a great strain on the friendship he had enjoyed with Legien. The two men were never able to make amends, as Legien died in 1920.



Isaac Haig Mitchell, the first GFTU General Secretary

As Britain was recovering after the war, Appleton took over as General Secretary of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) from Legien. This would have been a particular boon for the GFTU but the TUC had grown into advocates of organised British labour in recent years. Before the GFTU's inception, they had been a largely consultative body with little interest in being the voice of trade unions; now, after the rapid growth in political representation of workers from the Labour Party and the growing power of large, national trade unions, the TUC had a more central role to play that left little room for the GFTU.



William Achibald Appleton, the second GFTU General Secretary

From 1920, the TUC began to represent Britain at the IFTU instead whilst the GFTU carried on with their work to assist other countries in the establishment of their own trade union organisations. This work has continued for decades, and is shown in the strong international links that the GFTU still has today.

Were there any significant divisions within the GFTU that occurred in its early history and how did they influence its course?

There were many factors that changed the GFTU's path, but two stand out for me:

1. They never managed to get the biggest, most influential unions to affiliate. The Miners' Federation of Great Britain for example, knew that they were rich enough without the GFTU's help. The Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (an ancestor of the present day RMT) also remained aloof. This greatly frustrated Appleton, as he felt that those unions should have supported the GFTU project.

2. Appleton was not an easy man to work with. I think he found it difficult to accept that the labour movement simply changed around him, and that the conditions that led to the GFTU's creation in 1899 had ceased to exist. He felt that trade unions should be the only intermediaries between employers and employees, with full control over the administration of sick benefits, pensions and unemployment support. From his point of view, these were all things that well-run trade unions had been doing for many years, and he resented the reforms to welfare provision that effectively gave too much power to the state. He became very vocal against strikes that he felt were caused by militants that didn't know how to negotiate. Despite this, I think he was the right person to steer the GFTU through these fast-changing years. His stubbornness saved the GFTU from being abolished or rendered obsolete by other organisations, and his tireless work for craft unions won him a great deal of loyalty from their leaders.

What was the impact of the General Strike of 1926 and the events that led up to it on the GFTU and its members?

Appleton was greatly concerned by the rising militancy of the Great Labour Unrest 1911-1914. There were tens of millions of working days lost during this period, which put a great deal of financial pressure on the GFTU in particular. The GFTU was compelled into tightening up its rules regarding strike fund eligibility, which led to increasing resentment as claims to the fund were turned down.

By the time of the 1926 General Strike, the GFTU no longer provided strike pay to workers on sympathy strikes. Of the nearly 3 million workers that put down tools for those 9 days, nearly 30,000 applied to the GFTU for strike pay during the dispute. The GFTU only granted payment to two workers. As members of the National Union of Stove Grate Workers, they had also been on strike for their own reasons as well as supporting the miners.

Truthfully, the GFTU would have been financially ruined had they continued to pay for members to engage in sympathy action. But the resentment from so many unions that had their claims to funds repeatedly rejected only grew, and the GFTU shrank as a national force after 1926.

What is the strangest thing you have found out while researching the GFTU's history?

This tends to surprise people: It was fairly common for trade unions to offer doweries. It was often a struggle to organise women workers, and one method was to guarantee a payment from their funds (after years of paying their membership fees) on the occasion of their marriage. This practice was particularly common in the textile industries.

Between 1899 and now, what would you characterise as a significant thread running through the tapestry of the GFTU's history?

Without a doubt I think that the GFTU's focus on education has been hugely significant for the movement. They started their links with the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) very early on, and encouraged attendance at evening lectures, funded books and sponsored speakers throughout their first decades. They eventually moved to providing scholarships for summer schools. They funded their first cohort of students to Ruskin College in 1939, where they did short courses on trade unions, economics, history and many other topics. Despite changing fortunes for many of their affiliates over the years, the GFTU's passion for education never wavered.