

## Strikebreaking and Anti-Unionism on the Waterfront: The Shipping Federation, 1890–1914<sup>1</sup>

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‘At taking-on time at certain wharves, where the foreman would come and stand at the iron gates of the wharf entrance’, described an eyewitness at the Port of London in 1897, ‘there would usually be a crowd of from two to three hundred men. Probably seventy or eighty would be required, and those at the back of the crowd would climb on to the heads of their fellows, and roll over and over their heads to reach the foreman to get from his hand the metal ticket admitting them to work. The scrambles were frightful’.<sup>2</sup> Although there were port transport workers with specialised skills - and demands for specialisation increased in response to the long transition from sail to steam - casual employment was the paramount feature of maritime labour.<sup>3</sup> The chronic misalignment between the demand and supply of labour, which resulted in persistent underemployment, low wages and the general pauperisation of port districts, and the aggressive attempts of employers to maintain a permanent reserve of workers to meet the pressures of the trade cycle and international competition, was, predictably, conducive to high levels of class conflict. The ferocious antagonism between labour and capital on the waterfront was replete with lessons for the overall trade union movement and its relations with industry.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the massive strike waves, which regularly hit the docks of Britain between the 1880s and 1914, went beyond the spatial confines of seaports and port cities. As the maritime industry was a key strategic sector in the British economy, work stoppages had inevitable and widespread repercussions on other trades, industries and services at the national and imperial levels, and as a consequence their disruptive effects on society as a whole were widely felt. Besides, the international nature of the shipping trade and the formation of international associations of transport workers and employers vastly amplified the magnitude and conspicuousness of maritime conflicts.<sup>5</sup>

The historiography has focussed on the formation of local and national maritime unions, the shifts and adjustments in their organisation, objectives and forms of struggle, the reformist or syndicalist influences on leaders and rank-and-file members, and the role of port workers as part of the wider British labour movement.<sup>6</sup> In addition, port strikes and protest in the period from the Great London Strike of 1889 to the seamen and dockers’ uprising in the pre-war years have been examined down to almost their minutest details. Somewhat surprisingly, shipowner associations and other anti-union organisations operating within the shipping industry have not been subject to the same degree of analysis. Although scholars have recognised the strength of employers and their intransigent opposition to trade union policies and methods, few have focussed on the organisational forms, strategies and wide range of mechanisms that British shipowners employed

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Charles Barnes, *The Longshoremen* (New York, 1915), 190.

<sup>3</sup> See, generally, Gordon Phillips and Noel Whiteside, *Casual Labour. The Unemployment Question in the Port Transport Industry 1880-1970* (Oxford, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm, "National Unions on the Waterside," in *Labouring Men* (London 1964), 204-220. Gerald W. Crompton, "Issues in British Trade Union Organisation 1890-1914," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, XX, 1980, 219-265 (221).

<sup>5</sup> Frank Broeze, "Militancy and Pragmatism. An International Perspective on Maritime Labour, 1870-1914," *International Review of Social History*, XXXVI (1991), 165-200.

<sup>6</sup> Ken Coates and Anthony Topham, *The Making of the Labour Movement. The Formation of the Transport and General Workers’ Union, 1870-1922* (Nottingham, 1994); Eric L. Taiplin, *The Dockers’ Union: A Study of the National Union of Dock Labourers* (Leicester University Press, 1985); Arthur Marsh and Victoria Ryan, *The History of the Seamen’s Union* (Malthouse, 1989).

in their attempts to put down strikes.<sup>7</sup> Even fewer have examined the network of free labour associations, industrial vigilantes, private guards and voluntary associations of “patriotic citizens” formed with the aim of physical strikebreaking within and outside of the docks.<sup>8</sup> This is partly because the traces left in the archives by these representatives and custodians of capital’s interest - in particular the vast body of “yellow” or company unions - tends to be noticeably fragmentary and scattered.

This article provides a systematic study of strikebreaking on the waterfront by tracing the policy of the Shipping Federation, which was perhaps the most aggressive anti-union force in the United Kingdom during the pre-war period. Aside from the official histories<sup>9</sup> - usually written with apologetic and hagiographic intentions - no one has yet written a comprehensive history of this powerful association of shipowners. While historians have unanimously stressed the vulnerability of maritime unions to the aggression and concerted action of the big shipping companies,<sup>10</sup> the strikebreaking apparatus of the Shipping Federation has been only briefly touched upon or neglected altogether.

Drawing on a vast array of archival and published materials,<sup>11</sup> the article focusses specifically on the organisational and operational principles of the shipowners’ federation, which included subsidising the strikebreaking market, forming an occupational class for strike work and delegating or subcontracting security tasks to private actors such as the short-lived and shadowy Volunteer Police Force (1911-1913).<sup>12</sup> It considers how strikebreaking and union busting practices related and adjusted to shifts in the configuration of political power and, in turn, to the varying philosophies of protest policing across the late Victorian and Edwardian years. More explicitly, it sheds light on how the state’s purported neutrality in strike situations - in particular from 1908 onwards - prompted shipowners to consider procuring private security to protect imported strikebreakers and facilities. The article also draws attention to the role of the Shipping Federation in organising and guiding a cartel of employers’ federations to deal with the formation of alliances of transport workers’ unions both nationally and internationally. Accordingly, it traces the enactment of transnational strikebreaking schemes and the foundation of the International Shipping Federation with the explicit purpose of disciplining labour and smashing

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<sup>7</sup> For an overview of employers’ strikebreaking tactics see Arthur I. McIvor, *Organized Capital: Employers’ Associations and Industrial Relations in Northern England, 1880-1939* (Cambridge, 1996), 92-117, especially pp. 94-95 for the Shipping Federation; Ibid. “Employers’ organization and strike-breaking in Britain, 1880-1914,” *International Review of Social History* XXIX. (1984), 1-33. Outside the port industry, see Jonathan Zeitlin, “The labour strategies of British engineering employers, 1890-1922,” in Gospel and Littler, (eds.), *Managerial strategies and industrial relations: an historical and comparative study* (1983), 25-54; Michael V. Flynn and Roy A. Church, *The history of the British coal industry, vols III: 1830-1913, Victorian pre-eminence* (Oxford, 1986), 266-268 and 671-674; J. A. McKenna and Richard G. Rodger, “Control by coercion: employers’ associations and the establishment of industrial order in the building industry of England and Wales, 1860-1914,” *Business History Review*, 59, n. 2 (1985), 203-231.

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Alderman, “The National Free Labour Association,” *International Review of Social History* 21 (3) (1976) 309-36; John Saville, “Trade Unions and Free Labour: the Background to the Taff Vale Decision,” in Asa Briggs and John Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History* (London: 1960), 317-350.

<sup>9</sup> See the dated work of Leslie H. Powell, *The Shipping Federation* (1950).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Philip Bagwell, Transport, in Chris Wrigley (ed.), *The History of British Industrial Relations, 1870-1914* (Brighton, 1982), I, 233-251; Hugh A. Clegg, Alan Fox and Arthur F. Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unionism since 1889* (3 vols. Oxford, 1964-1985), II, 40 ff.

<sup>11</sup> For this article, I have benefitted from scrutinising the archives of the Shipping Federation and the International Shipping Federation, which are preserved at the Modern Record Centre, University of Warwick.

<sup>12</sup> In this article, the word ‘strikebreaker’ is used to both indicate a worker who is acting in opposition to trade union aims, policies and methods, especially by accepting, offering or agreeing to work in place of workers involved in a labour dispute, and to describe an agent who procures or supplies labour replacements and provides security measures if a strike occurs.

the trade union movements - all of this in paradoxical coexistence with the polarisation of the alliance system and intensifying competition in naval armaments.

Amid the gradual expansion of social rights and the progressive incorporation of the working classes into the national political community, the issue of strikebreaking inevitably went beyond the economic sphere and into the main realm of citizenship. In this regard, the article stresses that the shipowners' violent response to the challenges of industrial action should be situated in the context of the more general reaction of business and the propertied classes to democratisation and welfare. It shows how the pressures of liberal progressivism and increased state intervention in industrial relations was regarded by the owners who came to form the Shipping Federation to be as much an objectionable interference with the market system and entrepreneurial initiative as an attack on the whole system of hitherto recognised principles and conventions on which national prosperity was considered to rest. From this premise, consideration will be given to the ideological assumptions and the spectrum of attitudes underlying the shipowners' claims to the right of self-defence and in particular to the intersection of anti-unionism, productive patriotism and fears of national decline in their legitimisation of vigilante activities.

Examination of the paradigmatic case of the Shipping Federation helps to demonstrate the tendency of certain sectors of British industry to wield violent and extra-legal instruments to protect their managerial authority from both the opposition of trade unions and the increasing encroachment of the state into industrial matters. Exposing this thrust towards privatised security serves to illustrate the abrasive tension that arose between the state's monopoly of force and the attempts of maritime capital to safeguard existing socioeconomic relations from the advance of industrial democracy. At the more general level, the analytical emphasis placed on the shipowners' use of coercive strikebreaking methods and their sponsoring of organisations with seditious leanings reveals the anxieties that a new conception of citizenship based on equal political, civil and social rights aroused among those with vested economic interests. Finally, by turning the spotlight on the intense confrontation between shipowners and the seamen's and dockers' unions, this article aims to demystify the image of pre-war domestication of violence in Britain and shows instead how the extensiveness of disorder on the waterfront convinced employers to consider forming their own private police and arm their non-union employees.

In light of these premises, the article intends not only to fill a historiographical gap by focussing on industrial vigilantism, strikebreaking and private security on the waterfront in the volatile transition to mass politics, but also to develop a new perspective on the crisis of confidence that British society experienced in the year preceding the outbreak of the war in order to better understand it.

### **The Shipping Federation and the Challenge of New Unionism**

In seeking to analyse the organisation of the Shipping Federation and to explore the nature of its strikebreaking apparatus, including its large mobilisations of non-union workers, attention must be paid to the conditions of maritime labour, the key aspects of which contributed to the rise of militant radicalism and the transformation of the British waterfront into a test case of strikebreaking and industrial vigilantism.

Port employment was overwhelmingly casual in nature. The permanent oversupply of labour - sometimes aggravated by the seasonal or temporary relocation of workers from other industries - and the influence of cyclical fluctuations in the shipping trade enormously aggravated the levels of unemployment and underemployment. The impact of irregular work, uncertain and insufficient income and the dependence on hiring officials was reinforced by the distinctive concentration of large masses of workers in the districts and quarters adjacent to port sites. These conditions allowed employers a wide range of coercive measures, particularly the hiring or importing of replacement workers in cases of strikes or lockouts. Testifying before the Royal

Commission of Labour, the managing owner of the Wilson-Hill Line, William Becket Hill, unequivocally declared that the most effective method of enforcing control over the men hinged on the perennial threat of the 'competition of outside labour – free labour'.<sup>13</sup>

Control over the labour market was at the core of the conflict between the dockers' and seamen's unions and maritime capital. It was the deep-seated ideological hostility of large port companies to any effort made by the unions to monopolise or regulate labour that gave industrial relations in the shipping industry its 'peculiarly uncompromising atmosphere.'<sup>14</sup> The shipowners, who had responded to the depression of the mid-eighties with the concentration of capital ownership and unprecedented managerial control over the handling of cargoes, perceived a union monopoly as an intolerable violation of both proprietorial rights and managerial prerogatives.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, in the midst of growing apprehension over Britain's industrial future and its international position, shipping owners considered that the interference of trade unions in the market system and the promotion of class conflict rather than productive cooperation in order to attain overall national goals were crippling the pursuit of greater industrial efficiency.<sup>16</sup>

Soon after the Great London Dock Strike of 1889, the sheer scale and magnitude of which had important repercussions for the development of the 'New Unionism' among semi-skilled and unskilled labourers, the employers' mounted a counter-attack.<sup>17</sup> This became immediately apparent following the formation of large associations of shipowners that were intended to guarantee mutual protection. The first to be founded, in the summer of 1889, was the Shipowners' Association of Great Britain, which was limited to the ports on the north-eastern coast.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the major London-based liner shipping companies, including P&O and the British India and Orient Line, initiated plans for a national federation of shipowners. On 2nd September 1890, a meeting of shipowners was held under the chairmanship of the Orient Line's director, Sir Thomas Lane Devitt, at the offices of the London Chamber of Shipping, at which resolutions were unanimously adopted to federate Britain's shipping firms.<sup>19</sup> The most pressing incentive for the formation of this association was the establishment of the Union of the Shipmasters and Officers of Great Britain and Ireland with J. Havelock Wilson as manager, and the vigorous attempts of this union to enforce closed shop agreements at several ports.<sup>20</sup>

The purpose of the newly-formed Shipping Federation was to counter the power of the waterside unions by curbing their ability to engage in effective collective action. This was explicitly set out in a circular to its constituent members and the details were then forwarded to the Royal Commission by its General Manager, George Alexander Laws. It stated that 'The Federation intends to secure to every man freedom to work at his own terms without interference ... [it] will proceed against those who break the law, and will protect those who are threatened or supply substitutes. It will specifically protect masters and officers, and other members of a crew, who are threatened in any way in consequence of their not belonging to any Union, and will

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<sup>13</sup> Royal Commission on Labour 1892, Minutes of Evidence, Group B, Vol. I, Q. 6506.

<sup>14</sup> John Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers. A Study of Trade Unionism in the Port of London, 1870-1914* (New York, 1969), 124.

<sup>15</sup> See generally, Royal Commission on Labour 1892, Minutes of Evidence with Appendices taken before Group B (Vol. 1), "Docks, Wharves and Shipping" and (Vols. II and II), "Transport by Water (Docks, Wharves, Shipping and Canals) and "Transport by Land (Tramways, Omnibuses, Cabs and Railways).

<sup>16</sup> The pages of *Fairplay* – the shipowners' organ - are filled with articles, statements and notes on the problem of labour unrest and its challenge to national efficiency. On the managerial ideology of employers in the pre-war period, see John Child, *British Management Thought* (London, 1969), 33-41.

<sup>17</sup> John Lovell, "The Significance of the Great Dock Strike of 1889 in British Labour History," in W.J. Mommsen and H.G. Husung (eds.), *The Development of Trade Unionism in Great Britain and Germany, 1880-1914*, 100-113.

<sup>18</sup> Royal Commission on Labour 1891-94. Fifth and Final Report, Part 1, 172.

<sup>19</sup> Powell, *The Shipping Federation*, 1-2.

<sup>20</sup> Coates and Topham, *The Making of the Labour Movement*, 140.

prosecute those who threaten'.<sup>21</sup> The anti-union aims of the Shipping Federation moved under the cover of law. While shipowners were not legally obliged to recognise the unions or to bargain collectively with the representatives of their employees, they had the right to keep their businesses operating. In anticipation of or during strikes, police authorities were bound by law to take all reasonable measures to maintain order and to ensure the protection of both life and property, and they were also mandated not to interfere with the right of an employer to import strike replacements.

By the end of 1890, 25 firms, companies and associations were affiliated to or were cooperating with the Shipping Federation, representing about seven-eighths of the total tonnage of the United Kingdom. The Executive Council, which met twice a year in London, was invested with full authority with regards to matters of policy and action. Administration of the Shipping Federation's affairs between general sessions was delegated to its committees, which included the General Purposes Committee, the Finance Committee, the Benefit Fund Committee and the Emergency Committee.<sup>22</sup>

As its membership expanded, elaborate strikebreaking machinery was devised to ensure the prompt recruitment, transportation and protection of non-union labourers. Shipping registry offices were established in all the main ports of Britain, not infrequently through the amalgamation and streamlining of an existing network of bogus or free labour unions and working-class associations. In October 1890, for instance, the Executive Council of the Shipping Federation appointed the secretary of the fictitious Amalgamated British Seamen's Protection Society, William Paterson Lind, as the General Registry Superintendent for the whole Thames District. His duties were to organise and coordinate a general registry scheme for seamen and 'to bring with him the remaining members of a Seaman's Union of which he was secretary'.<sup>23</sup>

Local registry offices, which were run by registrars and outdoor officers, enlisted seamen, kept the 'local black list' and issued permits, benefit schemes and parchment tickets.<sup>24</sup> The latter entitled the holder to preferential employment with any shipmaster affiliated to the Shipping Federation in return for pledging to accept engagement alongside both union and non-union crews.<sup>25</sup> By 1895, registries at various shipping centres had issued 172,376 tickets to seamen and firemen, while 14,166 masters and officers had been listed in the Federation's benefit books.<sup>26</sup>

Alongside this ramified network of registry offices, the Shipping Federation appointed a General Labour Superintendent to supervise the administrative and operational aspects of labour replacement. Lieutenant R.H. Armit, Honorary Secretary of the National and Patriotic League for the Protection of British Industries, took up the role of the first Labour Master of the Shipping Federation.<sup>27</sup> He was replaced by Thomas Robb at the end of 1890. The general duties of the Labour Superintendent included recruiting labour masters or foremen, in particular from among the men who had served the Shipping Federation during strikes, maintaining communication and liaising with free labour throughout the United Kingdom and coordinating their prompt dispatch

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<sup>21</sup> "Circular giving the scope of the operations of The Shipping Federation, Limited" is reprinted in Royal Commission on Labour, Minutes of Evidence, Group B, volume I, Appendix VII.

<sup>22</sup> "Articles of Association of the Shipping Federation Limited" in Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Modern Records Centre (MRC), The Shipping Federation (SF), Policy and Administration (PA), Grey Books. Transactions of the Federation, Oct. 1st 1893 to September 30th, 1896, Central Office & Thames District, 1890-1891. Seamen's Registry, Established October 1890. Revised up to 1894. Return giving Names, Ratings, Duties, Salaries, and Allowances of the various Registry Officials employed by The Shipping Federation in the Thames District. No Date.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Registration Ticket is reprinted in Royal Commission on Labour, Vol. 1, Appendix XI.

<sup>26</sup> *The Shipping Federation: Why it was formed and what it has done*, reprinted from the Federation's journal, *Fairplay*, 7 June 1895, 3.

<sup>27</sup> On Lieutenant, R. H. Armit, see Hugh Cunningham, "Jingoism in 1877-78," *Victorian Studies*, 14 (1971).

in case of strike or dispute. In addition, he was tasked with making arrangements for the transport of strikebreakers by rail or water, supervising the paying of wages and allotment notes, overseeing the housing of the Shipping Federation's strike materials and stores, keeping the central office stock book and periodically reporting to the General Manager on the situation of free labour and union labour in all districts. If required by the General Manager, he was assigned to accompany free labourers to the strike area. At a local level, the Labour Superintendent supervised the officials of the various Free Labour Offices. These officials were mostly hired from among ex-police officers and their tasks were to organise and recruit labour,<sup>28</sup> at times using methods that were sinisterly reminiscent of the press gangs that forced seamen into service<sup>29</sup> The prospect of higher salaries and, perhaps, greater opportunities for promotion may have enticed these former policemen away from public policing into private security positions and strikebreaking services. It is fair to assume that this movement of personnel encouraged informal forms of public/private partnerships in undercover work (e.g. anti-union espionage).<sup>30</sup>

When it became difficult to import seafaring or dock labour due to intense picketing at the docks, Free Labour Officials coordinated the transportation of strikebreakers on depot ships.<sup>31</sup> These vessels, which were moored outside the picketed docks, provided housing and messing accommodation for the replacement workers. If active intervention through the supply of strikebreakers was not undertaken, members of the Shipping Federation were indemnified under the rules for detention of their vessels.<sup>32</sup>

The formation and expansion of the Shipping Federation precipitated a wave of dock strikes involving both seamen and dockers that spread across British ports. All the conflicts turned on the employment of non-union workers. The Labour Department responded by dispatching batches of free labourers. Where dock police forces proved inadequate to protect the safety of the strikebreakers, the big shipping magnates regularly secured the collaboration of local magistrates in deploying the police. Between September and November 1890, strikes in Leith, Bowness, Grangemouth, Garston and Barrow were broken by ample supplies of blackleg labour.<sup>33</sup> In London, the dock strike was sparked by the decision of the United Labour Council to circulate the Wade's Arms Manifesto, which required port workers to boycott the vessels of Messrs. Shaw, Savill & Co., the New Zealand Shipping Company and the British India Steam Navigation Company until these shipping lines undertook 'to sign none but members of the National Amalgamated Sailors' and Firemen's Union'.<sup>34</sup> The boycotted companies applied to the Shipping Federation to obtain free labourers and as many as 1,100 strikebreakers recruited from northern outports and the Kent countryside flooded into the London Docks and were housed in depot ships and sheds.<sup>35</sup> During the strike, Free Labour Officials appeared to have armed some of the strikebreakers with revolvers. Clement Edwards, who was at the time an assistant in the Dockers' Union, reported several cases of armed free labourers on the Albert Docks to the Royal Commission.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Stephen Sims, representative of the Amalgamated Stevedores, declared: 'It is within my knowledge that they have done so [carried firearms] ... it was a dispute in the

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<sup>28</sup> MRC, SF, PA, Grey Books. Transactions of the Federation, Oct. 1st 1893 to September 30th, 1896, General Labour Establishment & District Charges, Revised up to 1894. Return giving Names, Ratings, Salaries and Allowances of the various Labour Officials employed by the Shipping Federation, Central Establishment, and Thames District. No Date.

<sup>29</sup> *The Times*, 20 June, 1893.

<sup>30</sup> Coates and Topham, *The Making of the Labour Movement*, 141.

<sup>31</sup> Powell, *The Shipping Federation*, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Memorandum of Association of the Shipping Federation, 1890 reprinted in Royal Commission on Labour, Vol. 1, Appendix, VI.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* Appendix, XII.

<sup>34</sup> Royal Commission on Labour, 1891-94. Fifth and Final Report, Part 1, 187.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Royal Commission on Labour, Minutes of Evidence, Group B, volume I, 433.

dock, and it was a case of the federation men against our men. They were the aggressors, and they followed our men on board the vessel'.<sup>37</sup> The use of aggressive strikebreaking methods resulted in the strike being defeated and marked the beginning of a decade-long decline in trade unionism in the London port.<sup>38</sup>

While the London dock strike was in progress, the port of Cardiff was brought to a virtual standstill when the tippers' refusal to load coal onto a vessel manned by non-union crews turned into a general strike against the Shipping Federation. Picketing was quickly established on the docks with the aim of preventing imported labourers being brought in. To get round this, a depot ship belonging to the Shipping Federation, the *Speedwell*, was used to accommodate outfits of strikebreakers comprising up to 200 men, mainly recruited by 'crimps' in the boarding houses of Liverpool and other ports and dispatched for ship work. After five weeks, the union was forced to call off the strike and work was resumed.<sup>39</sup> On the Aberdeen docks, seamen also went on strike against the 'Federation Ticket'. The arrival of strikebreakers led to an immediate expansion and aggravation of the conflict, with the dockers striking in sympathy and the shipowners responding by supplying blackleg dockers. There was 'any amount of free labour to be had at any time, at any rate, and good labour, too', George A. Laws declared. Three weeks later, the strike collapsed.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, a strike broke out in Hull when dockers refused to unload the steamer *Mary Anning*, which had enlisted 'an all-Federation crew' instead of union workers. The Shipping Federation promptly dispatched non-union labour from Liverpool to unload the ship's cargo onto lighters, but the lightermen refused to handle it. A number of strikes went on for about six months, with the Shipping Federation unable to make a decisive breakthrough at what was then the strongest and best organised union port in the country.<sup>41</sup> On Humberside, however, the trial of strength between the Shipping Federation and the waterside unions was merely deferred.

In March 1893, the shipowners decided to establish a Free Labour Office in Hull, the British Labour Exchange, and assured preferential treatment for those who registered. The objective of the British Labour Exchange was to thwart union efforts to mount effective strikes by securing a reserve of free labourers who could be employed in case of stoppage or refusal to work. In spite of the conciliatory efforts of the dockers' delegates, whose position had been weakened by the depression in the shipping trade and unemployment, negotiations between the parties proved fruitless and a strike was called in early April. About 8,000 dockers came out on strike and sympathetic strikes by sailors, cranemen, lightermen, firemen and other classes of port workers followed. This brought work on the docks and wharves to a general standstill. The strike, which was the most extensive and severe that the Shipping Federation had yet had to cope with, lasted seven weeks. Over 7,000 strikebreakers, including batches from Sweden and the Netherlands, were transported to Hull until the docks were fully manned. Local magistrates, who were mostly appointed from among the shipowners or the shareholders of shipping companies, applied for police reinforcements from neighbouring areas as well as military aid to protect the blackleg labour, and two gunboats were positioned in the Humber to defend the vessels. The massive importation of outside labour led to the rapid brutalisation of conduct and widespread disorder. Stone throwing, police baton charges, street fights, shootings, arson and the destruction of property all became regular features of the dispute. Eventually, the strike collapsed with the complete acceptance on the part of the workers of the terms laid down by the shipowners, which

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 338.

<sup>38</sup> For a thorough analysis of the positions of employers and workers in the Port of London at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, see John Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*.

<sup>39</sup> This account relies on that given in the Final Report of the Royal Commission. See also Philip J. Leng, *The Welsh Dockers* (G.W. and A. Hesketh, 1981).

<sup>40</sup> Royal Commission on Labour, Minutes of Evidence, Group B, volume I, 229.

<sup>41</sup> Raymond Brown, *Waterfront Organisation in Hull 1870-1900* (Hull, 1972), Ch. 3.

included recognition of the Free Labour Exchange.<sup>42</sup> ‘The dockers’, George A. Law wrote years later, ‘have found their Waterloo in the strike of Hull and, undoubtedly, the coercive tactics of the “New Unionism” generally have been moderated by the knowledge that, owing to the efficiency to which the Federation Free Labour System has been brought, from 500 to 5,000 men can be mustered, fully equipped with beds, bedding, cooking utensils, gear, &c., from the central stores in London, and dispatched to any district where their services may be required at a few hours’ notice’.<sup>43</sup>

The anti-unionism of the Shipping Federation – its aggressive recourse to coercive strikebreaking actions, the arming of its dockside agents and the ease with which it could call on the intervention of police and the military – resulted in the liquidation of the National Sailors’ and Firemen’s Union (NSFU) and the weakening of the maritime unions’ position. At the same time, maritime workers learnt that the new association of shipowners was not afraid to use violence and unlawful measures to defend their unilateral control over the labour market and employment relations.

### Subcontracting Strikebreaking

‘Bodies of organized strike-breakers multiplied by the dozen’, trade union leader Ben Tillett wrote in his memoirs. ‘Hundreds of thousands of pounds were poured into them. Ships were commissioned as blacklegs depots. The poorest scum of the slums were enlisted and the offscourings of the gaols gathered in. The Shipping Federation was formed. Trade Union wrecking and strikebreaking became almost a science’.<sup>44</sup> After playing a direct role in the violent and murky business of strikebreaking, the Shipping Federation recognised that they ran the risk of legal liabilities and so routinely opted to subcontract the supply of strike replacements to bogus or free labour unions, which emerged within the ‘Free Labour’ movement or were formed on an *ad hoc* basis by employers to serve their own ends. The widespread use of third parties to supply labour replacements (or free labourers) and the interrelated professionalisation and commercialisation of strikebreaking and strike-guard services became salient yet often overlooked features of the employers’ counterattack against mass unionism.

On the waterfront, myriad organisations, such as the Amalgamated Seamen’s and Tradesmen’s Union, the International Federation of Stewards, the London Seamen’s Mutual Protection Society, the Vigilance Association and others, had played a role in strikebreaking since the early 1880s and apparently continued to operate until the early 20th century.<sup>45</sup> In 1891, the Executive Council of the Shipping Federation approved the formation of free labour associations in Southampton and other principal shipping districts, and was also prepared to consider benefit schemes for seamen, dockers and others connected with the already established registry offices.<sup>46</sup> Two years later, the Shipping Federation sponsored the reorganisation of the East End underworld of labour, recruiting agents into the National Free Labour Association (NFLA). In addition to legal vulnerabilities, the shipowners recognised that the main difficulties associated with countering the tactics of New Unionism lay in sympathetic strike action. Therefore, from 1891, the shipowners began to support establishment of inter-sectorial partnerships with the aim

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<sup>42</sup> The Hull Strike of 1893 has been extensively studied. See, in particular, the cited work of Brown, *Waterfront Organisation in Hull 1870-1900*; Clement Edwards, “The Hull Shipping Dispute,” *Economic Journal* (Aug. 1893), 345-57.

<sup>43</sup> *A handy book for shipowners & masters* (1899), 217.

<sup>44</sup> Ben Tillett, *Memories and Reflections* (1931), 176.

<sup>45</sup> Marsh and Ryan, *The Seamen*. 312. See also, “Free Labour Frauds—a study in dishonesty,” *The Critic Magazine*, 1898.

<sup>46</sup> MRC, SF, PA, Grey Books. Transactions of the Federation, Oct. 1st 1893 to September 30th, 1896, Executive Council, “Free Labour Association,” 19th February, 1891.



of founding a national strikebreaking agency.<sup>47</sup> The formation of the NFLA under the leadership of the self-styled ‘King of Scabs’, William Collison, was essentially the outcome of this initiative.

Constructed around the network of ‘free labour exchanges’, which were usually administered by retired police detective inspectors, the association would act as the main commercial conduit for supplying blackleg labour to British industries up until the First World War.<sup>48</sup> When a strike broke out, the NFLA supplied and transported workers who had registered at its offices and signed the Free Labour pledge. Whenever picketing was anticipated or called for, a ‘guard of special emergency’ was employed to protect the replacement workers during their journey to the strike area and some limited medical assistance was also provided. A team of reporters, a photographer and a solicitor accompanied the imported labour in case legal action would be necessary at a later date. The employers had to guarantee housing, food and protection.<sup>49</sup>

While in the 1890s the NFLA was engaged for the most part on the waterfront, in the early years of the new century, its anti-labour services were hired by railway companies. Most of the disputes in which the agency supplied free labour were small, although in a number of cases they had far-reaching consequences. Certainly, Collison, who claimed that in 20 years the NFLA fought ‘no less than six hundred and eight-two battles with aggressive Trade Unions’<sup>50</sup>, recognised that violence was at the heart of the strikebreaking business:

‘In the North-East Coast Shipsmiths’ Strike, a certain Councillor named Summerbell, who afterwards became M.P. for Sunderland, gave notice to move in the Council, that police protection should be withdrawn from the Free Labourers, To this threat I at once replied that if the Council denied us protection in the exercise of our legal and moral right to work, I would send for our Emergency men, arm them, and meet organized violence with organized violence’.<sup>51</sup>

Regardless of how much Collison and his associates may have relished the inherently violent tensions of ‘industrial warfare’, the work of the association was not limited to strikebreaking. It also included propaganda against trade unionism through the Free Labour Gazette (later the Free Labour Press and Industrial Review) as well as the use of informational lobbying. Furthermore, it endorsed legislation restricting the powers of trade unions and campaigned against Labour politics.<sup>52</sup>

By the end of the century, the shipowners, together with the Employers’ Federation of Engineering Associations, the London Association of Engineering Employers, the National Association of Master Builders and the South Metropolitan Gas Company, aware of the NFLA’s difficulties in coping with large-scale strikes, supported the formation of the Free Labour Protection Association (FLPA). The primary purpose of this organisation was ‘to test systematically the efficiency, or otherwise, of the existing laws for the protection of Non-Unionists’.<sup>53</sup> Although the new body was not an out-and-out strikebreaking organisation, it was said to have its own police for the protection of blackleg labour, who could be sent anywhere at only a few hours’ notice and sworn in as special constables. Former Metropolitan Police officers

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. “British Labour Exchange,” August, 1892. See also, Edward Bristow, *Individualism Versus Socialism in Britain, 1880-1914* (New York and London, 1987), 233-234.

<sup>48</sup> Alderman, *The National Free Labour Association*; [J. C. Manning], *The National Free Labour Association: its foundation, history, and work* (1898); William Collison, *The Apostle of Free Labour* (1913).

<sup>49</sup> Collison, *The Apostle of Free Labour*, 101-102.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 95.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 221.

<sup>52</sup> George A. Hutt, “A forgotten campaign of “The Times” against Trade Unionism,” *The Modern Quarterly*, Vol. II no. 1 (January 1939), 63-67.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in *The Labour Gazette*, Vol. 5 1897, 318.

and army veterans formed the ranks of this force. ‘These men’, the Secretary of the FLPA, Fredrick Millar, stated before the Royal Commission in 1906, ‘happen to be big, strong, powerful fellows and their presence is quite sufficient to ensure the men getting about without discomfort’.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to the NFLA and the FLPA, other anti-labour organisations emerged during this period, including the Provincial Free Labour Association, the Lancashire, Yorkshire and Midlands Independent Labour Association, the Plymouth and District Free Labour Association, and the Association of Non-Unionists, the latter primarily serving the Amalgamated Society of Engineers.<sup>55</sup> The rise of organisations for the protection and advancement of employers’ interests, whether by functioning as ‘yellow’ unions or as commercial suppliers of blackleg labour, testified to the increasing professionalisation of strikebreaking services. This thrust towards the contracting out of anti-labour provisions played an important role in the employers’ manoeuvres to split labour markets, generate divisions among workers and safeguard the *laissez faire* freedom of contract.

### ‘A state of defensive preparation’, 1906–1910<sup>56</sup>

The Liberal landslide in the General Election of 1906, which attested to the increased parliamentary strength of Labour, produced a climate of industrial relations that was more favourable to trade unionism and attempts to improve the conditions of maritime labour by legislation. The shipowners’ response to the growing pressure of industrial democratisation betrayed their outright authoritarian reflexes and they went to the extreme length of threatening a private solution to the ‘labour problem’.

From its early years, the strikebreaking machinery of the Shipping Federation had been bolstered by a series of judicial decisions that undermined statutory recognition of the trade unions, as embodied in the legislative acts of 1871 and 1875. With setbacks such as wide application of the principle of *Lumley v Gye* (1853) to trade disputes, the decision in *J. Lyons & Sons v Wilkins* (1899), which virtually outlawed any form of picketing, and the liability of unions established by the *Taff Vale* case (1901), trade union activity was severely impaired. The passage of the Trade Disputes Act (TDA) of 1906 reversed this cycle of judicial intervention and protected trade unions from civil and criminal proceedings.<sup>57</sup>

With the passing of the TDA, the shipowners’ desire for industrial self-defence gained a new sense of urgency. The anti-unionism of American employers and their vast reliance on strikebreaking agencies, private police and labour espionage became a possible model for overcoming the constraints imposed on strikebreaking by the Liberal government’s assertion of neutrality in labour disputes. ‘If things go on as they seem to be shaping up’, stated Cuthbert Laws, the new General Manager of the Shipping Federation, in an interview with the *Daily Mail*, ‘we in this country may be compelled in our own defence, from the sheer necessity of the case, to form some such force as the Pinkerton police in America’.<sup>58</sup>

A matter of grave concern - at least for the shipowners - was section 2 of the Trade Disputes Act, which in lieu of the provisions of section 7 of the Conspiracy and Protection Act of 1875, provided for the right to picket for peaceful persuasion. The Belfast dock strike of 1907

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<sup>54</sup> *Royal Commission on Trade Disputes and Trade Combinations*, 1907, 208.

<sup>55</sup> E. H. Phelps Brown, *The Growth of British Industrial Relations* (1959), 166-167.

<sup>56</sup> Quote is in MRC, SF, PA, Grey Books. Transactions of the Federation, from October 1st 1902 to September 30th, 1905, Report of the General Purposes Committee to the Executive Council, 28th April 1905, 4.

<sup>57</sup> See, generally, Henry Rothschild II, “Government Regulation of Trade Unions in Great Britain: II,” *Columbia Law Review*, Vol. 38, no. 8 Dec. 1938, 1335-1398.

<sup>58</sup> *Daily Mail*, 5 April, 1906.

appeared to justify their disquiet. In the Annual Report of the Central Labour Office, the General Labour Superintendent, E.G. Irvine, declared:

'In all my experience I have never seen a strike conducted with such violent and venomous methods as those employed by the Union at Belfast, and it is very evident that unless this new Act is considerably modified and the local authorities exhibit more energy and determination at the beginning of those disputes by a just and firm administration of the law, our strike will become much more difficult and costly than in the past'.<sup>59</sup>

The development of new forms of mass picketing and the apparent disinclination to provide unconditional protection for imported labour had serious implications for the Shipping Federation's strikebreaking apparatus. At a meeting of the Executive Council, Chairman T.L. Devitt cautioned the shipowners that 'If the Government will not do it we must protect ourselves'.<sup>60</sup>

Between 1908 and 1909, the Shipping Federation's structure was again put under pressure in the Irish Sea by the dissemination of James Larkin's appeal for militant action. During the summer of 1908, the NUDL dockers employed by the City of Cork Steam Packet Company refused to work alongside members of the General Labourers Union and insisted that the company discharge them. After the company rebuffed their demands, the carters, checkers, storekeepers and railway chockers all went out on strike in sympathy with the dockers and refused to handle any cargoes consigned to or carried by the Cork Steam Packet Company and the railway companies. The Shipping Federation dispatched 382 dock labourers, carters and storemen from Liverpool, Hull and Grimsby, together with a supply of foremen, clerks, timekeepers, stewards and cooking staff. The strike then extended to the coal porters, compelling the Shipping Federation to deliver new batches of strikebreakers from different English cities.<sup>61</sup> To avoid alienating the general public, who were becoming alarmed at the levels of violence and disorder, the shipowners agreed to negotiate with union delegates. In its November 1908 issue, *Fairplay*, the shipowners' official publication, lamented that the opacity of the provisions concerning picketing, which did not establish a rule as to the number of workers who might be placed on picket lines in the exercise of their right to peaceful persuasion, undermined effective policing and left employers helpless to protect their businesses.<sup>62</sup>

Aside from the problem of picketing, the shipowners were aggrieved by increasing government intervention in labour disputes. In Dublin, the carters, at the instigation of Larkin's newly founded Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU), went on violence-marred strike at the end of November 1909. The dockers followed in sympathy. The shipowners applied for assistance from the Shipping Federation, and the Labour Department began to arrange for the transportation of labour replacements. However, the Lord Lieutenant intervened in the dispute and offered to arbitrate between the parties. The Dublin District Committee accordingly requested that the importation of free labourers be postponed. The stalling of negotiations prompted the Shipping Federation to issue a 48-hour ultimatum to the local authorities, after which the importation of labour would not be held back. In the meantime, 1,000 blackleg dockers were held

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<sup>59</sup> MRC, SF, PA, Grey Books. Transactions of the Federation, from October 1st 1905 - September 30th 1906. The bound volume also includes printed transactions of the Federation, committee, agenda and reports for the years 1907 through October 1908. Central Labour Office, April 7th 1908, 2.

<sup>60</sup> Proceedings of the Executive Council of the Shipping Federation, 25 October 1907. Quoted in Barbara Fletcher, "The government were determined to make the men as strong as the masters. The experience of the Shipping Federation, 1906 to 1910," *Maritime Policy and Management*, 11:4, 1984, 262.

<sup>61</sup> MRC, SF, PA, Grey Books. Transactions of the Federation, 1908-1911. Report of the General Purposes Committee to the Executive Council, 21st May, 1909. See also the already cited report of the Central Labour Office, April 7th 1908, 1-4.

<sup>62</sup> *Fairplay*, 26 November, 1908.

in readiness to be dispatched on the Federation depot ship, the Dominion liner Vancouver and a passenger vessel, the Nora Creina. A further request by the Lord Lieutenant to delay labour replacement was deemed untenable, 'feeling sure that the strike could only be terminated by decisive action'. Before any strikebreakers arrived at the docks, however, a settlement was reached, thus preventing the imagined violent confrontations.<sup>63</sup>

The Liberal government's impartial style of law enforcement, as well as its commitment to formalising procedures for the resolution of labour disputes through statutory mediation and arbitration, became even more evident during the Newport dock strike of 1910. Houlder Brothers & Co., which had connections with the Shipping Federation, arranged to bring in strikebreakers and made a formal demand for protection. The Watch Committee feared that supplying police or troop protection for the imported workers could result in serious disorder and possibly a labour stoppage in the neighbouring Monmouthshire collieries. On the advice of the Home Office, which had, through the Board of Trade, tried unsuccessfully to mediate a settlement, the Chief Constable refused the firm and its employees protection and threatened to prevent the arrival of imported labour on the docks. At the end of the strike, the Shipping Federation accused the Home Office of refusing to abide by the legal obligation to protect free labourers and of seeking to coerce Houlder Brothers & Co into arbitration.<sup>64</sup>

The more conciliatory approach of the Liberal government to labour and the passing of a body of laws regulating the maritime sector diminished the shipowners' trust in the political authorities. The state's sanctioning of collective bargaining procedures and any concession to organised labour were perceived by the shipping employers as an assault upon property and contract rights and an incentive to industrial insubordination. All of this undermined their faith in a political culture that unreservedly recognised the state's monopoly of force and contributed to the emergence of leanings towards the privatisation of security.

### **'The labour question adopts more and more an international character' - The Shipping Federation and Schemes for International Strikebreaking**

The international nature of shipping, which led maritime unions in different countries to form alliances, as signalled by the foundation of the International Transport Workers Federation (ITWF), hastened the formulation of similar transnational schemes for anti-labour collaboration and coordination among shipowner federations.

As early as 1898, the Executive Council of the Shipping Federation appointed a special committee to consider the issue of intervention in foreign strikes. The committee made no recommendations as to the desirability of extending the Shipping Federation's operations abroad, although any member affected by strikes outside Britain could receive assistance.<sup>65</sup> The first formal attempt at international collaboration was made by the Chairman of the Verein Hamburger Rheder, Adolf Woermann, in the aftermath of the Hamburg dock strikes of 1896–1897. Woermann requested British shipowners to employ only stevedores from the Labour Office of the Hamburg Federation of Shipowners and Ship Agents.<sup>66</sup> At the beginning of the century, and in response to the outbreak of the strikes that hit continental ports, the leading shipowner associations of Denmark, Holland and France communicated with representatives of the Shipping

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<sup>63</sup> Report of the General Purposes Committee to the Executive Council, 21st May, 1909, 2.

<sup>64</sup> MRC, SF, PA, Grey Books. Transactions of the Federation, 1908-1911. Report of the Legal and Indemnity Committee to the Executive Council, 18th November, 1901.

<sup>65</sup> MRC, SF, PA, Grey Books. Transactions of the Federation, October 1st 1896-September 30th 1899, Report on the Special Committee on Foreign Strikes to the Executive Council, 22nd April, 1898.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. Letter of Adolf Woermann to the Secretary of the Shipping Federation, January 12, 1898.

Federation to gather information on its organisation and methods.<sup>67</sup> In 1902, the Schutzverein Deutscher Rheder and the Dampskibsreederei Foreningen made an official proposal for cooperation with the Shipping Federation. A subcommittee was appointed by the Executive Council to consider cooperation with foreign employers' federations and a resolution was passed stating 'the time is not yet ripe for close alliance as proposed [...] but the best consideration of the Federation will always be given to exceptional cases which may arise in this country for which assistance is requested, provided they involve no question of wages'.<sup>68</sup> The following year, after the Marseille seamen's strike, the Messageries Maritimes contacted representatives of the Shipping Federation for technical and administrative assistance. A few months later, the Comité Général des Armateurs de France was formed, its leading officials 'desiderous of tendering assurances of their willingness to cooperate in mutual defence of any common interests involved'.<sup>69</sup>

In the spring of 1907, consolidation of a militant international labour front, as would materialise during the Sixth International Convention of Transport Workers in Vienna in 1908, prompted the Shipping Federation to consider the formation of an international body of shipowners to deal with 'the question of labour'. The General Manager, Cuthbert Laws, in endorsing a scheme for cooperation and mutual support between the various shipowners' organisations of Europe, stated:

'The labour question adopts more and more an international character [...] The unions have for a long time had in their minds the formation of a body so great, so influential, and so far-reaching that the shipowner, if he is not willing to send his ship without profit from one port to another, will be compelled to absolutely surrender to the demands of the seamen's unions. To prevent the realization of such a state, the shipowners of all countries must also combine'.<sup>70</sup>

Proposals were initially discussed at the International Conference of Maritime Employers held in London in mid-October 1907. Delegates from the principal ports of the United Kingdom, the Central Association of Shipowners of Germany, the Dampskibsreederei Foreningen of Copenhagen, the Comité Général des Armateurs de France, the Federation Maritime of Antwerp, the Nederlandsche Reedersvereentging of Amsterdam and other Dutch organisations, the Sveriges Redareförening of Sweden and the Federazione degli Armatori Italiani of Genoa attended the event. The order of the day was international coordination of shipowners, indemnity for those who suffered liabilities, contingencies and losses through strikes, blacklisting and boycotting unionised seamen and dockers, and forming a transnational body of strikebreakers.<sup>71</sup> The International Shipping Federation (ISF) was officially constituted in London in October 1909, its leadership and top management drawn almost exclusively from the Shipping Federation.<sup>72</sup> The shipowners of Austria-Hungary, Italy and Spain did not join.<sup>73</sup> Following the

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid. Grey Books. Transactions of the Federation, October 1st 1899-September 30th 1902, Report on the Special Committee on Foreign Strikes to the Executive Council, 26th October, 1900.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. Grey Books. Transactions of the Federation, October 1st 1902-September 30th 1905. Report of the General Purposes Committee to the Executive Council, 24th October, 1902, 1.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. Report of the General Purposes Committee to the Executive Council, 24th April, 1903, 2-3.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Samuel Gompers, "The Seamen's Successful Uprising," *American Federationist: Official Magazine of the American Federation of Labor*, vol. 18, no. 9 September 1911, 683.

<sup>71</sup> *Deutsche Arbeitgeber Zeitung*, 2 February, 1908.

<sup>72</sup> On the administrative functioning of the ISF, see MRC, International Shipping Federation, Minutes, Bound volume of minutes from the General Council and Executive Committee, 1909-14.

<sup>73</sup> In the "Scheme for Constitution of an International Shipping Federation as finally revised, March 3rd, 1909," it was specified that in countries where there was more than one association of shipowners, such associations had to merge into one organization as a condition of membership. It is probable that the shipowners of Austria-Hungary, Italy and Spain could not reach an immediate agreement to the merger or

emergence of international associations of employers and workers, the battle lines were drawn for a confrontation of unprecedented proportions on the waterfront.

### **The Shipping Federation and the ‘Great Unrest’, 1910–1914**

The unprecedented industrial struggle in the years before the outbreak of the war – in concert with the Agadir incident, the constitutional crisis of 1909-1911, the women’s suffrage movement, the escalating battle over Irish Home Rule and the arming of Ulster in the same period – raised fears of political and social disintegration among the propertied upper and middle classes.<sup>74</sup>

Amongst the shipowners, the unceasing pattern of agitation and the difficulties in counteracting the new forms of mass protest and mass action increased the already sizeable support for a private response to the growing force of trade unionism and socialism.

After November 1910, rumours of the possibility of an imminent international seamen’s strike had rarely ceased to haunt the shipowners of both Europe and the United States. At the beginning of May 1911, General Manager Cuthbert Laws informed the Executive Council that preparations for an international cessation of work continued with ‘great force’.<sup>75</sup> Due to the reduced pool of potential strikebreakers as a result of lower levels of unemployment, the General Purposes Committee warned that ‘the time has now arrived when every shipowner must recognise that he is responsible for doing his part towards creating a supply of seamen’.<sup>76</sup> The chief and district offices were urged to maintain a large pool of strikebreakers and to seek police protection. On 10th June, they were further instructed to proceed with ‘provisional arrangements’, which included the engagement of crews on the continent to ease the demand placed on the home supply. Four days later, a strike of seamen was declared at all the principal European and North American ports.<sup>77</sup>

While on the continent the seamen’s uprising was generally curbed by the employers’ precautionary voluntary concessions, the British ports ‘burst into flames’.<sup>78</sup> The strike began in Southampton then spread like wildfire across the country. Among the seamen’s demands were union recognition and preferential employment for union members through abolition of the engagement of seamen in the registry offices of the Shipping Federation.

Almost from the beginning, the combination of tightness in the labour market and sympathetic action revealed cracks in the strikebreaking apparatus of the Shipping Federation. ‘A sufficient body of pickets’, stated a report by the General Purposes Committee, ‘having been got together to overpower the men working upon any particular vessel, a tour of the docks would be made, during which each ship would be visited, and the men employed ordered to cease work. The process was continued, the picket being thus continually reinforced in numbers until the

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on other provisions for inclusion in the ISF, MRC, SF, PA, Grey Books. Transactions of the Federation, 1908-1911.

<sup>74</sup> For an interpretation of the general unrest as a more general symptom of social malaise, see George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (New York, 1961; 1st ed., 1935), Elie Halevy, *The Rule of Democracy*, 2 (London, 1952); S. Meacham, “The Sense of an Impending Clash”: English Working-Class Unrest before the First World War,” *The American Historical Review*, 77 (1972): 1343–64; R. Price, *Masters, Unions and Men* (Cambridge, 1980). Other historians, such as E. H. Phelps and Henry M. Pelling, have attempted to deflate the link between the industrial unrest and a more general crisis of British society.

<sup>75</sup> MRC, SF, PA, Grey Books. Transactions of the Federation, 1908-1911. Report of the General Purposes Committee to the Executive Council, May 19th, 1911.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> MRC, SF, PA, Grey Books. Transactions of the Federation, 1908-1911. Report of the General Purposes Committee to the Executive Council, 17th November, 1911, 2-3.

<sup>78</sup> Ken Coates and Anthony Topham, *The Making of the Labour Movement*, 344.

strike became general'.<sup>79</sup> In this context, the local authorities were accused of being reluctant to provide sufficient police reinforcements so as to avoid increased charges on the county rates. It was said that after failing to contain the violent picketing at the start of the dispute, the police were forced to confront forms of industrial action that were well beyond their resources. Blame was placed on the Home Office's pursuance of a policy of impartiality, which appeared to 'proceed upon the assumption that any attempt of labour replacement was regarded as a provocation'.<sup>80</sup>

In these conditions, the strikebreaking mechanism of the Shipping Federation was 'rendered virtually inoperative', which resulted in the laying up of a substantial amount of tonnage upon indemnity.<sup>81</sup> The first 'general collapse' of the Shipping Federation occurred in Hull. After weeks of affray between pickets, free labourers and the police, a strike settlement was reached under the auspices of the Board of Trade.<sup>82</sup> Following this precedent, similar settlements were ratified in other ports. In Liverpool, the demands of the sailors, firemen, stewards and cooks were met without recourse to a strike. Here, the large passenger companies operating at the North End Docks, such as White Star, Cunard and Booth and Canadian Pacific, were not affiliated to the Shipping Federation and therefore were less able to withstand the NTWF's pressure. However, to overcome the resistance of those cargo firms that were affiliated to the Shipping Federation, the seamen remained on strike in solidarity with the porters (dock labourers), thereby preventing the movement of freight through the docks. Work was finally resumed at the beginning of July and a conference between shipowners and the National Union of Dock Labourers was held a month later to sanction a permanent settlement – the White Book Agreement – which ratified the establishment of a Conciliation Board and provided for the institution of certain closed shops arrangements.<sup>83</sup>

In Cardiff, vessels were successfully manned until the riveters and dry-dock labourers went on strike in mid-July. The arrival of the depot ship *Lady Jocelyn* and the use of free labourers to unload the steamer *Annan* led to violence. The extension of the strike was accompanied by attacks against local shipowners' offices, the burning of a warehouse at the docks, and pitched and running battles between tumultuous crowds and the police. Racial hatred was unleashed at the Chinese workers who had been recruited and crewed in the South Wales ports. Although the world's largest coal port was brought to a virtual standstill after the trimmers and tippers came out in sympathy, an agreement was reached between the Cardiff Shipowners' Association and the Sailors' and Firemen's Union. The shipowners had conceded.<sup>84</sup> In Manchester, the Shipping Federation was able to send steamers with full blackleg crews until the dockers and then the carters went on strike.<sup>85</sup> In London, where the consequences of the port transport workers' stoppage for the general population were becoming serious, many vessels and approximately 1,600 free labourers from various parts of the country were dispatched through the

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<sup>79</sup> MRC, SF, PA, Grey Books. Transactions of the Federation, 1908-1911. The Report of the General Purposes Committee to the Executive Council, 17th November, 1911, 3-4.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Powell, *The Shipping Federation*, 22.

<sup>82</sup> For an excellent account of the Humberside dispute, see Keith Brooker, *The Hull Strikes of 1911* (1979).<sup>SEP</sup>

<sup>83</sup> On the Liverpool strikes, see Eric Taplin, *Near to Revolution: The Liverpool General Transport Strike of 1911* (Liverpool, 1994); Harold Hikins, "The Liverpool General Transport Strike, 1911," *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 113 (1961).

<sup>84</sup> On the labour unrest in the South Wales ports in 1911, see Campbell Balfour, "Captain Tupper and the 1911 seaman's strike in Cardiff," *Welsh History Review*, Vol. 14, 1970; Martin J. Daunton, "Inter-Union Relations on the Waterfront: Cardiff, 1888-1914," *International Review of Social History*, Vol. XXII (1977), 350-378.

<sup>85</sup> MRC, SF, PA, Grey Books. Transactions of the Federation, 1908-1911. Summary of District Reports to the Executive Council. 23 Districts have reported to the Council, 9th November 1911, 2.

agency of the Chief Office of the Shipping Federation in London and the outports. However, the Lady Jocelyn, with numerous strikebreakers on board ready to unload H. and W. Nelson's meat-laden vessel, was forbidden by the Home Office and police authorities from entering the docks.<sup>86</sup>

By the end of summer 1911, the shipowners had secured their control over the regulation of work and 'freedom of contract' in Aberdeen, Glasgow, Leith, Dundee and London, at least as far as the hiring of sailors was concerned, although union recognition was still formally denied. Over the following months, the Executive Council attempted to impose new, more stringent disciplinary control over its members and to shuffle its labour staff across districts.<sup>87</sup> There was much talk of protecting sailors and firemen while they were being engaged at the Shipping Federation's registry offices and of organising their own private security force. A special committee appointed to consider the subject commented:

'The committee realized very strongly that the comparative helplessness of employers during the recent strikes of dock labourers was due to the protection of men who were willing to work, who were all the times obtainable by the Federation [...] If any effective resistance is to be offered to unreasonable demands of the part of Trade Unions – such protection – so long as it is not forthcoming from H.M. Government – must be in the last resort provided by shipowners themselves. The Committee, however, shrink from recommending at this stage a step involving such serious expense as the maintenance of a protective force by shipowners alone. They feel that this is a matter which should properly be dealt with by employers as a whole, and that the object desired might be more effectively achieved by the general support by employers of an organization for supplying protection during labour disputes should be available to any section which is attacked [*sic*].'<sup>88</sup>

Approval was, however, granted for the subcontracting of the security to private or vigilante organisations that had been forming around the country since the summer of 1911. Under the guise of patriotism, these volunteer corps of strikebreakers were formed with the ostensible intention of protecting the general public from the disruptive effects of serious stoppages. In consequence, they offered to assist in delivering essential services, including food supply, electricity and transport.<sup>89</sup>

At the beginning of 1912, the Shipping Federation received a deputation from the Volunteer Police Force (VPF, or Civilian Force), a vigilante group that had been formed in London during the autumn of 1911, in response to the problems posed by the national railway strike. The main aim of the VPF was to assist the police in defending law and order and to protect 'life or property where attempts are threatened to wreck trains or signal boxes, set fire to warehouses, loot shops, or do other malicious injury to public methods of locomotion, transport or private property without awaiting the initiative of absentee officials'.<sup>90</sup> The Executive Committee of the Shipping Federation, after conferring with the Finance Committee, agreed to make a donation of £500 to the VPF, which would be increased to up to £1,000 if it developed along the promised lines.<sup>91</sup> In a report by the special committee, the decision was said to have been motivated by the fact that 'unless we can get some protection other than we can get at

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid. Report of the General Purposes Committee to the Executive Council, 17th November, 1911.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. Transactions of the Federation, 1911-1914, Report of the Special Committee. Appointed by the Executive Council of 17th November, 1911 to Consider the Constitution and Policy of the Federation, May 1912, 3.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>89</sup> On the Liverpool Civic Service League (1911-1921), see Stephen McGreal, *Liverpool in the Great War* (2014), 30; on the Leeds Citizen League of Law and Order (1913), M. E. Sandler, "The Leeds Municipal Strike," *The Economic Journal* Vol. 24, No. 93 (Mar., 1914), 138-152.

<sup>90</sup> Aims and Objects of the Volunteer Police Force in HO 45.10666.216733, Volunteer Police Force.

<sup>91</sup> £500 in 1911 was roughly equivalent in purchasing power to £40,000 in 2017 - 1515 days of paid work for a skilled tradesman in 1910.



present under the Trade Disputes Act, it will be necessary for shipowners and for other employers to constitute a force which will give their men protection when they are willing to work and not allowed to by other influences. We shall have to take that step sooner or later, unless we can get the Trade Disputes Act repealed'.<sup>92</sup>

Meanwhile, the lingering fear that a nationwide general strike might paralyse the whole machinery of social existence prompted the government to amend its policy of neutrality in labour conflicts and adopt aggressive policing policies, including the deployment of troops to ensure the continued supply of essential commodities.<sup>93</sup> When all the workers in the Port of London came out in sympathy with the lightermen at the end of May 1912, heavy police protection was deployed to ensure the outward flow of food supplies. Throughout the strike, the Home Office – on which direct responsibility for maintaining order in London fell – provided protection to '187 convoys, comprising 8,600 vehicles'.<sup>94</sup>

Right from the beginning of the London Transport Strike, the Shipping Federation had favoured the importation of labour. In spite of the decision by the Home Office to forbid the *Lady Jocelyn* and the 500 labourers on board to enter the Royal Albert Dock, over 2,000 strikebreakers were hurriedly brought into London and housed on board the ships being worked or in sheds ashore.<sup>95</sup> Nevertheless, the bar on using depot ships to house the imported labourers consistently increased the need for police protection. As a result, the Shipping Federation decided to request the services of the VPF, 'whose presence contributed largely towards a feeling of security on the part of the imported men'.<sup>96</sup> A report by the General Purposes Committee stated that 'a determined attack in force by the picket boats was repulsed by the Civilian Force, with casualties on both sides'.<sup>97</sup> In the aftermath of these events, the VPF released a statement on its role in the dock strike to the effect that it had assisted the Shipping Federation in the 'transportation of food supplies for London, protected free labourers from molestation, escorted large bodies of willing workers to the docks, and guarded vessels from damage by strikers, and some detachments have in addition to protection duty, worked hard in discharging cargoes of food'.<sup>98</sup> Rumours circulated that the VPF had been armed with revolvers and the resultant public pressure led Cuthbert Laws to deny these rumours in the press, while in the House of Commons the practice of substituting private for public police authority to protect strikebreakers spawned a lively discussion.<sup>99</sup>

At the end of June, the shipowners, then regrouped under the aegis of the Port of London Authority, remained resolute on breaking the strike. About 3,000 blackleg dockers from various Shipping Federation centres and about 5,000 local free labourers were engaged and sent to the docks together with 300 supervisory staff (stevedores, clerical workers and cooks).<sup>100</sup> In addition, a considerable number of 'old hands were returning to work at some of the wharves'.<sup>101</sup> On 27th July, the Strike Committee issued a manifesto recommending the immediate resumption of work. The following day, the men unanimously resolved not to resume work, although on the following Monday a certain number of dockers and stevedores gave up and on 30th and 31st July the return

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<sup>92</sup> MRC, SF, General and Executive Council Meetings, Proceedings at General and Executive Council Meetings. Bound volume. May 1912-November 1914, Annual General Meeting Friday, May 17, 1912, 8.

<sup>93</sup> Roger Geary, *Policing Industrial Disputes: 1893-1985* (Cambridge, 1985), 25-48.

<sup>94</sup> Barbara Weinberger, *Keeping the Peace? Policing Strikes in England and Wales 1906-1926* (Oxford, 1991), 110.

<sup>95</sup> MRC, SF, PA, Grey Books, Transactions of the Federation, 1911-1914, "Thames Strike," 4th June, 1912.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. Report of the General Purposes Committee to the Executive Council, 29th November, 1912.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>98</sup> *The Times*, 6 June, 1912.

<sup>99</sup> HC Deb 12 June 1912 vol. 39 cc872-995.

<sup>100</sup> MRC, SF, PA, Grey Books, Transactions of the Federation, 1911-1914, General Labour Superintendent's Report, May 7th, 1913, 2.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. Letter of the Secretary Michael Brett to the members of the Shipping Federation, June 24th, 1912, 2.

to work was general. Months later, reporting on the condition of the strikebreaking apparatus of the Shipping Federation in London, General Labour Superintendent E.G. Irvine wrote: 'The reversion to the conditions of taking-on alongside the Employer's premises and our depots (which existed from 1890-1911) has been most satisfactory for both Free Labourers and Employers, and the constant friction which existed during the few months of 1911 and 1912, when men were selected outside, has practically disappeared'.<sup>102</sup>

While the London strike was dragging on, strikebreakers were sent to Bristol, Southampton and Wexford. In Liverpool, after the labourers on Birkenhead Dock walked out in protest against the clearing house system, the local shipowners requested the assistance of the Shipping Federation. Approximately 3,000 free labourers and an adequate team of officials, foremen, clerks, timekeepers, stewards and cooking staff arrived on the Mersey. During the labour dispute, the replacements handled 50,000 tons of cargo. In Blackburn, strikebreakers were provided in partnership with the Engineering Employers Federation.<sup>103</sup>

In 1913 and 1914, the labour situation in the ports of Britain continued to be uncertain and tense. Between 1st April 1913 and 31st March 1914, the Shipping Federation supplied labour during five strikes. In Limerick and Galway, the Central Labour Office provided relatively small batches of strikebreakers from Liverpool, while 1,500 men, including crane drivers and tippers, were boarded onto the steamers Paris and Lady Jocelyn and sent to Leith docks. At the end of 1913, during the great Dublin lockout, some shipowners, master carters and timber and coal merchants who had pledged not to employ any of Larkin's ITGWU members requested the assistance of the Shipping Federation. Over the six months of the dispute, 1,100 men were sent to Dublin on depot ships. The Ella was continually used to transport blackleg labour and stores from Merseyside, while the Paris was used to house them.<sup>104</sup>

The steamer Paris was also deployed, together with the tug Zealandia, to provide a large crew during the seamen's dispute in the Bristol Channel at the beginning of 1914. When presenting the Annual Labour Report, E.G. Irvine declared that 'the fact that we can send a large number of men with our own vessels fully provisioned for a week or ten days into any port must produce a great deal of moral effect upon union organizations who suddenly discover that their picketing energies are being wasted at railway stations'.<sup>105</sup> Irvine, however, did call attention to the extreme bitterness of the last wave of strikes, which required the further strengthening and extending of strikebreaking resources. In fact, 1914 had opened to very unsettled conditions throughout the shipping world and disputes of a more or less serious nature had involved both seamen and dockers. The formation of the Triple Alliance, which could have shut down mines, railways and docks, raised the spectre of a general strike and intensified anxiety among both employers and the government. A general feeling that shipowners and unions were expeditiously heading for a new general confrontation was in the air when the First World War broke out.<sup>106</sup>

## Conclusions

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a series of strike waves in Britain, unprecedented in terms of their scale and intensity, prompted the formation of employer associations largely devoted to organising strikebreaking and replacement work activities. Although historians have long recognised that labour replacement was an important method for

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<sup>102</sup> MRC, SF, PA, Grey Books, Transactions of the Federation, 1911-1914, General Labour Superintendent's Report, May 7th 1913, 3.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. Central Labour Office, Annual Report, 23rd April, 1914.

<sup>105</sup> MRC, SF, PA, Grey Books, Transactions of the Federation, 1911-1914, Central Labour Office, Annual Report, 23rd April, 1914.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. Central Labour Office, Annual Report, 5th May, 1915.

defeating strikes and undermining trade unionism, its organisational and operational features have so far not been fully discussed. The case of the Shipping Federation, as analysed in this article, highlights the ubiquity of strikebreaking practices in a strategic economic sector like shipping. Even though the recruitment and importing of strike replacements was not confined to the waterfront, there is no denying that they attained their most systematically brutal and uncompromising forms there. Over a span of 20 years, the Labour Department of the Shipping Federation engaged hundreds of thousands of free labourers, an unquantifiable number of whom provided strikebreaking services to its associates. This article has detailed the techniques and strategies that the shipowners employed to break strikes and protect their control over hiring procedures and wages from the interference of waterfront unions at both the national and international levels.

The article has shown the determination of shipowners to use violence as a means to counteract the advance of industrial democracy and hence protect the safety of the whole system of social and economic relations upon which national and vested interests rested. This propensity to violent conduct challenges the traditional assumption that British employers were generally less aggressive towards organised labour and more disposed to compromise than their continental counterparts.<sup>107</sup> It has, instead, been demonstrated that the shipping companies were inclined to consider using private and, in certain cases, illegal instruments to smash the unions and violate workers' civil liberties. In particular, in response to the increased pressure on parliament from labour to institute a programme of welfare legislation and a distrust in the government's willingness or ability to protect private corporate interests, the associates of the Shipping Federation time and again discussed in-house security plans and the employment of private guards. The legal implications and costs associated with private law enforcement might have suggested a more conservative course of action.

Nonetheless, shipowners were willing to contract out security services to private groups. For instance, perceived deficiencies in law enforcement agencies during the Great Unrest resulted in the employment of a quasi-militarily organised body, the Volunteer Police Force. This practice exposed the vigilante orientations of shipowners in their quest for industrial and social discipline and explicitly called into question the state's monopoly of violence. The delegation of protection tasks to commercial strikebreaking agencies and private police (or parapolice) forces was an attempt to supplant or, at the very least, supplement public policing and transfer responsibility for the protection of assets and production continuity to corporate entities. However, the ability of the state to protect its formal boundaries against this move – in good part assisted by the renewed congruence of state security and corporate interests in the midst of fears of an imminent general labour stoppage and aggravation of international relations – stemmed the incipient development of vigilante propensities among shipowners and other militant employers' associations fighting organised labour. Pressure in favour of private (or semi-private) security protection remained a latent and persistent threat up to the outbreak of the war and re-emerged with different emphases during the volatile post-war years.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Roger Geary, *European Labour Politics from 1900 to the Depression* (London, 1991).

<sup>108</sup> For the post-war period, see Ralph H. Desmarais *The Supply and Transport Committee, 1919-1926: a study of the British government's method of handling emergencies stemming from industrial disputes* (University of Wisconsin--Madison, 1970); K. Jeffery, *States of Emergency: British Governments and Strike Breaking since 1919* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983); Richard C. Maguire, "The fascists ... are ... to be depended upon. The British government, fascists and strike-breaking during 1925 and 1926," in *British Fascism, the Labour Movement and the State* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 6-26.