

## **THE RISE AND FALL OF THE CONGRESS HOUSE AND THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT**

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In 1944, at its 76th Meeting in Blackpool, the Trades Union Congress (TUC)—today a federation of 48 trade unions representing 5.5 million members—adopted a resolution to establish a memorial:

This Congress, having in mind the conspicuous part played by the British Trade Unions and the successful prosecution of the war to overthrow the yoke of Nazi domination and the annihilation of the nazi creed, and the supreme sacrifice made by thousands of Trade Unionists in the field of battle, the air, on the sea and among the civilian population in the blitzed areas and elsewhere, believes that a fitting memorial to their heroism and gallantry should be erected in the name of the British Trade Union Movement (TUC 1944).

The plan expanded to create a TUC Headquarters at Great Russell Street in London. David Aberdeen won the architectural competition. He proposed a central courtyard, conference hall, memorial hall, training college, library, and offices; the “Congress House” was officially opened in 1958.

The building is a consecration of the ideologies of the labour movement at the time. All workers on the site were unionized. The construction material, Cornish granite, was sourced from various quarries as part of a scheme aimed at reducing unemployment (Mathison & Powers 2024). The architecture is believed to be inspired by the public works of Le Corbusier—the people’s architect. In contrast to the colourful street where terracotta and red bricks appear in a range of pre-war styles, the Congress House is modern, simple, and functional.

Bernard Meadows, a British sculptor, won a competition to create “The Spirit of Brotherhood”, the bronze statue that sits atop the entrance. Inside the Congress House, in the Bevin Room, is Jacob Epstein’s famous sculpture, a mother cradling her dead son, commemorating the sacrifices of trade unionists in the two world wars.

The TUC was established in Manchester. A meeting of a large number of trade unionists across the United Kingdom took place at the Mechanics' Institute in June 1868, where they resolved to hold an annual congress.<sup>1</sup>

Since June 2025, the Congress House has ceased to function as the TUC Headquarters and is now for sale. It represents the site of negotiations that had global implications. These included conflicts of interest between blue-collar and white-collar workers, where the TUC generally moderated more activist positions; between different types of workers' internationalism, where the TUC resisted the influence of the global left; and between workers in Britain and the empire, where the TUC resisted solidarity.

## While at the Congress House ...

... At a 10-minute walk is The Red Lion (20 Great Windmill Street), where Karl Marx and Frederick Engels wrote the *Communist Manifesto*, and the British Museum (Great Russell Street), where Marx worked on *Capital*. Those interested in the history of labour are better served with a three-minute walk to 1 Bloomsbury Street, where you will find Bookmarks. This left-leaning bookstore offers new and used books and pamphlets, and regular events.

### **About the author**

**Parashar Kulkarni** studies religion, political economy, and utopias in colonial and contemporary India and the British Empire. His work appears in literary and academic journals such as *Granta*, *Boston Review*, *The Sociological Review Magazine*, *Social Science History*, and the *British Journal of Political Science*. He has a PhD from New York University. See also his [profile page](#).

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## References

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<sup>1</sup> The text uses primary sources TUC (1968) and TUC (2024) for much of the historical information.

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