

THE
ACTU

By

Thomas F. Reilly, C.S.S.R.



A Catholic
Apostolate
for
Labor

THE STORY
OF A
CHRISTIAN APOSTOLATE
FOR THE
CARPENTER OF
NAZARETH



Published by

THE ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC
TRADE UNIONISTS

226 Lafayette Street
New York City

Word and Action

“**W**E have had a great many pretty speeches on the encyclicals but what we want is action.” Such statements have appeared periodically and we who hear or read them nod vigorously in agreement. Our vigor thus expended, we wait for others to provide the action.

But there is small organization which is furnishing action we want and need. This is the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU). Its activities are being carried on by laymen and laywomen but it enjoys the guidance of a very competent chaplain, the Rev. John Monaghan, and the active assistance of several other priests.

Part of Papal Program

The ACTU is decidedly in harmony with the papal encyclicals. Both Leo XIII and Pius XI considered the formation of Labor Unions a very necessary means for uplifting the proletariat. According to Pius XI the ideal arrangement for Catholic workingmen in certain circumstances is the creation of Catholic unions but where such organizations are impossible Catholic workers “seem to have no choice but to enroll themselves in neutral unions.” The Holy See is aware that “neutral” unions may depart from Christian principles. Hence, where Catholic workers must join

such unions it demands as "the first and foremost precaution" that "side by side with these trade unions, there must always be associations which aim at giving their members a thorough religious and moral training, that these in turn may impart to the labor unions to which they belong the upright spirit which should direct their entire conduct. Thus will these unions exert a beneficent influence far beyond the ranks of their own members."

The Association of Catholic Trade Unionists appears to be the first group which might fall within the scope of the definition of the Holy Father. The members of the ACTU belong to any bona fide union, whether independent or affiliated with the C. I. O. or the A. F. L. Their constitution states their purpose: "To foster and spread in the American labor movement sound trade unionism built on Christian principles, by bringing to workers a knowledge of those principles, and by training leaders and supplying an organization to put Christian principles into practice."

Not A Union

The ACTU is not another trade union nor does it desire to form a clique within any union to secure "political" control of union affairs. In the election of union officials, ACTU members do not necessarily support Catholics, any more than Catholic voters support Catholic candidates in political election. They are concerned with the election of honest, intelligent men who will best

promote the welfare of the workers. Endeavoring to assist their fellow-unionists to build up the labor movement into an effective institution for social justice the ACTU is naturally led into conflict with Communism on the one hand and on the other into fighting union leadership which disregards the interests of the rank and file. While striving to enlighten the mind of the general public, which has been filled with grossly exaggerated report of the evils in the existing unions, the ACTU is working for removal of the actual shortcomings which impede progress of sound unionism.

The group meets twice monthly at its offices in downtown New York and listens to a discussion of some phase of Catholic social teachings or problem of trade unionism.

An important part of the association's work has been the support and settlement of strikes. Before the question of strike support is submitted to vote, the association acquires factual knowledge of the particular situation and then considers whether the strike is justified in the light of Christian ethics. If the strikers have shown themselves committed to the use of violence or Marxist tactics, or if their demands are unjust in any way, support is withheld. If they conclude that the strike is comfortable to Christian principles, ACTU members lend their aid by picketing, obtaining speakers (priests and laymen) for mass meetings, or by publicizing the fact of the conflict in their paper, the *Labor Leader*.

Oppose Violence

The threat of the ACTU to withdraw support has been sufficient at times to prevent the flaring up of violence which may so easily occur in a long drawn out strike. The ACTU has also offered itself as arbiter in a number of industrial conflicts and has been acclaimed by both workers and employers for its decisions. Thus the association is offering convincing proof to many workers that sincere Catholics are far from indifferent to the injustices under which they labor.

The ACTU paper, the *Labor Leader*, mimeographed at first, has developed into a printed four-page bi-weekly. Though circulation is increasing slowly, desperate financial condition of the paper imperils its further growth. Its survival must be a matter of deep concern to Catholics, for it meets a very important need. Few indeed of the daily papers can be praised for impartiality in their reporting of labor news. It has even happened on occasion that Catholic papers, amid the barrage of criticism and charges of Communism hurled so profusely at the labor movement, have re-echoed statements decidedly unfair. As Bishop Lucey recently pointed out, we must have a more than superficial knowledge if we wish to escape the prevalent anti-labor bias. "In our just determination to stop Communism, we must not offend the honest working people who are trying to organize for justice and the common good," Bishop Lucey stated. "Above all we must not be guilty of libel. Some of the statements that we have made would constitute a mortal sin of injustice—but we know not what we do."

Honest Criticism

A union man is apt to be extremely distrustful of an outsider's criticism of his union; even though he perceives that the criticism is just, he may well wonder at the motive behind it, particularly when the source is some organization which has never raised its voice against injustice. But let the same criticism come from men, who have been fighting shoulder to shoulder with him for better working condition, and it will receive a respectful hearing. The *Labor Leader* is hard-hitting. While exposing the anti-labor tactics and the miserable wage conditions which prevail in many plants, it has not failed to lash out at the efforts of Communists to use this or that union for their own ends, nor has it minced words when dealing with union leaders who connive at racketeering or override democratic procedure.

Pioneer Labor Schools

The lack of Catholic worker schools goes a great way towards explaining the absence of informed Catholic leadership in many unions where Catholics are numerically strong. The ACTU in its constitution proposed the establishment of such schools, and last year entered into this badly neglected field. It has sponsored three schools in New York, at downtown Fordham, St. Joseph's and St. Mark's Church in Harlem. With priests and several laymen from the ACTU as teachers, the schools are presenting courses in Trade Union Practices, General Labor Relations, Economics, Labor Ethics, and Labor History. It is expected

that 500 or 600 men and women will enroll. Results of this step should be felt in a few years.

Another educational task, hardly less important, is interpreting the union movement to non unionists and particularly to the middle class. The ordinary man of the middle class feels the workers are not getting what they should, but at the same time he believes all this striking is "probably just a bunch of Reds or racketeers behind the whole business." He is rarely aware of the conditions which exasperate workers beyond endurance. When a large strike is in progress the interpretations of the capitalistic press, employer propaganda with its "Citizens' Committees" as a front and with its shibboleths of "Americanism," "law and order," "outside agitators," "interference with the right to work," and the like, may lead him to join in the clamor to teach these strikers a good lesson, "to show them this is America and that stuff doesn't go here." He does not realize he has succumbed to an old strike breaking technique.

Because the attitude of the middle class plays such an important part in the advance or retrogression of unionism, an effort must be made to acquaint them with the rights of workers and with facts which antilabor propaganda so consistently ignores. A start towards this is being made under auspices of the ACTU speakers' bureau. Lectures have been given this winter at the Centre Club, New York, by Fathers Boland and Monaghan; by Edward Squitieri, ACTU president, and George Donahue, *Labor Leader* editor.

Approximately two hundred other talks were

given before Holy Name, Knights of Columbus and school groups.

Catholic Labor Defense

Another ACTU outgrowth is the Catholic Labor Defense League, with membership of about 30 Catholic lawyers. It aids workers of any creed who have suffered any infringement of their legal rights in matters pertaining to the employer-employee relationship or union status. Up to now, the League has handled its cases without fee. These cases have arisen in some instances from alleged discriminatory discharge by employers for union activity, and in others, from unjust suspensions or expulsions from unions because of unwillingness to go along with dictatorial officials or left wing factions.

In twenty cities outside New York the nuclei of other ACTU groups have begun to take form. In Pittsburgh, Detroit, Boston and several other cities the effort has received ecclesiastical commendation or approval. A number of Catholic papers have been enthusiastic in their praise. Of course, a few discordant voices have been heard but in general the great value of the movement is recognized.



*(Chapters and addresses
on page 11)*



ACTU CHAPTERS

NEW YORK CITY

Edward Squitieri, Pres., 226 Lafayette St., New York

BOSTON

Katherine M. O'Hearn
ACTU - Boston
1578 Cambridge St.
Cambridge, Mass.

DETROIT

Paul Weber, Pres.
ACTU - Detroit
52 Harper Ave.
Detroit, Mich.

AKRON

Leo Field
ACTU - Akron
789 Harvard St.
Akron, Ohio.

PHILADELPHIA

Hugh Byrne
ACTU - Philadelphia
2848 Jasper St.
Philadelphia, Pa.

PONCA CITY

Rev. D. J. Kanaly, Chap.
ACTU - Ponca City
Ponca City Hospital
Ponca City, Okla.

OKLAHOMA CITY

Rev. John L. Garvey
ACTU - Oklahoma City
218 N. W. Fifth St.
Oklahoma City, Okla.

PITTSBURGH

Robert Steinmetz, Pres.
ACTU - Pittsburgh
3221 Fifth Ave.
Pittsburgh, Pa.

NEWARK

Agnes Fahey, Act'g Pres.
ACTU - Newark
c/o Rev. Lambert Dunne
528 High Street
Newark, New Jersey

BELLINGHAM

Harry Oberlatz
ACTU - Bellingham
2716 Grand Ave.
Everett, Wash.

PONTIAC

Rev. Thomas A. Edison,
Chap.
ACTU - Pontiac
St. Vincent de Paul Rect.
197 South Parke St.
Pontiac, Mich.

CHICAGO

Rev. John M. Hayes
ACTU - Chicago
St. Angela's Rectory
5758 W. Potomac Ave.
Chicago, Ill.

SAN FRANCISCO

Laura Smith, Act'g Sect'y
ACTU - San Francisco
1392 Funston Ave., Apt. 14
San Francisco, Calif.

BAYONNE

Marie Swiney, Act'g Sect'y
ACTU - Bayonne
325 Avenue C
Bayonne, New Jersey

COLUMBUS

G. George De Nucci
ACTU - Columbus
744 S. Remington Rd.
Columbus, Ohio.

CLEVELAND

Earl J. Krock
ACTU - Cleveland
617 Swetland Building
Cleveland, Ohio.

BAY CITY

Rev. Neil O'Connor
St. James Rectory
710 Columbus Ave.
Bay City, Mich.

WASHINGTON

Marie G. Heilig
ACTU - Washington
1228 Eye St. N. W.
Washington, D. C.

