Workers Find a Voice

Trade unions, political reform, and the birth of the Labour Party

MWH.C.5.2.B "Explain the rise of trade unionism and the birth of the Labor Party, including the effects of various social and political reforms, such as Liberalism (John Stuart Mill) and modern conservatism (school of Edmund Burke)."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline reasons workers joined unions, circle voting or government reforms, and number two places where union action led toward political representation.

From the Docks to Parliament

1 In 1889, London dockworkers struck for a higher hourly wage. Their victory showed that workers with little money or special training could gain power by acting together. Earlier craft unions had mainly organized skilled workers; the dock strike helped expand unionism among less-skilled workers. Industrial growth had crowded workers into factories and ports, where long hours, unsafe jobs, and low pay gave them shared grievances. A union collected dues, planned strikes, and spoke for members in talks with employers. The Trades Union Congress, founded in 1868, gave unions a national voice, while the Trade Union Act of 1871 recognized unions as lawful organizations.

2 Parliamentary reforms widened the electorate: acts in 1867 and 1884 gave many more men the vote, although most women still could not vote in parliamentary elections. The secret ballot, introduced in 1872, made it harder for employers to watch how workers voted. Liberal thinkers such as John Stuart Mill defended individual liberty and argued that women should have voting rights. Conservatives influenced by Edmund Burke's school of thought favored careful change that preserved established institutions. These ideas did not produce the same policies, but both entered debates about reform. As more workers became voters, politicians had stronger reasons to respond to their demands.

3 Even with more working-class voters, unions wanted representatives who answered directly to them. In 1900, unions and socialist groups formed the Labour Representation Committee to elect such members of Parliament. A 1901 court ruling in the Taff Vale case made a union liable for damages from a strike, intensifying demands for political protection. After the 1906 election, the committee took the name Labour Party. A Liberal government passed the Trades Disputes Act in 1906, protecting unions from certain lawsuits connected to strikes. Its old-age pensions in 1908 and national insurance in 1911 also eased some economic risks for working families.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why did unionism spread beyond skilled craft workers in the late 1800s? Use two details from the passage.

2. How did changes to voting rules give workers more political influence?

3. How might Mill and conservatives influenced by Burke have differed in their responses to demands for reform?

4. Why did the Taff Vale ruling strengthen unions' case for political representation, and how did the Liberal government later respond?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a 1911 letter to a local newspaper from a union member arguing why workers need both unions and their own party. In 5 or 6 sentences, connect one workplace problem, one voting reform, and one government social or legal reform, and contrast Mill's and Burke's views of change.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · MWH.C.5.2.B

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline reasons workers joined unions, circle voting or government reforms, and number two places where union action led toward political representation. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why did unionism spread beyond skilled craft workers in the late 1800s? Use two details from the passage.	**Industrial jobs gave less-skilled workers shared problems, such as low pay and unsafe conditions. The dockworkers' 1889 victory showed that organizing could improve their bargaining power.**
2	How did changes to voting rules give workers more political influence?	**The acts of 1867 and 1884 gave many more men the vote, and the secret ballot made it harder for employers to monitor workers' choices. Politicians then had stronger reasons to address workers' demands.**
3	How might Mill and conservatives influenced by Burke have differed in their responses to demands for reform?	**Mill's defense of liberty and voting rights could support expanding political participation. Burke-influenced conservatives favored careful changes that preserved established institutions.**
4	Why did the Taff Vale ruling strengthen unions' case for political representation, and how did the Liberal government later respond?	**The ruling exposed a union to damages from a strike, increasing its need for political protection. The Liberal government's 1906 Trades Disputes Act protected unions from certain strike-related lawsuits.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

At the docks, low pay makes it hard to feed a family, so we organize to bargain together. The 1884 voting reform gave many more men a vote, but a ballot alone cannot force an employer to listen. Our Labour Party can bring union demands into Parliament and seek laws that protect us. The 1906 Trades Disputes Act has already shielded unions from certain strike lawsuits. Mill's defense of liberty suggests giving more people a political voice, while Burke's approach warns against changes that discard established institutions too quickly. I believe organized workers can press for practical reform without tearing those institutions down.

Accept other passage-supported workplace problems and reforms. Responses should distinguish Mill's support for expanded rights from the Burke-influenced preference for cautious change without claiming either thinker founded the Labour Party.