

Emigration, Immigration and the National Agricultural Labourers' Union

Ben Richardson

On the evening of 29 May, 1872, the Reverend F. S. Attenborough invited delegates to the inaugural meeting of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union (NALU) back to his church for tea.¹ This might seem an unusual place to finish a trade union meeting, but religion and temperance were central to the union's identity. Its figurehead was Joseph Arch, an agricultural labourer and Methodist preacher from Warwickshire. Arch was determined to bring about better livelihoods for the downtrodden farmworkers but did not want to encourage civil disobedience or political revolution. Earlier that day he had told his audience: "Brothers, be united and you will be strong; be temperate and you will be respected; realise a central capital and you will be able to act with firmness and independence. Be united, be sober, and you will soon be free".² His vision was clearly appealing; by 1874 almost 90,000 workers had become members, making it one of the biggest trade unions in the country.³

Arch was the President of NALU and so historically the union has been associated with his home village of Barford and with Wellesbourne where he first rallied agricultural labourers to bargain collectively for higher wages and decent accommodation. But Leamington was the centre of the union's activities. Delegate meetings were held in the Circus (a large domed building where the Loft Theatre now sits) and the Public Hall (formerly on Windsor Street), its headquarters were based at Balm Cottage in Forfield Place, and its mass gathering in 1884 to support electoral reform in the countryside took place in the field behind Northumberland Road.⁴ Moreover, key personnel were also drawn from the town. A carpenter and unionist in the Leamington Trades Council called Henry Taylor was chosen to be the NALU General Secretary, the sympathetic proprietor of the *Royal Leamington Chronicle* James E. Matthew Vincent became Treasurer, and supporters like Reverend Attenborough joined the Consultative Board.

What connects the NALU to the Commonwealth is the importance it placed on both emigration and immigration within the British empire. Emigration was seen as an opportunity for agricultural labourers to make a new life for themselves as independent farmers in the white settler colonies of Australia, Canada and New Zealand – or what was sometimes referred to as 'Greater Britain'.⁵ NALU also used emigration in their disputes with employers, hoping to use the threat of labour shortages to pressure farmers and landowners to raise wages or end their lock-out of union members.

Given the lack of support from the British government for state-sponsored emigration during this period, the NALU's strategy also attracted the attention of colonial authorities that wanted to bring in more labour of the right kind of 'stock'. NALU leaders were invited to visit the dominion of Canada and officials were appointed as emigration agents for Queensland and New Zealand. Between 1872 and 1881 the union sponsored around 40,000 members and their families to emigrate, paid for with union membership fees.⁶

In contrast to the union's support for emigration, on the question of immigration it was much more critical. The movement of agricultural labourers from Ireland, then under British rule, during the harvest season was seen as undermining the bargaining position of their English counterparts. For this reason, the NALU leadership supported the emergence of a sister union in Ireland in the hope that this would improve conditions in rural Ireland and regulate the flow of migrants. However, at a meeting in County

¹ *Leamington Spa Courier*, 1 June 1872, 8.

² Joseph Arch (1898) *Joseph Arch: The Story of His Life, second edition*. London: Hutchinson and Co., p 116.

³ Pamela Horn (1971) *Joseph Arch: The Farm Workers' Leader (1826-1919)*. Kineton: The Roundwood Press.

⁴ The oddly named circus was erected in 1871 on the site of a volunteer drill shed in Victoria Gardens as Frederick Ginnett's Model Cirque.

⁵ This phrase was used Arthur Clayden, who accompanied Arch on his trip to Canada. See *Colonies and India*, 20 April 1895, p. 23.

⁶ Horn, Pamela (1972) 'Agricultural Trade Unionism and Emigration, 1872-1881', *The Historical Journal*, 15: 1, pp. 87-102.

Cork in 1873 to inaugurate the fledgling union, many of the Irish politicians involved instead used it as a platform to press the case for national independence. NALU leaders in attendance at the meeting, including Joseph Arch and Henry Taylor, did not support this cause and so quickly distanced themselves from the movement. The Irish Agricultural Labourers' Union never came to fruition.⁷

From the perspective of the NALU leadership, the different positions on emigration and immigration were justified by their belief that while British agriculture was characterised by a labour surplus, in Canada and Australasia there was 'empty land' and a labour shortage. This was an account that seemed to deliberately ignore the existence of native communities and the ongoing acts of violent dispossession to which they had been subject. For example, despite Arch's own visit to a community of Huron-Wendat Indians on his trip to Canada and discussions with settlers about the land conflict between the two groups, he remained of the opinion that: "there are broad fields in our colonies, with thousands of acres of virgin soil, only awaiting the labourer to till them".⁸

Nevertheless, the union's support for emigration began to wane as its membership fell from its peak in 1874, in part because it had helped many of its members to leave the country. Internal divisions within the leadership also weakened the union. In 1876 Henry Taylor left to take up a position with the Immigration Department of the South Australian government, while James E. Matthew Vincent, who had quit the year before to start a rival union, also ended up working with settlers in Australia, writing a book called *The Australian Irrigation Colonies* (1888) that promoted work on the fruit farms of Victoria to potential British emigrants.

The NALU was formally dissolved in 1896. Though it had been in existence for barely two decades it had made important gains on behalf of the rural working class, most notably in politics following the extension of the franchise in 1884 and the election of Joseph Arch to Parliament – the first agricultural labourer to sit as an MP. Arch also mentored the next generation of rural unionists who would in effect reform the NALU in 1906 as the National Union of Agricultural and Allied Workers.⁹ The town and unionists of Leamington played a formative role in these achievements, and the story of how they came about stretches far beyond Britain to the ends of Empire.

⁷ Horn, Pamela (1971) 'The National Agricultural Labourers' Union in Ireland, 1873-9', *Irish Historical Studies*, 17: 67, pp. 340-352.

⁸ *Joseph Arch: The Story of His Life*, pp. 190 and 313.

⁹ The union was initially called the Eastern Counties Agricultural Labourers & Small Holders Union and was based in Norfolk, where Arch had twice sat as an MP.