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Trade Unions in a Free Society

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Article abstract

In an industrial and democratic civilization, labor unionism appears as a normal and essential institution. Born of democracy, it helps to preserve and develop democratic life. There is, however, an essential condition. It must be itself an institution that really represents the workers and gives them the opportunity of expressing their aspirations while safeguarding their economic and professional interests. Union democracy is a necessity for the national welfare. But, above all, democracy in the labor movement is the direct responsibility of union leaders who must ensure its maintenance and survival through good institutions and also by their cooperation in the civic education of the rank-and-file members.

Trade Unions in a Free Society

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The creation of the Canadian Labor Congress, or the unification of Canadian labor forces, has placed before public opinion the presence of trade unions as a real power in our country. What is the place and role of trade unions in a democracy? That is what we will attempt to discuss.

Growing Importance of Trade Unionism

Few social phenomena have been as ill-understood and disregarded as trade unionism has been. It is seen through a maze of prejudices which hide its true nature, its role and even the growing importance it is taking in the life of the nation.

Nevertheless it is one of the most important phenomena of our times. Its influence spreads to individuals, groups and institutions. It has repercussions in the field of labor, economy, politics and even religion.

If we wish to estimate briefly the part played by labor unions

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in a field where there has been no direct action, since we have never had a labor government in this country, let us consider the legislative measures of national importance which would never have seen the light of day unless labor groups had applied pressure: unemployment insurance, old age pensions, family allowances, compulsory public education, regulations governing working hours, and other. Yet, these measures do not benefit trade union membership alone, but all the workers of the nation.

Fought, rejected, tolerated, and misunderstood, trade unionism has continued on its way, changing traditional concepts, influencing the life of all the citizens. One must be blind not to see the importance of this phenomenon and be foolish to reject it as a force one must take into account if one is to have any influence at all in the planning of our future society. It is no longer a matter of taste or sentiment: Trade unions are here to stay.

In a serious review published in Quebec province, an editor last year held that: "Peoples abandoned by a profit-minded elite develop an ever-growing need for security. Labor unions are the most obvious symptom of the failure of the elite and of popular reaction". Is it really true to suggest that if the elite had perfectly carried out its duty and shown greater social sense, trade unions would never have been born? Although this opinion is held and maintained in many circles, I do not believe it is a correct one. It is the "paternalist" thesis. Trade unionism is necessary even where an enterprise is directed by "good employers".

Normal Phenomenon

Trade unionism has not always existed and will probably not exist forever. Institutions evolve. I am not a prophet. However, within the context of an industrial and democratic civilization, it is a normal phenomenon. It is even an essential one. It is neither a social accessory imposed by the will of some leaders aiming at occupying a position of prestige and financial gain, nor the result of the culpable negligence of bad employers seeking to exploit the workers.

All industrial civilizations lead necessarily to the setting up of a large number of enterprises, some of them of great proportions. Now, there can be no enterprise without workers.

Automation, which is almost here, will only result in a change of jobs or enterprise for the workers. These workers find themselves in the same economic, social situation. They work under similar conditions, obey a similar management, and share a common fate.

For the sake of efficient operation of an enterprise, within a group, it is impossible for the employer to cater to the various whims of individuals. This communal situation leads necessarily to communal interests among workers. An individual cannot bargain over his own conditions. He must accept a standard contract.

Field of Labor Relations

How can the interests common to the workers be efficiently safeguarded? In a non-democratic civilization, the State can assume this responsibility: we then have the regime that exists in Russia or in fascist countries. We may leave the matter to the arbitrary will of employers, as in the good old days of "laissez-faire".

In a democracy, it is up to the interested parties, to all the interested parties, to look after their own affairs, instead of leaving them to be looked after by others.

That is why the efficient protection of workers' interests in a democratic regime requires association. The incompetence of some employer or the ambition of some labor leaders may have been the occasion that led to the establishment of some unions. Nevertheless trade unionism is irreplaceable in an industrial and democratic civilization.

Provoked no doubt by the need to safeguard material interests, trade unions fulfill deeper aspirations, towards the ideal of a complete life shared by a good part of the population, and towards the planning of relations between men in the specific labor relations field and in society as a whole. Trade unions are the product of a civilization and at the same time a leaven contributing to its development towards an ideal and structures, in greater conformity with the dignity of men.

Trade unionism helps to build a democracy because of its function and of the spheres in which it evolves.

The function of trade unionism is to represent the workers, to promote and defend their specific interests as workers. In addition, and as a result, trade unionism must collaborate with other institutions and educate its membership.

A labor union is the normal spokesman of its members with regard to the employer, government authorities, and the public. Its job is the defence of the workers' interests wherever these may lie.

Field of Economics

Its proper sphere of action is the domain of economics. By improving working conditions, regulating labor relations in an enterprise, contributing to ensure security for workers, increasing the standard of living, guarding over the respect due to the human person, trade unionism accomplishes something for the citizen, for, there is little to be distinguished between the worker, the head of a family, and the citizen.

But, precisely because of this coincidence, a labor union cannot make abstraction of public affairs. Its professional and economic aims inevitably overlap into the political sphere. Job security, full employment, the distribution of national revenue, and the standard of living are matters which affect and interest the entire nation. Economic problems are becoming more and more important in the political sphere. The state's role in the economy of the nation is constantly growing. If state intervention in the field of economy is to be efficient and in conformity with the interests of workers and the nation, persons who hold the reins of public authority must be assisted.

Trade unions play an eminent and useful role in a democracy by making known the view of their membership and also by cooperating with public administration departments. It must be said however that until now the positive role that trade unions and employer groups can play in administrative bodies has not been completely understood.

Political Action

Representations made by workers to the public authorities, as well as membership education programs, already constitute a form of indirect political action long practised in this country.

While remaining in their specific sphere, trade unions can, under certain circumstances, engage in direct political action.

A labor union is not a political party and it would be a grave error to confuse one with the other in theory or in practice. A labor union is made up of workers who pursue their collective interests within a society. A political party, on the other hand, is formed of citizens who seek together the best means to achieve the common welfare. It is normal however that a labor union and a political party, which take inspiration from an identical conception of society, work shoulder to shoulder and collaborate effectively to make their common ideal a reality. One must not conclude from this that a political party must become a tool in the hands of a labor union, or that a labor union may accept to become the plaything of a political party. In one and the other case, the result would be a move toward dictatorship and democracy would cease to function.

The respect of each group's autonomy and a hierarchy of respective aims are absolutely indispensable but they do not close the door to collaboration. In our country this type of collaboration has only reached an embryonic stage. There are many causes, but the political immaturity of the workers themselves and the imperfection of the democratic structure of the traditional parties are the most important.

Trade unions and democracy go together. Trade unionism can develop only in a democracy where there is freedom of expression and association. On the other hand, a true democracy cannot exist or normally grow unless there exist as a link between state and citizens, some social, economic, and professional organizations which play the role of intermediaries. Trade unions constitute one type of such groups.

Union Democracy

It is difficult to imagine a democracy with institutions which are not themselves democratic.

That is why, if we want trade unions to really, not in theory alone, bring something to the democratic way of life of our country, it is necessary that at all levels of their organization they preserve democratic forms and that in their actions towards other groups or their

own membership, they respect the values inherent to the democratic system.

One would have to be blind not to note that labor unions, as all other organized groups in our civilization which tend more and more towards unification and concentration, are slowly building up to gigantic organisms which could endanger democracy if we do not take care.

As a movement becomes an institution, takes on size and importance, its structures become fixed, tasks are divided, and a specialization becomes necessary. Gradually the tasks of management, administration, and even the responsibility of making decisions, become concentrated in the hands of a few persons because these tasks demand a higher degree of competence and more experience. Gradually, the general assembly, which juridically holds the legislative power, becomes a body to which one reports and later simply informs.

This process of concentration of power is not, as is sometimes believed by persons outside trade unionism, exclusively attributable to the thirst for power of leaders, although they contribute sometimes to increase the process in some cases.

An administration must be realistic, practical, and efficient; it must look after matters which can only be dealt with in a bureaucratic way. Sometimes the stubborn opposition of employers forces leaders to make quick, and firm decisions. There must be solidarity between members if a union is to function. This need for unity compels the leaders to take the means to prevent unscrupulous or demagogic opposition which would exploit membership dissatisfaction, sometimes encouraged by outside agents.

Centralization

One must not believe that this process of the centralization of power is a process of usurpation carried out over the opposition of the membership. It comes progressively, imperceptibly, with the passive approbation and consent of the workers. What the worker wants from his union is a good return, protection and service for the union dues he pays. As long as he gets what he expects from his union, he has a tendency to become disinterested in the meetings and adminis-

trative problems. This is a phenomenon which has been noted in all other democratic institutions. It has long been accepted by shareholders in private enterprise.

But the fact that this situation is easily tolerated elsewhere does not dispense those who want to see the growth of an authentic labor movement from taking measures to ensure that, while taking into account the needs of efficient action, each member is not absorbed in a big machine and, on the other hand, is encouraged to play his role of a responsible and free human being.

Some Abuses

Democracy within a union may be jeopardized by practices which do not have the excuse of some objective, if distant, situation. These practices are far from being as widespread as is generally believed in circles which are ignorant of trade unionism or hostile to it. But it would be hypocritical not to admit their existence. In certain cases, trade unions restrict the admission of members or set up prohibitive initiation fees. In certain unions, there are no elections, and the officers hold an indefinite mandate or it is impossible to oppose them. Sometimes reprisals are carried out against members. Union security, which is in itself legitimate, useful, and recommendable, is sometimes used as an excuse to track down honest workers who simply want to exercise, in a democratic way, the rights guaranteed by union regulations or by the law. It might also be pertinent to mention the manner in which, in some cases, unions funds are employed.

Leaders' Responsibility

I repeat it, these practices are found only in certain unions, and curiously enough, they are found in the same trades and the same industries almost all over the world. Moreover, investigations have shown that in each case where a racketeer controls a union he has the support of an employer or a shady politician. And, interesting to note, these racketeers are usually opposed to steady political action on the part of unions.

Even if such practices are rare in our country, they are not to be tolerated, because they are a cancer which throw discredit on all or-

ganized labor and give an easy pretext to the enemies of labor to hamper its normal development.

Problems of Integration

In their dealings with other groups, unions sometimes could develop a tendency to throw out of balance the relations between various democratic institutions if, because of their economic or political power, they assimilate the common good with the welfare of the class they represent. For the time being, in our country, this is not the case. We cannot however predict what may develop in the future. It will depend, to a large extent, on the manner in which other social classes and institutions will accept the legitimate demands of the working class and help the integration of trade unionism in our society.

Until now, it must be said, trade unionism is finding acceptance only with great difficulty. While almost everyone accepts trade unionism as such, very few are in fact ready to give trade unions their normal place.

There are three causes for the difficulties encountered by trade unions in their efforts to become integrated in society: the character of trade unionism itself, the opposition of traditionalist social forces, the blunders of labor leaders.

Because it is a new institution trade unionism is not well understood by the public and by the workers themselves. Because it is an institution designed to make demands, a labor union becomes involved in conflicts to safeguard the interests of the workers. While conflicts of interest are considered normal in all domains, in the labor relations field they are often objected to.

Every new social force clashes with the ancient forces which, through time and tradition, have learned to live together. Traditional social forces such as political parties, financial institutions, and the farming class, in time found a mutually acceptable regime.

They accepted each other, upheld each other. The mass of the people, small owners, tradesmen, self-employed workers, civil servants, professionals, reacted and still react sympathetically to these institutions and accept trade unions with difficulty. Consciously or not, they

think trade unionists are something to league against or to hold in suspicion.

Public Relations

The third cause is the awkwardness or naive nature of certain union tactics. In spite of their honest will to integrate their movement in society, many union leaders lack social psychology in the face of opposition, incomprehension and suspicion. They unconsciously jar public opinion, they do not concern themselves enough with the problem of "good public relations", they do not explain to a sufficient degree the reasons behind their attitudes or actions: as demands for increased salaries, calling strikes. Often, they confuse what is urgent with what is important.

The preservation and the development of democratic methods within unions are above all the responsibility of union leaders. Because of their function, their competence in technical matters and of their knowledge in the labor field, they have the power and the opportunity of giving their organization a good structure which, at all levels, respects the dignity of the worker and protects his interests. Particularly, they should cooperate for the education of the members of their organizations, for democracy is not only a question of institutions and structures. It is above all a spirit, a sense of responsibility among men, a knowledge and a respect for moral and spiritual values. There is no true democracy if men are not educated. Recently, we asserted this: "Paradoxical as it may appear, the lure of a golden servitude is perhaps more powerful among men than the love of freedom. For freedom imposes sacrifices and self-denial which one may become easily unable to support. And people who have become enslaved in this way are no longer christian". This is true for all citizens, even for unionized workers.

Members' Education

Labor organizations, for a long time now, have given importance to the problem of the education of their members. Of all social groups, with cooperatives, they are perhaps those which each year spend more money than any other for this purpose. They maintain Educational Services with a specialized staff and invite experts to help them. Al-

though it is necessary for them to devote many efforts towards the training in union techniques, — because it is a must for the existence and the functioning of unions, — they also have to cooperate to educate the worker in his union and social responsibilities.

It is true that a labor union has neither the right of monopolizing the education of its members nor that of shielding them entirely from all exterior influence. But it is surely one of its responsibilities to cooperate to their civil education with all the means at hand.

About 30% of the workers are unionized in Canada. Now for the greater part of them, unions are the only organizations in which they have a chance for active participation and in which they may be trained to become group leaders. A truly democratic union which allows freedom of expression, helps the development of the personality and thus contributes to prepare free citizens.

Let me summarize. In an industrial and democratic civilization, labor unionism appears as a normal and essential institution. Born of democracy, it helps to preserve and develop democratic life. There is, however, an essential condition. It must be itself an institution that really represents the workers and gives them the opportunity of expressing their aspirations while safeguarding their economic and professional interests.

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