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LABOR - MANAGEMENT AND THE FEARFUL SIXTIES



by

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Why should labor-management relations today be described as fearful?

Because they seem to have been going downhill most of the last decade. History tells us that prior to 1935 there was much exploitation of labor in the United States. The Wagner Act helped swing the balance the other way. World War II consolidated labor power, but at the same time introduced a pervasive pattern of labor-management co-operation. At the end of the war, most of us had high hopes for the future of industrial relations in the United States.

Were these hopes based on special situations that prevailed only during the war?

At the time we did not think so. We felt, for example, that after critical Supreme Court decisions in 1937 management was reconciled to collective bargaining with the new mass-production unions. Moreover, we noted the wide spread of what has been called "human-relations" programs. These antedated the war. Finally, the joint work of labor and management representatives on war boards engendered trust that should have carried over through the peace years.

What happened then?

It is difficult to be certain, but we note that a number of factors tended to direct union-management relations to the top levels, to the apparent neglect of important work at the plant level. For example, a series of strikes in 1945 and 1946 led to the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. Labor reacted against this by intensified political action. There were national political elements too in many of the postwar rounds of wage increases, as labor tried to keep up with inflationary price rises. Heavy demand for the products of industry obscured errors that caused costs to rise faster than new machines and processes could increase labor productivity.

How did this affect labor relations in the 1950's?

Individual companies began to react against industry-wide patterns of bargaining. One of the first signs was the Kohler strike taken nearly six year ago. Then a large electrical company introduced a new pattern of "take-it-or-leave-it" bargaining for a new contract. This method has been called "Boulwarism," from the name of its author. The 1956-57 recession made many industries cost

conscious, since they felt that a consumer rebellion against high prices was a major factor in the recession. Finally, the work of the McClellan Committee gave labor a black eye. The result was a drastic curb on union practices in the Landrum-Griffin Act of 1959.

Is all this bad? Or could you say that the pendulum is now in a middle position, favoring neither labor nor management?

It would be premature to answer the second question, since it will take years to weigh the effects of a major piece of labor legislation. But what does seem bad is the atmosphere that prevails. For example, the 1959 steel strike was prolonged over an issue that in past years would not have been a subject of industry-wide bargaining. Work rules are essentially plant issues. In the past, they were generally discussed on a plant or company basis, after general agreement was reached on wages and fringe benefits.

Why is the present practice wrong?

Because it lends itself to exaggerated fears based on uncertainty of application. Labor could well imagine that granting complete freedom to make changes might lead to oppressive working conditions and wholesale layoffs. But if the particular practices were spelled out on a plant or company basis, they could be discussed in terms of their reasonableness. If a working force was unnecessarily large, plans could be made to cushion the shock of changes. For example, older men could be retired on special pensions and not replaced.

Who is to blame for all this?

Even if it were possible to assess blame fairly and adequately, it would not be wise to answer this question. When social problems are discussed in terms of blame, particularly when a whole group is involved, there is a tendency to close ranks and fight for survival. In the process, the original issue is often forgotten. We do have a right, and often a duty, to assess issues in terms of right and wrong. But there are also times when this judgment is best kept private, so that the parties can discuss issues with a minimum of prejudice and emotional reactions.

What would you suggest for today?

I think a good start would be for both labor and management to start examining their own consciences. We have had too much of the practice of

public confession of the sins of others. We might ask how our own work conduct might be tainted by selfishness, injustice, and insensitivity to the rights and human dignity of others.

Is this all?

No. This examination should be followed up by an effort to seek to build strong patterns of trust, harmony, and mutual collaboration at the plant level. This may be started by quiet conferences held by two or three persons for each side. They should have the understanding that their primary aim is to build for a better future, not to assess blame for the past. Of course, where past practices or existing personnel may be blocks to future progress, changes must be considered.

Do you really think that this will work?

It will, if both sides are really willing to make an honest try. Since elements of character and personal virtue are involved in this attempt, both groups should give serious thought to regular programs for asking God's help. Catholics, for example, might consider a Holy Hour, or a half-day of recollection, devoted to the virtues of unselfish charity and sensitive concern for others' rights. Protestant and Jewish groups might also make appropriate arrangements.

Would this really change problems that are mostly national in origin?

Eventually it would. Present laws tend to make collective bargaining and related activities more responsive to local pressures and decisions. The moral climate of a union or an industry is largely affected by the moral climate at local areas. It is the exception when patterns are imposed from the top upon unwilling union members or industrial leaders. And such exceptions will be increasingly rare, given the present legal situation and the attitudes of the public.

Is there any hope, or is the future dark and fearful?

Only one group can answer this question. This is the American people, both in labor and in management. Basically, it is a question of a moral caliber. Do we have, or can we get, the moral and religious strength to rise above selfishness and seek the general welfare of companies, industries, and the nation? Upon the answer to this question depends much of the future of our great nation.

EPISCOPAL RESIDENCE

Hartford, Connecticut

In the Providence of God we have been placed in a world in which both as Catholics and as citizens we are faced with serious responsibilities. The changes in our society which have occurred in our generation have been deep and shaking. These changes give evidence of a world-wide social restlessness, and the social problems which have been provoked by these changes must be resolved not by expedient remedies, but by decisions which respect the dignity and the eternal destiny of all of God's human creatures.

It is the purpose of Social Action Sunday to direct the thoughts of our people to the teachings of the Church and the counsels of the Popes on the social problems which trouble both our nation and the world. Today we must appreciate these problems and we must have knowledge of the proposed remedies. Perhaps the Church has never had a greater need of an informed and zealous laity, a laity who are concerned not only with their own personal sanctification, but who are equally anxious to accept their responsibilities in resolving the social problems which harass mankind.

Human misery, sordid poverty, wretched housing, economic insecurity, calloused discrimination — these are social evils which the Church has condemned in one form or another for almost 2,000 years. Through all the centuries and in a variety of social apostolates, ranging through the monk-farmers, the captive-liberators and the ambassadors of the Faith, the Church has worked to eradicate those social evils which threaten the souls of men.

Today in an hour of most urgent social crisis the Popes of the Church in a series of magnificent social documents have summoned all Christians to the apostolate demanded by our day. In the social teachings of the Church they have pointed out the dangers and they have sounded the warnings. They have asked not for an apostolate built upon the fear of the evils of Communism, but rather for a positive apostolate which will arise from our loyalty to

Christ and the justice and charity of His teachings. They have called for an heroic effort to meet the need — but unfortunately far too many have been coldly indifferent to the call.

On Social Action Sunday we urge all of our people both to acquire a knowledge of the social teachings of the Church and to seize every opportunity to put that doctrine into practice. In factories, in offices, in unions, in agriculture, in political life, in the professions — in every area of human activity it is the laity who have the competence to work with their associates and shape the world closer to the standards of the justice and charity of Christ's teachings.

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