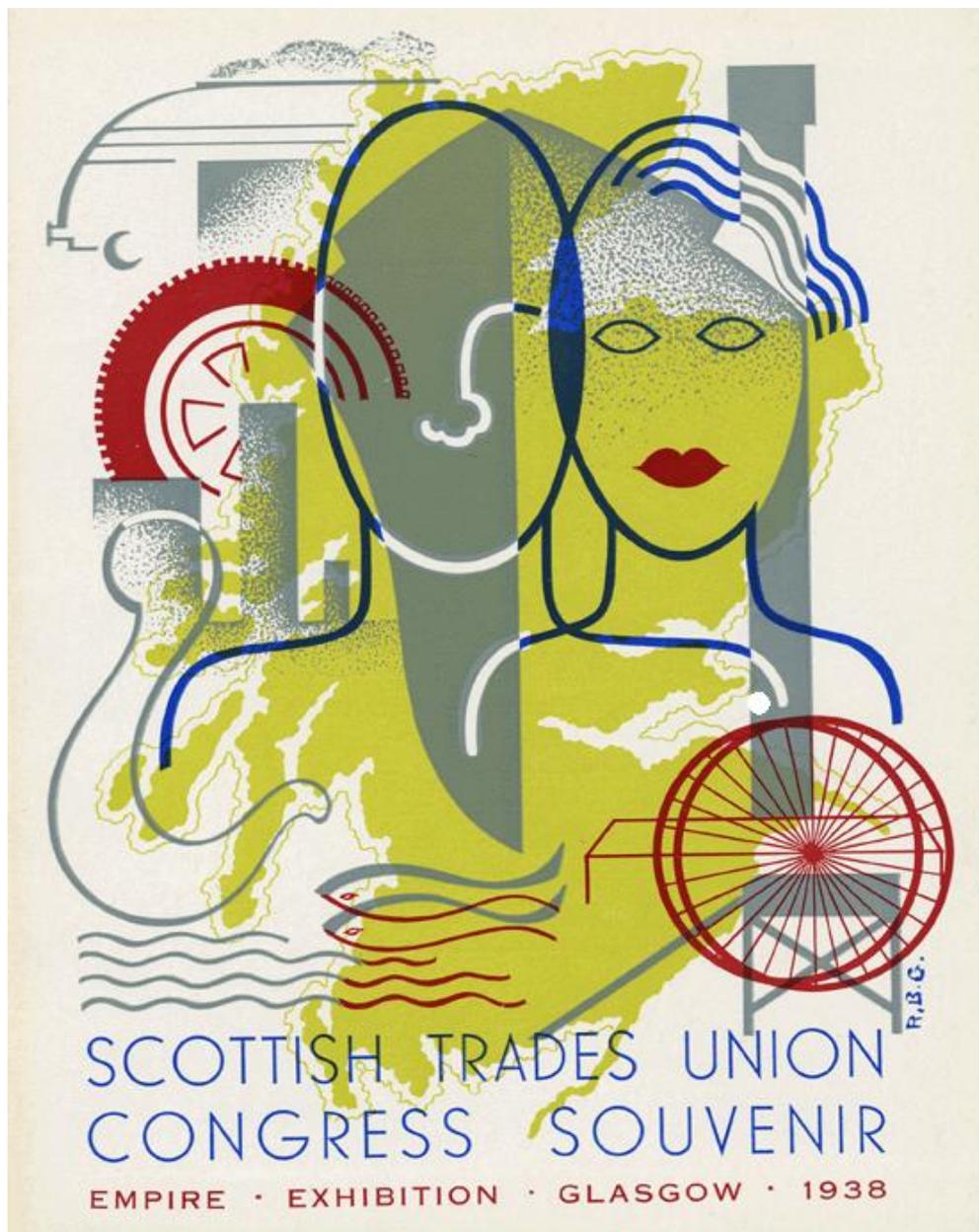


STUC YOUTH CONFERENCE
2008

Commemorative History of the STUC Youth
Committee



Introduction

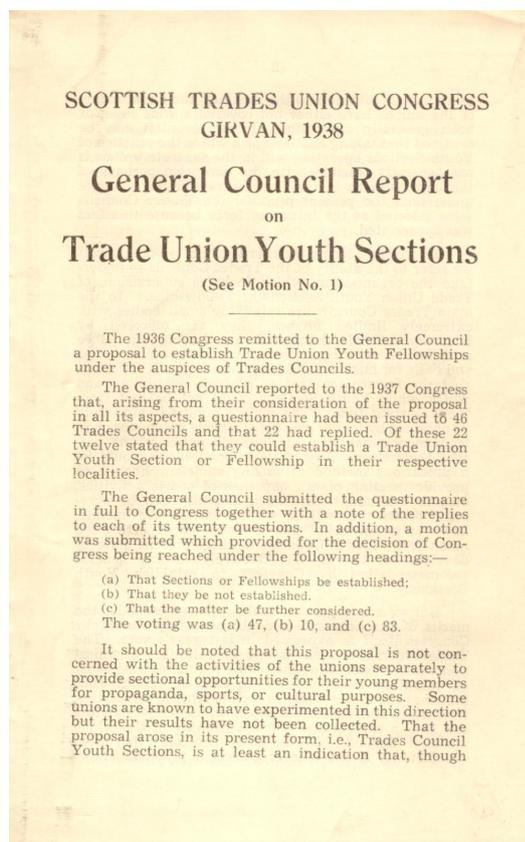
The First 70 Years

For 70 years, Scotland's Young Trade Unionists have campaigned for equality, peace and social justice. This leaflet commentaries the formation of the Youth Committee in 1938 and looks back on the campaigns, personalities and issues of the past 70 years.

Formation of the Committee

The idea of a Youth Fellowship was first mooted at the 1936 STUC Congress. It was not universally welcomed and the Congress referred the issue back to the General Council. The following year, it was decided to hold a Special Conference to examine the issues. The Special Conference was held in Girvan in 1938 and was historically described as the founding Youth Conference.

In reality it was an all age Conference set up to discuss the formation of a Youth Committee. There were suggestions that the youth of 1938 were more frivolous than in the past and that the formation of a Youth Committee was a serious mistake. Others, such as, Eleanor Stewart of the T&G, argued that forming a Youth Committee would segregate young people from the Movement, and that the way forward was to encourage them to attend their regular Branch meetings.



(larger version illustrated on back cover of document)

R Little of the AEU, argued that the finances should be controlled elsewhere, as young people had a tendency “to spend money without any account of it.”

This picture of apathetic, frivolous youth of 1938 was challenged, with many speakers pointing out the need to recruit young workers and to capture their idealism and energy for the Labour Movement. Far from feckless youth, the young worker of 1938 had lived through the greatest economic depression ever seen and now faced the prospect of war and conscription. In a rousing address, the 1938 STUC President, Herbert Ellison of the NUR, who in common with the 2008 President, Phil McGarry, was a rail worker, made a passionate plea for the establishment of the Youth Committee and Youth Conference.

“Whilst the pioneers of our Movement deserve the thanks of the present generation for the strenuous fight they made to give us our present conditions, it must not be forgotten that we are living in a modern age and that youth must be given the necessary guidance and encouragement to fit them to continue the fight for the future.”

Herbert Ellison, NUR 1938

After that rousing address, it was no surprise that the vote, with a few abstentions, was nearly unanimously passed. As a result, the Scottish TUC Youth Advisory Council came into existence on 17th September 1938, when 84 delegates, representing 29 Unions, elected a Committee of 5 to manage its affairs.

The original Committee Elected was as follows:

Betty Watt, National Union of Clerks
Jas Morris, USDAW
Ian McPherson, Bakers' Association
W Gillan, Scottish Draughtsmen
Dave Mitchell, Railway Clerks' Association

They could not have faced a more difficult start as, almost exactly a year later, Britain was plunged into war with Nazi Germany. As a result, the first two Youth Conferences were cancelled. The proximity of war for the young Committee members was made apparent in Minutes of the General Council of 1941, when Jas Morris had to resign his position after being called up to His Majesty's Armed Services, thankfully, an ordeal which does not confront members of the present Committee.

The Second Youth Conference was not held until February 1941 at Central Halls, Bath Street, Glasgow. Many consider this to be the first genuine Youth Conference, as it was only available to delegates under 30 and was the first STUC Youth Conference which was allowed to pass motions.

With echoes of today, the first motion passed by Conference called for greater effort to organise young workers. By the 1944 Conference, young workers had found their voice and were forming opinion and demanding that the Secretary and Chair should be elected by Conference and not appointed by the General Council.



MISS MARGARET CAIRNCROSS,
President, 1947

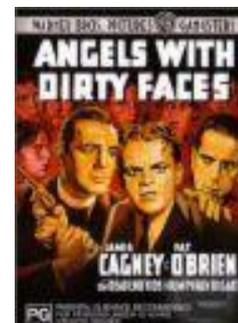
This was granted in 1946 and the very first elected Chair of the STUC Youth Committee was Margaret Cairncross of the Railway Clerks' Association. This was apt, considering the past and continuing contribution of young women workers to the Youth Committee.

The World in 1938

The STUC shared its birth year 1938 with legendary Rock and Roll singer, Eddie Cochran, who died in a plane crash at the age of 22 in 1960; TV Presenter, Terry Wogan, was born in 1938; and more ominously for the Trade Union Movement, former Secretary of State for Employment, Norman Fowler, came into the world and, as a Tory Minister, introduced many of the draconian anti Trade Union laws which still hinder Unions today.

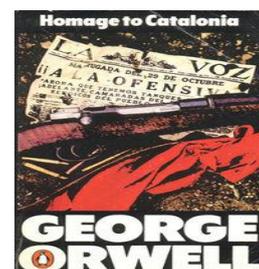
TV was in its infancy with only a few thousand rich patrons close to Alexandra Palace in London able to afford a set and receive a signal. On the other hand, picture going was at an all time high with half the population attending the flicks at least once a week.

The most popular film of the year was the classic *Angels with Dirty Faces* starring James Cagney. The film had a strong youth theme set in the tough Brooklyn neighbourhood as two brothers set off in very different ways. One becomes a parish priest, the other the local gangster. The local boys, the dead end kids, barely tolerate the gentle priest, but adore and idolise the local gangster. At the end of the film, James Cagney, facing the electric chair, is persuaded by his brother to die like a coward, in order that he would not become a martyr to the local kids. The film was a massive hit and became a cult film for young people. It is highly likely that members of the Conference and Youth Committee went to see the film.



The great political story of the day was the Spanish Civil War in which the democratically elected socialist government of Spain was fighting a desperate battle of survival against a fascist insurrection supported by Hitler's Germany and Mussolini in Italy. The Spanish Republic was deserted by France and Britain. However, thousands of young volunteers flocked to Spain to fight in the Civil War against fascism. Of the 2,500 British volunteers in Spain, over 500 lost their life. The Youth Conference delegates of 1938 were asked to contribute to Milk for Spain and Save the Basque Children Fund.

Famous books published in 1938 include George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*. George Orwell went on to write *Big Brother*, but many consider *Homage to Catalonia* his greatest book.



This book was a biographical account of the Spanish Civil War, as George Orwell fought on the Socialist side against the Franco fascist forces.

On the Trade Union front, the STUC membership was only 365,962 reflecting the terrible defeat the Movement had suffered in the General Strike 12 years before. However, there were stirrings of hope as membership had started to rise again, with 30,000 new members being recruited in the previous years.

The formation of the Youth Committee coincided with the Empire Exhibition in Glasgow. By the time that the Committee celebrated its 50th Anniversary, Glasgow was hosting the Garden Festival and Trade Union membership in Scotland stood at 910,942, although it had been in years of decline, due to the industrial and anti Trade Union policies of the Conservative Government and its Leader, Margaret Thatcher.



Wages in that period were desperately low as evidenced by the fact that a motion to the Congress in 1938 called for a Minimum Wage of 35 shillings - £1.75 a week. Even unionised workers had it tough. USDAW were pushing the Co-op to pay 71 shillings - £3.55 a week, linked to the radical demand for 15 days' paid holiday.

Although there were many differences, there were also many parallels between then and now. 1938 had its very own credit crunch with the Youth Chair commenting that many workers had seen:

“The gradual rise in the cost of living with little correspondent rise in wage is having a serious affect in thousands of working class homes”.

I am sure for many workers today this situation sounds depressingly familiar.

Credit Crunch

In 2008, we had the increase in the 10p Tax band for millions of low paid workers, while in 1938, we had an increase on tax on tea which, as a staple of the working class diet, disproportionately hit the low paid.

Finally, the young Trade Unionists of 1938 had to contend with the 1927 Trade Disputes Act, introduced by the Tory Government after the defeat of the General Strike of 1926. This draconian piece of Trade Union legislation forbade sympathetic strike action and tied Trade Unions into a legalistic straitjacket. Trade Unions today are outlawed from supporting their fellow workers in sympathetic action and also forced to operate in an extremely hostile legislative environment.

The message is that the styles, music and films may change, but the issues for young working people in 2008 are not so different from those facing the young trade unionist of 1938.

Fighting Back

The young trade unionists were determined to fight back and it is worth noting that many of the most important and powerful campaigns fought by the Labour Movement often had their origins in the actions of young trade unionists.

Education

With this year's Conference themed around lifelong learning, it is inspiring to look back on the strong support the Youth Conference gave to increasing the educational opportunities for young workers.

The second motion ever passed by the Youth Conference in 1941 called for the raising of the school leaving age to 15 without exceptions.

By 1949, the Youth Conference had moved to the salubrious surroundings of the Grand Hotel at Charing Cross, demolished in the 1970s, to make way for the M8. The young delegates inspired no doubt by there surroundings, called for the paid day release for young apprentices. Ten years later, the NUR were calling for educational bursaries reflecting the changing aspirations of young workers.



The swinging sixties heralded in higher expectations and it is noticeable that the demand for higher education became more prominent. The 1969 Youth Conference was awash with demands for increased educational opportunity. This was hardly surprising, as late as 1969, less than five percent of working class children attended university, which was seen as the preserve of the upper and middle classes.



The Conference supported the formation of the Open University created by the Scottish Trade Union MP, Jennie Lee, who was courteous enough to write to the Youth Committee outlining her plans. Conference went so far as to call for grants to buy televisions, in order that students could watch the Open University programmes.

By 1982, the Youth Conference passed a motion calling for 100 hours paid learning time a year. This is interesting, because last year's Congress mooted a similar idea, which again goes to prove that, in most things, the Youth Committee were 30 years ahead of its time.

We should also note the efforts of the Youth Committee to hold a weekend seminar to educate young trade unionists. At one such event in the early 1970s, the main speaker was a certain George Galloway.

Peace

The Youth Committee was formed at a time of war and it is noticeable how prominent the issues of internationalism and peace have featured. The NUM Youth Delegation moved a motion as early as the 1957 Conference calling for the banning of the Hydrogen Bomb. The 1969 Conference was held at the Shawlands Hotel in an era when the young were protesting against the Vietnam War throughout the world. The Youth Committee issued a report calling for the end of the Vietnam War.

“This Conference calls upon the British Government to disassociate itself from American Policy in Vietnam”.

Youth Committee 1969

This provoked a strong letter from the Labour Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart, who wrote to the Youth Committee accusing them of anti Americanism.

Equality

The Youth Conference has always been forward thinking in terms of equality. In 1959, the newly arrived immigrant community in Notting Hill was savagely attacked by youths inspired by far right, racist organisations, as the police stood aside. The events of this period were portrayed in the famous film Absolute Beginners.

The Youth Conference angered by these events passed the following motion.

“This Conference declares our solidarity with the coloured people of Notting Hill. We demand Government take strong action against the organisations set up to foster hate. Conference calls for fraternal relations with all coloured peoples.”

NUM 1959

The presence of the BNP in the 21st Century and their extreme right wing rhetoric shows this is an on-going struggle.

Equal Pay

Airdrie and Coatbridge TUC has the distinction of moving the very first motion on equal pay at the 1973 Youth Conference. It called for equal pay for equal work. Nearly 40 years later, women workers still earn on average nearly 20% less than their male colleagues. It is hoped that the young trade unionists attending Conference today can be part of the generation which ends the outrage of the gender pay gap.

Nurseries and TV

In 1951, the Youth Committee undertook a Danish Study Tour following an invitation, visiting trade unions, factories social services and co-operative organisations. This visit impressed those attending and the report to the General Council made reference to the excellent kindergarten, sports, education and canteen facilities witnessed in a hosiery factory. Over fifty years later, very few Scottish workers enjoy such facilities or, if they have, see them withdrawn by employers in their relentless drive for profit.

This visit clearly made an impression and the Youth Conference has never been slow to debate some less conventional issues. The 1969 Congress examined the role of day nurseries, which Conference was informed were for the children of "Widowed Mothers"; while the NUM put forward a motion deploring the spread of television and radio which had a detrimental influence on the minds of young people. One wonders what the delegates of 1957 would think of the internet or YouTube and the BEBO of today.

The Future

A brief resume of the last 70 years has demonstrated the tremendous contribution of young workers. Many of the young workers involved in the Youth Committee and its Conference went on to make major contributions to the Labour Movement. The current General Secretary of the STUC,



Grahame Smith, was an active member of the Youth Committee. Margaret Cairncross, the first elected Chair, became a full-time Official with TSSA; while the sponsor of the Corporate Manslaughter Law, Labour MSP, Karen Gillon, also was active in the Youth Committee. Perhaps the most famous ex-delegate was Mick McGahey, who became the legendary Leader of the Scottish Miners.

The STUC Youth Committee is going strong 70 years after its conception. For the first time in many years, delegate numbers have increased and the Programme for the Conference demonstrates a range and depth of issues which is a credit to the delegates involved.

We hope that the next 70 years will see the Youth Committee and young workers in general take on the mantle to fight for equality, peace and social justice. It is apt to finish by returning to the speech made by Herbert Ellison when he called for the introduction of a Youth Committee 70 years ago.

“Let us look forward to the brightness of the new dawn and not to the darkness of the past”.

Herbert Ellison 1938

**Happy Birthday and here's to the
next 70 Years**

SCOTTISH TRADES UNION CONGRESS
GIRVAN, 1938

General Council Report
on
Trade Union Youth Sections

(See Motion No. 1)

The 1936 Congress remitted to the General Council a proposal to establish Trade Union Youth Fellowships under the auspices of Trades Councils.

The General Council reported to the 1937 Congress that, arising from their consideration of the proposal in all its aspects, a questionnaire had been issued to 46 Trades Councils and that 22 had replied. Of these 22 twelve stated that they could establish a Trade Union Youth Section or Fellowship in their respective localities.

The General Council submitted the questionnaire in full to Congress together with a note of the replies to each of its twenty questions. In addition, a motion was submitted which provided for the decision of Congress being reached under the following headings:—

- (a) That Sections or Fellowships be established;
- (b) That they be not established.
- (c) That the matter be further considered.

The voting was (a) 47, (b) 10, and (c) 83.

It should be noted that this proposal is not concerned with the activities of the unions separately to provide sectional opportunities for their young members for propaganda, sports, or cultural purposes. Some unions are known to have experimented in this direction but their results have not been collected. That the proposal arose in its present form, i.e., Trades Council Youth Sections, is at least an indication that, though

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