

Some Thoughts on Labor and Political Action **Réflexions sur le mouvement ouvrier et l'action politique**

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Article abstract

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Some Thoughts on Labor and Political Action

Adolf Sturmthal

This is an attempt to formulate, at an early stage of a research project, some hypotheses on the relationship between the labor movement and political action.

These are the kind of hunches with which theoretical work starts out on the way to the development of a set of interrelated generalized propositions which have withstood the first stages of confrontation with empirical evidence. There are, therefore, any number of questions in connection with this essay which I shall be compelled to give either very tentative answer or the reply: I don't know, but I hope to find out.

1—Systems of Thought

Three systems of thought in the Anglo-Saxon world have dealt with the role of political action in the arsenal of the labor movement. In a chronological — only partly logical — order these are the theories of Marx, the Webbs and Selig Perlman. For Marx political action was the fundamental and at the same time the supreme weapon of the working class. To the same degree to which the workers would develop class consciousness they would also accentuate their political organization, the leading organization among those which the working class creates for its emancipation. All other organizations are subordinate to the political party; they are not only under its leadership, they are also primarily recruiting grounds for the political organization. The ultimate battle in the class struggle is a political battle, in the sense that it is fought primarily by political organizations as well as that its object is the conquest of political power by the working class. For Marx political action forms, both quantitatively and qualitatively, an increasingly important part of labor action. With the progress of labor, we should, therefore, expect that political activity in the labor movement is increasingly emphasized.

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With a very different kind of reasoning, the *Webbs* arrived at a somewhat similar conclusion. In their view the objectives of the trade union required for their attainment the establishment and enforcement of what they called the « Common Rule ». Collective bargaining and mutual insurance may serve as instruments to this end; but, as the *Webbs* put it in the 1920 edition of their « *Industrial Democracy* », « the trade unionists, having obtained the vote, now wish to make use of it to enforce, by Legal Enactment, such of their Common Rules as they see a chance of getting public opinion to support ». Political action for the purpose of legal enactment of common rules thus becomes a method of growing importance for the labor movement as its political power increases.

Selig Perlman's theory propounds an almost diametrically opposed view. The labor movement created and led in its early stages by intellectuals frees itself gradually from their spiritual leadership as labor evolves into self-confidence. Since it is the intellectual who has impressed upon the « manualists » the view that political action and social reform objectives are of paramount importance, labor gradually shifts its attention from politics and distant aims of social change to economic action and immediate objectives. The emancipation of the manualist from the tutelage of the intellectuals expresses itself in increasing emphasis on collective bargaining for short-run demands. A mature labor movement stresses collective bargaining to the neglect of political action (it is only a mirage says *Perlman*).

2—Political Activity

This brief summary of the views of important thinkers indicates not only the disagreements which exist among them, but to some extent also the confusion between « scientific » and « normative » elements in their views. The « class-conscious » labor movement of *Marx*, the « mature » movement of *Perlman* are of course expressions of what the authors thought labor movements ought to do and not merely of what they would do. In addition, there seems to exist, perhaps more among the disciples than among the masters, a certain ambiguity of what the term « political activity » is to imply. It is perhaps useful first to clarify the term for our purposes.

Political action is sometimes — perhaps more in Britain than in the U.S. — identified with « independent political action » which in turn is interpreted to mean a Labor Party in the style of either the British

Labour Party or the Scandinavian Social Democratic parties. In American discussions the term more commonly refers to either the nominating of candidates for public office or, in a somewhat looser fashion, to the attempt to achieve certain objectives by legislation or administrative action. In a vague way, emphasis on political action is sometimes identified with certain — usually radical — ideologies: political action is then regarded as equivalent with the effort to achieve certain changes in the social system. Finally, we could suggest that the term be reserved for the work of organizations presenting solutions for a whole range of problems, as distinguished from pressure groups which concentrate all their attention upon a small number of issues.

In what follows I intend to use the term in one of its most conventional meanings — namely, to denote a method for the achievement of given objectives. Political action then implies the use of legislative or administrative means by unions for the attainment of their objectives. More realistically, since no labor movement refuses to use legislation or administrative devices altogether and very few, if any, nowadays reject collective bargaining *in toto*, we shall be concerned with the respective proportions in which these two methods — disregarding all others — are used. Our assignment is thus to suggest hypotheses that may assist in understanding the different mixtures of political action and collective bargaining used by different labor movements.

3—Danger of Ethnocentrism

The main danger which such an attempt faces is that of ethnocentrism. Let us consider what this danger may consist of in the case of the United States. In making comparisons among different labor movements one or several of the following silent assumptions are commonly or at least frequently at the base of the comparison:

a) The main or essential or at least short-run objectives of different labor movements are everywhere and at all times the same, once labor movements have come into being. The achievements of various labor movements can, therefore, be compared by the use of one yardstick — e.g., the level or the rise of real hourly earnings.

b) The means of achieving these identical objectives would be the same in all countries and at all times — if we disregard minor variations imposed by local peculiarities — if intellectuals did not intervene and, from a certain moment on, misguide the movement.

c) The basic method is collective bargaining, with political action at the most playing a subsidiary and supporting part to collective bargaining.

d) Left to themselves all labor movements will put increasing emphasis on collective bargaining. We are heading for a universe with an increasingly uniform labor movement in which the method-mix accentuates collective bargaining at the expense of political action.

Merely stating these assumptions is sufficient to point out their fragility and their fundamental ethnocentrism. To think of the labor movements in the world in the image of present-day American business unionism, i.e., as an organization whose horizon is bounded by wages and hours and working conditions is to misrepresent other movements, other phases of the history of the American labor movement and, perhaps, even some important aspects of American labor today. Statistically at least, in many of its behavior patterns, the American labor movement is the exception rather than the rule among the labor movements of the world. This applies particularly to its still rather distrustful attitude toward political action.

Equally significant, I believe, is the ethnocentric element in the role that many observers have assigned to collective bargaining. An almost mystic faith in collective bargaining has developed in this country. As long as the issue was that of collective bargaining versus unilateral determination of wages and working conditions — usually by the employer — the stress upon the virtues of collective negotiations was easily comprehensible. However, this faith in the unlimited virtues of collective bargaining seems less warranted when the choice is between collective bargaining and political action. Undoubtedly each of these methods has its virtues and its shortcomings and, what is more important, each operates best or most effectively under certain conditions. It will be the purpose of this paper to formulate some hypotheses about the conditions under which each of these methods seems likely to be most effectively employed. Let us proceed by way of a simplified theoretical model.

4—Theoretical Model

This model operates with four variables: economic development, changing objectives of the labor movement, changes in the fundamental situation on the labor market and changes in the structure of the labor

movement. In extreme shorthand the following propositions may be formulated:

1. With progressive economic development — which typically means industrialization — have come changes in the principal objectives of the different labor movements; so far the emphasis has ordinarily moved from the political, social, cultural, educational to the economic sphere.

2. Quite frequently industrialization has its take-off in a situation which implies unlimited supplies of unskilled labor. The bargaining power of an all-inclusive labor movement is close to zero. Labor must then choose between political action or a limitation of its organization to high-skilled craftsmen. This choice will be greatly influenced by the existence or absence of strongly emphasized non-economic objectives common to all or most workers.

3. With the progress of industrialization the excess supply of labor tends to be absorbed. However, this same process, by calling forth the rise of the semiskilled worker and other developments, weakens the bargaining position of the skilled workers. This tends to emphasize political action — but at this stage it often serves less as a substitute for bargaining, but rather as a necessary preparation for effective bargaining.

These propositions must be developed to be meaningful.

5—Economic Development

The problem we are considering must be visualized against the background of economic development — the progress of industrialization, rising per capita incomes, improving levels of education, ever higher social acceptance of manual labor, etc. This great change that has been going on in the Western world since the eighteenth century is now spreading around the globe. It has been accompanied by changes in the objectives of the labor movements.

During the last century and a half since organized labor movements have come into being, they have been instruments for the attainment of very different objectives at different times. Universal equal suffrage, greater educational opportunities for workers and their children (in particular universal compulsory free secular primary school education), greater social recognition for manual labor, recognition of social respon-

sibility for some of the risks connected with manual work — all these and many more have been central objectives of various labor movements at different times. The struggle for universal equal suffrage filled an entire stage in the history of most Western labor movements — the heroic age of European socialism which lasted roughly until 1918 and was responsible to a large extent for the flavor of comradeship and dedication that was characteristic, until fairly recently, of so many of the Continental European labor movements. No one can fully understand the present crisis of European labor without reference to the void which the attainment of its democratic objectives left in the whole make-up of the movement. A history of the international labor movement could be written, simply in terms of those of its functions which it abandoned, partly because they were no longer necessary since some other organization had taken them over — e.g., education by the state, social security by a public system, etc. — or partly because the original objective had been attained. It seems possible that by further research certain interesting regularities could be ascertained in the sequence in which given objectives were emphasized, attained, or abandoned, the degrees of interconnection and overlap among them, etc. Intimate connections, in particular, could be established between certain types of objectives and emphasis or lack of emphasis on political action. The relative lack of interest in political action on the part of the American labor movement can be related to the fact that quite different from — say — its European counterparts — suffrage, and public secular primary school education had been attained before the modern organization of American labor emerged. *

Let us now concentrate our attention exclusively upon that stage of the evolution in which the economic objectives of the labor movement have pre-eminence. For the sake of simplicity of the argument, I shall use the wage rate as the object of economic union demands. This means that I shall disregard for the moment all non-economic demands — an important loss of realism, but fortunately only a temporary one in the development of our thought — as well as all economic demands not expressed in terms of changes of the wage rate. This, on the whole, is not a significant fact since these demands can be translated into rate changes and, in fact are so treated on many occasions by the partners in the bargaining process.

* Quite possibly, in the twentieth century, anti-colonialism, the struggle for national independence, may have taken the place of the conventional political objectives of labor in earlier history — universal suffrage, universal free secular grammar school education, etc.

The wage rate being a price, the proximate determinants of the price are supply and demand for the particular type of labor involved. The bargaining power of a union is then its ability to influence the wage rate either by changing the demand or supply schedules or by setting a rate different from the equilibrium rate. Generally speaking, bargaining power will be the higher, the easier it is to control the supply of labor that is available to fill the jobs, since the union has little direct influence upon the demand schedule.

In most countries, in the early phases of the industrialization process the supply of labor is very large in relation to the demand. This is expressed in what is called hidden unemployment or under-employment, i.e., a situation — existing particularly frequently in agriculture — in which the withdrawal of a significant portion of the labor force would be offset by minor adjustments in the work load of the remaining workers, without producing any substantial reduction in output. Arthur Lewis has discussed this situation in a study entitled «Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labor».¹

This situation means that at the existing wage rate in industry an excess supply of labor is available. The industrial labor force can consequently be increased without any increase in the wage rate. In terms of economic theory, the supply of labor in the aggregate is perfectly elastic. No increase in wage rates is required to produce a higher supply of labor.

Where does this excess supply of labor come from? It originates essentially with four main sources:

1. *The excess labor force in agriculture.* In addition, the gradual transformation of subsistence agriculture into commercialized farming releases further parts of the agricultural labor force.

2. *Release of labor from the pre-capitalistic small-scale manufacturing and trading sector.*

3. *Population increase.* Industrialization goes sometimes — particularly nowadays — hand in hand with improved sanitation and the introduction of modern medical methods. This reduces the mortality rate and produces rapid increases in the rate of population growth.

(1) W. A. LEWIS: *Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labour*, The Manchester School of Economic and Social Studies, Vol. XXII, No. 2, May 1954; and the same: *Unlimited Labour: Further Notes*, Vol. XXVI, No. 1, January 1958.

4. *Immigration.*

Of these the first two — the release of labor from agriculture and the pre-capitalistic manufacturing and trading enterprises — are normally the most important sources of labor supply in the early stages of industrialization. They produce the excess supply that stands at the factory gates eager to take on factory jobs or that part of the agricultural labor force which recruiting agents in various guises can easily induce to leave the village, temporarily or permanently, to obtain industrial employment.

Industrial wage rates are, even under these conditions, higher than the average subsistence provided for in agriculture. But the differential between the wage rate for common labor in industry and the average subsistence in agriculture cannot be high. The pressure of the excess supply of labor prevents the differential from becoming larger than custom, morality, the need for a stable and reasonably healthy labor supply in the plant, higher living costs in urban communities, etc., require. Under these circumstances union action by way of collective bargaining is likely to have little effect upon the basic wage rate, that for unskilled labor in industry.

The situation is far better, from the union point of view, as far as the rates for skilled labor are concerned. Economic growth commonly produces a sharp increase in the demand for the higher skill grades of labor while the supply — as a result of low educational levels, mediocre training facilities and rather high training costs in relation to current incomes — is fairly inelastic. The rise in the demand for higher skill qualifications is thus ordinarily sufficient to provide for an increased spread of the wage structure.

Unions operating in this kind of environment will be confronted with a choice whose implications are far-reaching. They may either limit their membership to highly skilled workers whose scarce supply provides the union with a powerful position at the bargaining table, or they may decide to represent all grades of industrial labor. In the latter case, they must find ways and means to relieve the pressure which unlimited supplies of labor exert upon the labor market. These ways and means may consist of restrictions on internal migration which effectively prevent the agricultural workers from accepting jobs in the urban areas and thus to compete with the industrial workers for the scarce jobs in

industry. Other devices are protective tariffs for agricultural goods. By increasing the average subsistence wage in agriculture the tariff reduces the significance of the industrial wage differential; at the same time, by improving the situation of the agricultural laborer, the tariff stems the tide of agricultural workers moving into industry. Restrictions on immigration are a relatively simple method to achieve the same objective. The unions, in a different solution of the problem, may achieve a universal «closed shop», i.e., they may hold complete control of the access to the various industrial occupations.

A labor movement limited to skilled craftsmen emphasizes collective bargaining. A movement conceived to include as many working class groups as possible, will have little market power. It will depend on political action either to give it control over the access to the labor market or to obtain direct enforcement of higher labor standards, circumventing, so to speak, the market.

On what does it depend which of these alternatives a labor movement chooses? As a working hypothesis I would suggest that one of the principal variables which determines the choice is the degree to which the labor movement serves as an instrument for the attainment of non-economic objectives (in addition to economic goals) common to the workers in general. The demand for equal suffrage, for the removal of class distinctions directed against manual labor, for equal educational opportunities represents a common tie among all workers and turns the labor movement into a class movement. When the resentment over the class society outweighs the economic advantages that could be obtained by limiting membership to skilled workers, the movement aims at becoming an all-inclusive working class organization. Its main weapon, then, tends to be political activity. For its lack of power on the market place, it substitutes its political pressure — the power of its numbers. Given its desire to include unskilled working class groups, the emphasis on political action is rational, just as the use of market power is perfectly reasonable for an organization limited to higher skill groups.

All this applies to labor movements in the early stages of industrialization when there is an unlimited supply of labor. There are, however, countries in which the take-off into industrialization occurs while labor is in short supply. On the whole this means that there is no underemployment in agriculture and that the pre-capitalistic sectors in manufacturing and trade are relatively small. The labor supply for

the growth of industry then must come from the natural population increase and from immigration. In countries of this type the bargaining power of unions is likely to be high at all times as long as industrial development proceeds at a sufficiently fast pace to absorb the increased labor supply originating in the growth of population and immigration. If the country happens to include a large under-populated but fertile territory, labor shortage rather than an excess supply of labor is likely to be the main problem of economic development guaranteeing a maximum bargaining power for labor unions. In this situation collective bargaining is an effective device for unions. Immigration may, however, grow to the point where it endangers the bargaining power of — particularly unskilled — workers just as seriously as would internal pressure of underemployed agricultural laborers. Then the need will arise to make a choice between a politically inclined class movement and a market-oriented high skill group.

6—Supply of Labor

The excess supply of labor continues to exist until it is relieved by any of the following processes:

1. Capital formation progresses to the point where the excess labor supply is absorbed; this is most likely to happen by way of progressive industrialization since modernization alone would tend to reduce labor requirements in agriculture and in the pre-capitalistic sectors of manufacturing and trade.

2. Migration. This may be either internal migration from the areas of excess labor supply into those undergoing rapid economic growth capable of absorbing immigrant labor, or external migration from underdeveloped countries into rapidly advancing modern industrial nations.

As soon as the pressure of excess labor supply upon the labor market is relieved — which is long in advance of the total absorption of excess labor — wages for labor in the industrial sector begin to rise. There are two reasons for this: average subsistence in the pre-capitalistic sector rises by the removal of a number of participants in the distribution of the product without any appreciable drop in the product itself; this tends to increase the supply price of industrial labor. The bargaining power of unions in the modern sector is enhanced by the drop of the volume of excess labor. Collective bargaining now becomes an

increasingly effective instrument in the hands of the labor movement, though it may appear to be the better part of wisdom to continue to use political devices for the purpose of raising incomes in the pre-capitalistic parts of the economy or in order to maintain a tariff that will increase real incomes in — say — agriculture. These devices will tend to reduce profits and, thereby the rate of economic growth in the long run, but at the same time will contribute to increases of wage rates in industry in the short run.

A special case of some significance is that of countries with « dual economies » — a substantial modern sector combined with a sector of either subsistence economy or at least a stagnant and relatively backward sector.² Our analysis leads us to expect that labor movements in these countries will tend to combine collective bargaining with political activity and that the role of bargaining increases with the growth of the modern sector.

7—Types of Labor

For a number of reasons, however, it would be misleading to assume that the logic of economic development would lead straight into the paradise of untrammelled collective bargaining and the corresponding decline of political action. Not only is it erroneous to regard social change simply as the function of one variable, but the independent variable itself — in this case the labor force represented by the unions — undergoes changes while economic growth proceeds. In practical terms this means:

a) That social mores once established persist beyond the life of the factors that gave rise to these mores. Thus the habit of regulating social relationships by law established in an era of unlimited supplies of labor continues into an era of increasing scarcity of labor; b) The advance of modern industry has produced a new category of workers, in between the highly skilled and the common laborer, namely the semiskilled worker. With the development of mass production industries came the growth of this type of worker, for a period the most rapidly growing group of the labor force and one which so far has shown few signs of numerical decline. In many ways this group put its imprint upon the social life and particularly the labor movements of industrial nations since about the beginning of this century.

(2) Cf., R. S. ECKAUS: « Factor Proportions in Underdeveloped Areas », *American Economic Review*, Vol. XLV, No. 4, September 1955.

From the point of view of our analysis the emergence of the semi-skilled worker in the later stages of industrial development means that the role of many types of skilled labor in the traditional meaning of the term — the craftsman and artisan — is greatly reduced. Entire operations which so far were in the hands of highly skilled workers are being taken over by semiskilled workers. At the same time it becomes easier for common workers to ascend into the ranks of the semiskilled. Rapid training processes are developed in the advanced industrial nations, training facilities are often provided for by the employees themselves, the growing wealth of the nation permits the development of many public training centers and the rise of the general educational level of the population enables a growing proportion of the working class to benefit from advanced training.

Thus, the boundaries between the different types of labor become more fluid, one type can often be substituted for another, the monopolistic position of high-skill labor is weakened; semiskilled workers play an increasing part in the labor force and, consequently, the labor movements of advanced industrial nations. This is reflected in the strategy of the labor movement.

Strong unions arise in the modern mass-production industries shifting the center of gravity of the labor movement at least to some extent away from the old craft unions. While the latter would wish to put all emphasis on collective bargaining, the industrial unions in the massproduction industries combine collective bargaining with considerable stress upon political action. There is now no longer a large industrial reserve army concealed in under-employment in agriculture and in precapitalistic forms of manufacturing and trade. Even unskilled and semiskilled workers have, therefore, at least in principle considerable bargaining power. But the facility with which semiskilled workers can be trained combined with the rising levels of education of the population weakens the market position of the semiskilled workers. Substantial parts of the high-skill groups find that within limits and some adjustments in the work process semiskilled workers can be substituted for them. Group power is weakened. Unlike the relatively small groups of high-skill workers in early industrialization, large numbers of semiskilled workers or common laborers discover that changing levels of employment in industry in general and in their own industry in particular have vital influence upon their power on the labor market. A combination of bargaining and political action — with the latter preparing the ground and creating favorable conditions for the former —

is the indicated strategy of the large industrial and of many of the skilled craft unions.

The weight of the industrial unions may be so large that the entire labor movement is swept along the way of mixed strategies or, there may be a prolonged split between the two groups with one putting the accent on bargaining — as for instance the building trades in the United States — and the other on political action as do the big industrial unions in this country.

8—Few Examples

What inferences can we draw from these models for an understanding of various labor movements? Let us consider a few examples.

1. Outstanding examples of labor movements which, in the early stages of industrialization, limited themselves to high-skill groups were the AFL and the French Syndicalists. Both operated in countries with limited supplies of labor: in the U.S. as a result of the development of a large continent, in France because of the low rate of population increase and the retardation in the decline of peasant enterprises as a result of the Meline tariff. If we remove the cover of ideological verbiage we find in both countries highly skilled craft groups relying on their market power: in the U.S. by collective bargaining, in France where collective bargaining was only in its infancy until World War I, simply by reliance on the effects of a scarce supply of skilled labor on its price. In both countries organized labor rejected political action, even developed disdain for the labor politician. Restrictions on immigration came in the United States toward the end of the century when mass immigration provided large supplies of common labor; the Meline tariff in France sufficed to slow down the decline of employment in agriculture and thus relieved the pressure of agricultural workers on the urban labor market. Even these measures were called in only in the 90's when the new type of semiskilled worker began to emerge, endangering the monopolistic position of the crafts.

2. In both countries it is possible to follow the impact of the rise of modern industry upon the arsenal of weapons used by labor. Up to 1914, the small shops around Paris with their many craftsmen and artisans were the stronghold of the anti-political syndicalists while the large textile areas of the North and the coal mines of St. Etienne and the Pas de Calais with their masses of unskilled and semiskilled workers were

bulwarks of the politically-minded Marxians. Hothouse industrialization during World War I caused these small industries to be replaced by some of the most advanced mass production establishments of France employing tens of thousands of semiskilled workers. This change was reflected in the ousting of the syndicalists and the victory of the Communists in the Parisian labor movement, and a consequent shift of emphasis to political methods.

In the U.S., the founding of the industrial unions was not only greatly facilitated by White House support and that of important State governors, but it led in turn to greatly enhanced union interest in participation in political campaigns. Over large parts of the U.S., the Democratic Party has for all intents and purposes become a labor party.

3. British development proceeded in three stages. Large supplies of labor prevailed for about the first five decades of the 19th century particularly as a result of the decline of agriculture. The British workers, deeply resentful of their class society, responded at first in a class movement of primarily political emphasis — the Chartists. In a second phase, with the gradual political reforms on one hand, the abolition of the corn laws on the other hand, came the withdrawal to skilled craft unions of high bargaining power — the development of business unionism. When in the last two decades of the 19th century the semi-skilled workers appeared and organized, the unions began their shift to increased political activity — the founding of the Labour Party in 1900 or 1906 being the symbol of this new trend.

4. Particularly interesting, from the point of view of this analysis, are the cases of countries with a dual economy such as Mexico. In spite of very rapid economic growth, the problem of excess labor supply is still very grave and class feeling very intense — a result of the relatively recent emergence of Mexico from its feudal and colonial past. As a consequence, political action is the main weapon of the labor movement, but it seems increasingly also to set the stage for effective collective bargaining. By giving the unions full control over hiring — an almost universal closed shop — the government ensures bargaining power for the unions — in return for their political support. Political action, in this case, is the main weapon of the movement; in a subsidiary fashion it is also the key to effective collective bargaining.

5. Most of the underdeveloped countries that are now eager to enter the stage of industrialization, are areas of excess labor supplies.

Since most of them are adopting modern forms of industry with its large requirements of semiskilled labor and the new labor movements have class objectives as well as strong feelings of class solidarity beyond the confines of a craft or occupation, the labor movements are of necessity political. The attempt to preach American style business unionism in Ghana or Pakistan is doomed to failure; business unionism would be either ineffective or run counter to the objectives of the movement and to the class consciousness of the workers or both; the circumstances do not permit the effective use of collective bargaining.

9—Conclusion

Many questions can undoubtedly be asked for which the suggested hypotheses provide no answer or no satisfactory answer. Nor do I claim that there is a single factor explanation for the behavior patterns of different labor movements at different times. What I do suggest is that the stage of economic development, the situation on the labor market and the degree of class solidarity within labor and the structure of the labor force are key factors which together explain a part, perhaps a good deal of the peculiar relationship that exists between labor and political action.

RÉFLEXIONS SUR LE MOUVEMENT OUVRIER ET L'ACTION POLITIQUE

Cet essai veut mettre en lumière, au stage initial d'un projet de recherches, quelques hypothèses sur les relations entre les mouvements ouvriers et l'action politique.

I—Dans le monde anglo-saxon, trois systèmes de pensée bien distincts se sont élaborés à propos de l'activité politique comme moyen d'action pour les groupements de travailleurs.

Pour Marx, l'action politique est l'arme fondamentale des classes laborieuses: c'est par elle, et par elle seule, qu'elles peuvent s'émanciper; toute organisation, en dehors du parti politique n'est conçue que dans le but de jeter les bases d'un groupement politique. La victoire, finale des classes laborieuses se concrétise par la conquête du pouvoir politique par le parti. Il est donc évident que pour Marx, l'action politique prend de plus en plus d'importance dans les mouvements ouvriers.

Les Webbs, par un raisonnement différent, concluent dans le même sens que Marx.

Perlman, par contre, voit la chose d'un tout autre oeil. Les mouvements syndicaux, en prenant de l'ampleur et de la force, se libèrent des intellectuels qui ont été à leur origine. Ce faisant, pense Perlman, ils oublient les objectifs politiques et les buts de changement social que les intellectuels leur mettaient devant les yeux. En s'émancipant de la tutelle des intellectuels, les travailleurs fixent plutôt leur attention sur des objectifs immédiats et de portée économique. Le mouvement syndical se définit comme groupe de pression et non plus comme groupement politique.

On constate aisément une confusion des données « scientifiques » et « normatives » dans ces courants de pensée. Aussi est-il bon de clarifier le problème en définissant ce qu'on entend par « action politique ».

Selon nous, ce terme doit être réservé au travail des organisations en quête de solutions pour toute une gamme de problèmes. Par contre le groupe de pression pur et simple concentre son attention sur un petit nombre de buts. D'une part donc, la méthode s'appuie sur le contrôle administratif et la législation, d'autre part le groupe de pression s'appuie sur la force de la revendication collective.

Notre but est de suggérer quelques hypothèses qui peuvent aider à comprendre les divers dosages d'action politique et de revendication collective dont les différents mouvements syndicalistes font usage.

Sous peine d'être accusé d'ethnocentrisme, il nous faut rejeter l'hypothèse selon laquelle tout mouvement syndical mettra l'accent en dernier essor, sur leur pouvoir de réclamation collective; cela peut s'avérer véridique, par exemple dans le cas du syndicalisme américain. Cependant, l'action politique peut éventuellement prendre plus d'importance: nos hypothèses porteront sur les conditions dans lesquelles l'une ou l'autre méthode sera vraisemblablement plus efficacement employée.

MODÈLE THÉORIQUE

Pour les fins de l'analyse, nous utilisons les quatre variables suivantes:

- Le développement économique;
- Les changements d'objectifs dans le mouvement syndical;
- Changement fondamental sur le marché du travail et enfin, changement dans la structure du mouvement syndical.

En bref, nous pouvons formuler les propositions suivantes:

- 1) Le progrès économique, i.e. l'industrialisation a amené des changements dans les objectifs des mouvements syndicaux: jusqu'ici, en règle à peu près générale, l'attention s'est portée du domaine socio-politico-culturel au domaine économique.
- 2) Souvent l'industrie prend naissance dans un milieu où la main-d'oeuvre non-qualifiée surabonde. Le pouvoir de revendication de tout mouvement syndical est, dans cette condition, pratiquement inexistant. Le choix pour le mouvement syndical est alors l'action politique ou la limitation de son organisation aux travailleurs qualifiés. L'absence ou la présence de motifs

non-économiques communs à tous les travailleurs influencera fortement le choix dans un sens ou dans l'autre.

- 3) L'industrialisation se généralisant, le surplus de main-d'oeuvre est résorbé: les travailleurs moins qualifiés deviennent en l'occurrence un affaiblissement pour le pouvoir de revendication des plus qualifiés. A ce stage, l'action politique semble toute indiquée: si, en tout cas, elle ne peut servir de substitut au pouvoir de revendication, elle peut être une préparation nécessaire à ce pouvoir effectif.

Il convient maintenant de développer ces hypothèses.

I. Développement économique

Un coup d'oeil sur l'histoire suffirait pour nous montrer que l'industrialisation (avec ce qu'elle implique en termes de croissance des revenus, du niveau d'éducation, etc.) a entraîné des changements dans les objectifs des mouvements syndicaux. Suffrage universel, droit et opportunités de bénéficier de l'éducation, reconnaissance sociale du travailleur manuel sont autant d'objectifs des mouvements syndicalistes passés. A mesure que l'Etat assumait un rôle grandissant dans le domaine de l'éducation et de la sécurité sociale, les partis syndicaux laissaient ces objectifs économiques. C'est ce stage qui nous intéresse: pour fins de simplicité, nous supposons que l'objet des revendications des travailleurs est le salaire.

Le salaire étant un prix, ses déterminants seront donc l'offre et la demande de travail. Le pouvoir d'une union résidera dans son habileté à influencer l'un ou l'autre des déterminants ou à fixer un prix différent de l'équilibre dans le cas où l'offre et la demande seraient fixées.

Vu que l'union a peu ou pas d'influence sur la demande de travail, son pouvoir d'action résidera dans le contrôle de l'offre de travail.

Or, dans la plupart des pays, en voie d'industrialisation, l'offre de travail excède la demande. C'est ce qu'on exprime en parlant de chômage voilé (situation fréquente en agriculture) ou de sous-emploi. Au niveau de salaires en vigueur, il existe encore une main-d'oeuvre disponible. Conséquemment, la main-d'oeuvre active peut augmenter sans qu'il n'y ait de hausse des salaires (en supposant que l'offre de travail est parfaitement élastique).

Ce surplus de main-d'oeuvre, à ce stade de l'industrialisation provient des conditions suivantes:

- 1) Surcroît du nombre des travailleurs dans l'agriculture (chômage voilé).
- 2) Mise à pieds des travailleurs dans la petite industrie pré-capitaliste.
- 3) Accroissement de population.
- 4) Immigration.

Avec cet excès de l'offre sur la demande, il semble bien que le mouvement ouvrier aura peu d'influence sur le taux des salaires, en tout cas pour ce qui concerne la main-d'oeuvre non-spécialisée.

Le cas est autre cependant en ce qui concerne les salaires des travailleurs qualifiés, dont l'offre est faible (dû au bas niveau d'éducation prévalant au début de l'ère capitaliste) et dont la demande est forte. Ici, le taux de salaires devrait s'accroître aisément sans même la pression d'un mouvement ouvrier.

Le mouvement ouvrier devra faire une option déterminante dans un tel contexte: appuyer les seuls ouvriers qualifiés ou tous les travailleurs. Dans le dernier cas, ils devront trouver des moyens de contrôler l'offre de travail en prévenant les migrations, le délaissement de la culture, etc.

En somme, un mouvement ouvrier limité à la main-d'oeuvre qualifiée met l'accent sur le pouvoir de revendication collective. Un mouvement incluant tous les ouvriers, ayant peu d'influence sur le marché, sera dépendant de sa force d'action politique par laquelle il peut contrôler l'accès au marché du travail et ainsi limiter l'offre. (ex.: par des lois sur l'immigration, tarifs agricoles, etc.)

II *Changement sur le marché (l'offre) du travail*

L'excès de l'offre sur la demande de travail peut être éliminé de façons suivantes:

- 1) Une formation de capital suffisante pour absorber le surcroît de main-d'oeuvre: avec la généralisation de l'industrialisation, ceci tend à se produire.
- 2) Les mouvements migratoires internes ou externes de lieux où l'offre est plus que suffisante vers des lieux où elle est insuffisante.

Aussitôt que la pression de l'offre excédentaire sur la demande est enlevée, vraisemblablement les salaires vont commencer à s'élever. (La hausse de productivité permet cet accroissement de salaires.)

Dans cette situation, le pouvoir de revendication collective est un instrument efficace dans les mains des mouvements ouvriers.

III *Changements des structures des mouvements ouvriers*

Cependant, il serait trop facile de croire que la logique du développement économique conduit droit au paradis où l'action politique serait superflue au mouvement ouvrier dont le seul pouvoir de revendication suffirait à assurer ses objectifs.

En fait, le mouvement ouvrier subit aussi l'influence du développement économique. Avec l'émergence de la production en chaîne, un nouveau type de travailleur a fait son apparition: à mi-chemin entre le travailleur qualifié et le non-qualifié, il constitue la masse grandissante du monde ouvrier. D'une part, il a rendu plus facile l'ascension du travailleur non-qualifié qui, après un entraînement rapide, peut assumer des tâches, apanages des ouvriers qualifiés avant la mécanisation; d'autre part, il a rendu plus vagues, moins définies, les frontières entre les divers

types de travail: la position monopolistique du travailleur qualifié s'en trouve affaiblie d'autant.

Les unions fortes modernes ne sont plus comme autrefois des associations de gens de même métier, mais se forment au plan de la grande usine.

Alors que les premières unions de métier s'appuyaient sur leur pouvoir de revendications, les unions modernes y ajoutent l'élan de l'action politique. La position des ouvriers semi-qualifiés (la masse des mouvements ouvriers) est plutôt précaire sur le marché vu qu'ils sont appelés à être remplacés rapidement et facilement; il en est ainsi pour le travailleur qualifié dans un monde où le niveau d'éducation s'élève rapidement. D'où, l'action politique s'ajoute au pouvoir de pression des unions ouvrières pour plus d'efficacité.

En conclusion, qu'il nous soit permis de donner quelques exemples selon les hypothèses de notre modèle.

La dualité de l'économie mexicaine pose un cas intéressant.

En dépit d'un taux de croissance rapide, le chômage y est très répandu: résultat de l'émergence récente de son passé féodal et colonial.

L'action politique est l'arme principale du mouvement ouvrier quoique le pouvoir de pression collective n'est pas sans efficacité. En donnant aux unions plein contrôle sur le marché (l'offre) du travail, le gouvernement s'assure un appui politique indispensable à son maintien. De façon subsidiaire, le pouvoir de pression entre donc en jeu.

Dans la plupart des pays sous-développés, il semble bien que la seule issue ouverte au succès du mouvement ouvrier soit l'action politique.

Voulant construire une économie selon les normes de l'industrialisation moderne, les pays sous-développés donnent naissance, à cette classe caractéristique de travailleurs semi-qualifiés. L'unionisme qui se veut efficace doit envisager l'action politique puisque le seul pouvoir de revendication collective ne peut endiguer l'offre excédentaire de travail.