

Organized Labour and the Imperial Munitions Board

Le mouvement syndical et l'Imperial Munitions Board

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Article abstract

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D.J. Bercuson

The author examines the fight for fair wage clauses in Canadian munitions production at the beginning of this century.

In 1918 and 1919 Canada experienced some of the most widespread, lengthy and disruptive industrial disputes of the century. A variety of factors, social, political and economic, created a mood of frustration and anger within the ranks of working men and women which swept along in an ever widening torrent of social protest and finally burst upon the national scene in a series of spectacular strikes beginning in the spring and summer of 1918. Though conscription, restrictive orders-in-council and the high cost of living are usually cited as prominent causes in the build-up of industrial tensions, the frustrated ambitions of trade union leaders must also be included in any list of explanations. Organized labour in Canada looked to the opportunities presented by war to build not only membership rolls, but demonstrable public esteem and social and industrial leverage. When union leaders were denied the fulfillment of these desires by a government agency which held sway over tens of thousands of war workers but whose labour policies basically reflected the attitudes of one man, the spirit of war sacrifice which they were called upon to demonstrate to their members vanished. Organized labour's failure to win fair wage clauses in war supply contracts of the Imperial Munitions Board has been all but ignored as a key factor leading to the buildup of industrial unrest but it was of singular importance in the development of trade union apathy towards the hoopla and bunting of the government's campaign of organized patriotism.

War forced Canada into the large scale production of munitions. The new industry was born shortly after the outbreak of hostilities when

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Minister of Militia, Sam Hughes, received an order from the British government for two hundred thousand shrapnel shells. The only Canadian facility able to manufacture munitions of this kind, located in Quebec City, was limited to a capacity of seventy-five rounds per day — clearly not enough for the job at hand.¹ The solution to this problem was worked out in the nation-wide organization of a munitions industry operating out of railway shops, bridge works, foundries and machine shops from coast to coast. Initially the responsibility for directing this effort lay with the Shell Committee but a series of scandals involving some of its principals prompted the establishment of the Imperial Munitions Board. Though the two committees were based in Canada, staffed and directed by Canadians and directly controlled war production in Canadian factories, they were administrative agencies of the British Government and represented the Imperial minister of munitions.²

The development of a new and growing munitions industry in Canada was paralleled by the growth of a munitions work force and a new order of labour-management problems was bound to emerge. By 1914 federal and provincial governments were still in the early stages of establishing machinery for regulating industrial conditions and inevitably war produced new problems. A major difficulty arose, however, because the industrial destinies of tens of thousands of Canadian workers were being directed by the Shell Committee and its successor raising the question of where the power to deal with industrial problems in war industries now lay. Who was now responsible for the regulation of wages and working conditions in war plants, Ottawa, London or the Shell Committee and the I.M.B. ? The question might have remained a theoretical one but for the early emergence of the problem of fair wage clauses in munitions contracts. War workers and their leaders were not interested in solving difficulties in Imperial relations and grew impatient, angry and frustrated when their demands to have fair wage clauses inserted in munitions contracts were ignored or rejected.

By August, 1914, it was standard procedure for the federal government to include a fair wage schedule or a fair wage clause in every public works contract awarded. The practice was initiated in 1900 when MacKenzie King prompted the Liberal government to provide legal protections

¹ *Industrial Canada*, Toronto, July, 1915, p. 310.

² Public Archives of Canada (P.A.C.) Flavelle Papers, Vol. 6, File 96. Flavelle to Col. H. M. Elliot, December 8, 1915.

on publicly financed projects by stipulating what wages must be paid to different classes of workers or by forcing the contractor to pay wages comparable to those already prevailing in the district where the job was located.³ With the start of munitions production union leaders took it for granted that this practice would be extended to armaments work which they vehemently believed to be another type of government-financed public work. By December, 1914, shortly after the first shell contracts had been let, it became obvious that this was not the case prompting a representative of the International Association of Machinists to complain to federal labour minister T. W. Crothers that he saw no difference between shell production and traditional public works.⁴ In this way organized labour launched a three-year campaign to have fair wage clauses inserted in war supply contracts and ran directly into the steadfast opposition of the man who has been called » . . . the virtual czar of Canadian industrial mobilization. . . »⁵, Joseph Wesley Flavelle, Chairman of the Imperial Munitions Board.

At first it did not appear that there should be any undue difficulty in correcting the situation and providing for the insertion of fair wage clauses in shell contracts. Prime Minister Borden saw nothing unusual or extraordinary in labour's demands and suggested to the Chairman of the Shell Committee, Lt. Col. Alexander Bertram, that manufacturers be required to « . . . pay a fair wage » in all contracts⁶ even though he knew his government had no power to enforce the recommendation. The President of the Trades and Labor Congress, James Watters, soon found this out when federal officials told him they could not grant his request that fair wage clauses be made compulsory in munitions contracts since those contracts were let by an agency operating under the authority of the British government.⁷ This need not have been any problem if Ottawa, London and the Shell Committee were willing to grant labour's requests, however, and by March, 1915, it appeared this was the case when Crothers and Bertram jointly announced that henceforth all munitions contracts would contain a fair wage clause and further that manufacturers who

³ *Ibid.*, « Memorandum re Munitions Contracts, Fair Wages Clauses, etc. » June 11, 1917.

⁴ *Ibid.*, James Somerville to Crothers, December 19, 1914.

⁵ M. BLISS, « A Canadian Businessman and War : The Case of Joseph Flavelle, » in J. L. GRANATSTEIN and R. D. CUFF (eds.), *War and Society in North America*, Toronto, 1971, p. 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Borden to Bertram, January 26, 1915.

⁷ *The Voice*, Winnipeg, February 5, 1915, p. 4.

failed to abide by the contracts would not receive future work from the Committee.⁸ Bertram, along with Canadian and British authorities, had apparently concluded that fair wage clauses were not a very radical departure from government policy and were a cheap price to pay for trade union goodwill.

From April to November, 1915, the Borden administration and the British government embarked upon the investigation and reorganization of the Shell Committee and its methods. The scandal had initially leaked out in April and until confidence could be restored in the leadership and direction of Canadian war production, it was not possible for continuing policies, such as the implementation of fair wage clauses, to be embarked upon. Nevertheless organized labour carried its case directly to London⁹ and learned that the British had already considered the requests and favoured them.¹⁰ Whitehall considered the T.L.C.'s position reasonable and was ready to propose to the Canadian government that all munitions contracts placed «... through the Dominion Government itself or through... the Canadian Pacific Railway Company should contain the Canadian Fair Wages Clause.»¹¹

Neither British nor Canadian authorities objected to the insertion of fair wage clauses but Joseph Flavelle expressed his opposition soon after assuming his new position. The introduction of fair wage clauses would upset the delicate balance of industrial peace that already existed in Canadian war plants, he commented, because the inclusion of such stipulations in future contracts would create conflicts in those factories already at work where no such clauses existed to govern wages. Flavelle's opinion that nothing in the current situation suggested any action should be taken which justified throwing Canadian war industry into chaos,¹² carried the day when he received extraordinary support from an unexpected source. In a despatch to British Colonial Secretary Bonar Law, the Governor General of Canada weighed these opinions against Borden's and wrote that in the best interests of the Imperial Government and the Canadian

⁸ *Ibid.*, March 12, 1915, p. 4.

⁹ *Proceedings of the Thirty-First Annual Convention of the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada*: (1915), p. 20. Henceforth cited as *TLC Proceedings*.

¹⁰ *The Voice*, August 20, 1915, p. 4.

¹¹ P.A.C. Borden Papers RLB 1419. B.B. Cubitt to A. Bonar Law, August 23, 1915.

¹² *Ibid.*, Governor General to A. Bonar Law, December 17, 1915.

people it was « . . . not necessary that the Fair Wages Clause should be inserted. »¹³ The British and Canadian governments had both given their approval, it was only Flavelle who said no.

This procedure was not a deliberate attempt by Ottawa and London to duck their responsibility — it was proper and legally correct. The Shell Committee and the Imperial Munitions Board were agencies of the British Minister of Munitions and did not fall under the jurisdiction of the Canadian government. The British Government thus had the power to order first Bertram, then Flavelle, to insert the fair wage clauses into munitions contracts but were obviously unwilling to overrule the man on the spot. Trade union friendship was desired but not worth the price of undermining the decisions of a man like Joseph Flavelle. This situation could not be appreciated by representatives of Canadian munitions workers who tended to blame the lack of movement on bureaucratic sidestepping. Each month's delay clouded the atmosphere further, embittered the unions and turned their thoughts ever closer to direct strike action to back their demands.

In January, 1916, a mixed delegation of union officials representing Canadian war workers met Prime Minister Borden and put their case briefly and bluntly. They blamed his government for not regulating wage and working conditions in war industry plants, pointed out that society was now putting a premium on patriotism and complained that workers could not easily resort to strikes without being accused of sabotaging the national war effort. They were, they asserted, in an unfair and intolerable position¹⁴ and warned that strikes had only been prevented thus far by the special efforts of union officers. In future, however, quick and decisive government action was going to be the only way to maintain industrial peace.¹⁵

Unknown to the unions the ponderous wheels of government were beginning to grind, albeit slowly. In late January the Colonial Office informed Borden of London's growing concern over the lack of any solution to the matter. Officials there feared « . . . serious . . . labour troubles . . . » might result unless some effective action was taken on the

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *TLC Proceedings*, 1916, p. 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17-18.

demands of the Canadian unions David Lloyd George, then minister of munitions, suggested that the Canadian government might wish to follow Great Britain's example by establishing a special tribunal to arbitrate wage disputes. Contract prices, he observed, were certainly high enough to allow Canadian shell manufacturers to pay fair wages.¹⁶

In the face of Flavelle's steadfast opposition, reiterated in March, 1916, in a meeting with Borden and the minister of labour,¹⁷ the Government decided to embark on an entirely different course. The cabinet now aimed to use existing stipulations and machinery of the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act by issuing an order-in-council extending its provisions to cover war industries.¹⁸ This was acceptable to Flavelle because the Act was broad in scope, its facilities already existed and it could be introduced without any possible interference in the continuing process of munitions production.¹⁹ On March 23, 1916, the Government issued order-in-council P.C. 680 which extended the I.D.I.A. to all war production in Canada.²⁰

This came after months of consideration and discussion. Borden had expressed his belief many times that there would be nothing unusual in adopting fair wage clauses for munitions contracts but upon consulting with Crothers and Flavelle was won over to the position that such action might be too drastic. The Prime Minister then concluded that the wisest course open was to extend and use legislation already on the books. This was in line with Flavelle's belief that it might be dangerous and disruptive to war production to impose fair wage clauses on the munitions industry.²¹ Again Flavelle's views prevailed because the government's action of March 23 was clearly designed to shelve the entire fair wages issue.

Once Ottawa decided to try this approach, London gave its full support to the policy and dropped its insistence upon the adoption of fair wages clauses. The Colonial Secretary told Borden that Whitehall now believed the use of the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act, coupled

¹⁶ Flavelle Papers Vol. 6, File 96. A. Bonar Law to Governor-General, January 21, 1916.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. 5, File 11. Memo of March 3, 1916.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Canada, *Labour Gazette*, April, 1916, p. 1059.

²¹ Flavelle Papers Vol. 6, File 96. Borden to Lloyd George, June 5, 1917.

with active policing by the Canadian Department of labour, would be sufficient to secure the payment of proper wages in Canadian war plants.²² The Canadian labour minister, T. W. Crothers, also thought this approach would settle the issue and agreed with Flavelle's argument that it was dangerous to tamper with a smoothly running operation. At the very least, Crothers believed, the new machinery should be given a try and his Department would do all it could to bring about success.²³ Thus, by the late summer of 1916 both governments had gone as far as they were willing to go without being pushed and in the face of Flavelle's steadfast opposition, backed away from their original positions.

Organized labour, however, was not at all willing to leave the issue in limbo and late in the spring of 1917 the Trades Congress and the International Association of Machinists made yet another effort to secure fair wage clauses for Canadian war workers. This time they fully realized who their real enemy was. Since approaches to the Canadian government appeared to be futile, the Machinists and the Trades Congress put their case into the hands of the British Labour Party and emphasized Flavelle's leading role in frustrating their demands. They charged he had opposed the insertion of fair wage clauses in munitions contracts and added that he had refused to assume any responsibility whatever for the working conditions of Canadians engaged in war production. To compound the situation, they pointed out, Borden's government had no authority to force the I.M.B. into any course of action since it was a British Government agency. There was thus no authority to which Canadian labour could appeal to redress their grievances.²⁴

The new campaign did begin to force the Canadian government into a reconsideration of the position it had adopted the previous year. Borden, for example, came to the conclusion that the I.D.I.A. extension, supported by increased co-operation between his labour department and the I.M.B., was not working. He told Lloyd George, now Prime Minister of Great Britain, that it was not always possible to redress labour's grievances to the satisfaction of the union leaders and that Canadian workers were becoming « . . . very restless and irritated. » In his opinion everything of a reasonable character should be done to accommodate their wishes.²⁵

²² *Ibid.*, A Bonar Law to Governor-General, June 30, 1916.

²³ *Ibid.*, Crothers to Borden, July 17, 1916.

²⁴ Borden Papers RLB 1419. Moore & McClelland to Thomas, May 17, 1917.

²⁵ Flavelle Papers Vol. 6, File 96. Borden to Lloyd George, June 5, 1917.

Since he had previously expressed the view that fair wage clauses were not unreasonable it is safe to assume that he was now finally ready to give this course a try.

Borden's assessment of organized labour's mood was all too accurate — they were now fighting mad. In June, 1917, a meeting of twenty six representatives of various war industry unions including machinists, blacksmiths, electricians, metal workers and others, together with leading Trades Congress officials issued a sweeping condemnation of Joseph Flavelle and the Imperial Munitions Board. The gathering was organized to express the grievances and complaints of workers about their alleged suffering under the I.M.B. yoke. Abuses charged directly to the I.M.B., or plants under its direction, included elimination of the eight hour day and introduction of longer hours ; violation of sanitary standards in camp and plant construction ; lowering of wage standards throughout the country and refusal to recognize trade union representatives in the determination of wages and hours. The delegates claimed that nothing short of a complete reorganization of the Board would be satisfactory and that massive strike action in war plants would soon be initiated as a last resort. ²⁶

This pointed censure of the I.M.B., combined with the threat of serious disruption in Canadian war industry, stimulated a great deal of discussion at the federal government level. Flavelle, for instance, now added a new argument to those he had been advancing all along. He told Borden that Canada could not follow the British example and introduce fair wage clauses into munitions contracts because no machinery existed for their enforcement. In Britain, he pointed out, fair wage boards had been established with wide powers over wages and production and since no such facilities existed in Canada the introduction of fair wage clauses would only lead to confusion. In addition, he asserted, no other country with as great an industrial output as Canada had experienced so little labour trouble. ²⁷

This time Flavelle failed to receive the support of his usual ally, T. W. Crothers. The minister of labour not only parted company with the I.M.B. chairman, he pointedly criticised the entire gist of his argument.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, «Memorandum re Munitions Contracts, Fair Wages Clauses, etc. », June 11, 1917.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Flavelle to Borden, June 7, 1917.

He did not agree that there was no machinery for the enforcement of fair wage clauses in Canada and pointed out that his department had already combined with the Board to deal with many complaints of unfair labour practices on an *ad hoc* basis. More to the point, he did not now see any good reason for failing to implement the fair wage clause policy since, in reality, nothing would actually change but the unions would at least get what they were after.²⁸

This last argument went to the very heart of the issue. Crothers had finally become convinced that war production would not be affected in any way by the introduction of fair wage clauses in munitions contracts since his Department would continue to investigate complaints and turn those found to be justified over to the I.M.B. for action. This meant, in effect, that the unions would in substance gain nothing more than they already had so why not keep them happy and give them the formal legal guarantees they so obviously desired?²⁹ This belief was supported by a man who worked closely with Flavelle and had great respect for his employer — the Director of Labour for the Imperial Munitions Board, Mark Howard Irish.

Irish was convinced that organized labour was using the fair wage issue to whip up discontent amongst rank and file union members in order to strengthen their hand in a drive for power and prestige. The insertion of fair wage clauses in munitions contracts would slow down their campaign, defuse a potentially explosive issue and in reality give nothing in return. In a note to his superior Irish claimed that the fair wage clause in City of Toronto public works contracts was not worth « . . . the cost of the ink that prints it » but gave labour leaders something to crow about to their members. This in itself might be objectionable but at least it would calm the atmosphere and keep union leaders happy :

Just so long as the Labour Leader has nothing to point his followers to as being accomplished for them, just so long will he keep agitating for a demonstrable accomplishment. Give him a chance to turn to his electors and point to the Fair Wage Clause concession having been 'wrenched' from the Munitions Board, and he is re-established and can take a holiday from agitation.³⁰

²⁸ Borden Papers RLB 1419. Crothers to Borden, June 9, 1917.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Flavelle Papers Vol. 6, File 96. Irish to Flavelle, June 15, 1917.

Irish was very nearly correct. By mid-1917 all traces of prewar recession and unemployment had vanished as a result of recruitment and the mobilization of war production. This created a manpower shortage in most war industries and the natural result was rising wages. Wage classifications for certain types of workers, particularly those most skilled and most capable of performing the intricate operations of shell manufacturing, were high and were increasing.³¹ It is certainly true that many unskilled and semi-skilled workers did not benefit from this process to the degree that groups such as the machinists did, but it was the latter trade that yelled the loudest about unfair wages and poor working conditions. Though union leaders were concerned with maintaining equitable wage standards, they were equally desirous of showing followers and prospective members that they were capable of making significant monetary and legal gains. The war was the best opportunity yet to come along to enhance prestige and build massive unions and the fair wage fight became a key battle in the broader campaign. Had fair wage clauses been placed in munitions contracts from the very beginning, in 1914, they would never have become an issue but Flavelle's opposition made them one.

In August, 1917, the British Government handed down its final pronouncement on the matter when they told Borden they had changed their minds once again and arrived at the conclusion that fair wage clauses were now necessary. The British Minister of Munitions, Winston Churchill, noted that increased agitation on the part of Canadian unions had prompted him to end his opposition to fair wage clauses and to propose their inclusion in all future contracts placed by the I.M.B. in Canada.³² Lloyd George was in complete sympathy with this position and told Borden that although his government had waited to see if the I.D.I.A. extension would work, it now believed the action was futile and the desired end of industrial peace could only be assured through the introduction of fair wage clauses.³³ The line-up against Flavelle was now formidable and included Borden, Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, T. W. Crothers and Mark Howard

³¹ See Canada, *Wages and Hours of Labour in Canada, 1901-1920*. Various tables clearly show dramatic wage increases. For example, all classes of metal workers enjoyed weekly increases of 46.3% and hourly increases of 54.7% from 1914 to 1918 according to index tables on p. 3.

³² Borden Papers RLB 1419. M. Wolff to Undersecretary of State, Colonial Office, August 6, 1917.

³³ *Ibid.*, Lloyd George to Borden, August 8, 1917.

Irish, not to mention the Trades Congress and the International Association of Machinists. Flavelle was the key man, however, and had shown himself virtually indispensable to the efficient direction and management of Canadian war industry. Any attempt by the British or Canadian Governments to override his opposition might result at best in erosion of his authority or at worst his resignation. This was not a price they were willing to pay and once again, for the last time, Flavelle won and the unions lost.

As the powerful head of Canada's vast and productive munitions industry Flavelle shouldered a great deal of responsibility and maintained a necessary singleness of purpose — the unhindered and continuing production of as much war material as could be squeezed out of Canadian industry. He was well aware of the importance of labour in his efforts. A Board representative estimated at one point that as much as 60% of the total cost of munitions production in Canada was expended directly or indirectly no wage.³⁴ But Flavelle's methods for handling labour's grievances were not designed to win friends in Canadian union halls primarily because his aims and those of organized labour were widely divergent. Where the unions, eventually supported by Crothers, desired to make substantial organizational and prestige gains as their just reward for faithful war production service (a victory that was apparently being won in the United States) Flavelle was solely interested in maximizing production. In addition he was personally inclined to guard against the growth or expansion of trade union influence because he was philosophically opposed to unions and what they were trying to accomplish.

Flavelle's primary method for handling labour disputes was based on co-operation with the Department of Labour and subtle persuasion of those manufacturers who tented to be intransigent towards their employees. The Board was an arm of the Imperial Government and therefore, in Flavelle's opinion, should not attempt to interfere « . . . on its own initiative . . . » in labour troubles by supporting either workers or employers.³⁵ When obvious crisis situations arose and it appeared that Board intervention was a must, Flavelle opted to attempt to persuade industrialists that labour unrest in their plants could be contagious and might eventually

³⁴ Flavelle Papers Vol. 5, File 11. W. Peterson to E. Fitzgerald.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Memo of March 3, 1916.

damage the entire national war effort.³⁶ In extreme cases, however, Flavelle was willing to go as far as cancelling a contract if circumstances warranted it or if the Labour Department recommended such action. In February, 1916, for instance a Medicine Hat steel company received notice that its agreement with the Board was being cancelled due to a failure to solve labour problems in its shops.³⁷

The possible disruption of war production was not, however, the only reason for Flavelle's continuing unwavering opposition to labour's demands. He was opposed to the principles of trades unionism and the rationale which underlay the campaign for fair wage clauses. Flavelle believed in the rock-solid principles of individualism, hard work and competition. He inherently mistrusted or opposed combinations or co-operative groups which banded together for the mutual advantage of their members whether these be organizations of companies in trusts or cartels or of hog farmers.³⁸ This sort of approach also led him to a natural antipathy towards trade unionism and undoubtedly prompted his almost instinctive reaction to shy away from any appearance of co-operation with organized labour. While Irish's argument was pointed, accurate and probably revealed a great deal of labour's true motives in the campaign for fair wage clauses, the very idea that union leaders would gain prestige from having appeared to wrench concessions from the I.M.B. would undoubtedly harden Flavelle's opposition even more. Then too, Flavelle was adamantly opposed to having governments do for people by legislation and regulation what they ought to accomplish on their own by sacrifice, clear thinking and hard work.³⁹ Flavelle, therefore, was not about to allow his Board to become the vehicle by which trade unions were going to advance on any front as a result of war-presented opportunities. The status quo ante bellum was fine and even that might have allowed organized labour too powerful a position.

By the fall of 1917 the battle was over and Flavelle's will had prevailed. Union leaders were angered over the lack of action which met their efforts to obtain fair wage clauses and realized they had slipped

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Flavelle to « All Manufacturers in Hamilton and Toronto », June 1, 1916.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, Memo of March 3, 1916.

³⁸ BLISS, pp. 26-27.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

into a legal morass where no one was willing to help cut the Gordian Knot. They had been unable to obtain any results from a campaign of peaceful lobbying and turned increasingly to strike action. The dismal failure of the campaign to obtain fair wage clauses in munitions contracts showed the almost total ineffectiveness of organized labour when it was not dealing from a position of strength and was trying to force concessions from men or institutions determined to stand firm. The contrast to the very successful drive of Canadian railway shop craft workers to obtain wage parity with their United States counterparts was striking. In this campaign union leaders were backed by the strikes votes of 50,000 railway workers and it was the naked threat of a complete national rail tie-up in wartime which forced the Canadian Railway War Board and the Borden government to agree to substantial wage increases in the summer of 1918. The contrast between petition and strike must have become starkly apparent.

Government-union relations, already strained by registration and conscription, suffered another blow. Union leaders were not party to the secret despatches and memoranda of Borden, Lloyd George, Crothers or Irish. They knew only that the Imperial Munitions Board, headed by an industrialist, arm of one government and in the close confidence of another, was frustrating their desires and there appeared to be no redress from either London or Ottawa. Some of the bitterness that developed during this long and frustrating campaign returned to haunt the Borden government in the spreading strikes of 1918 and the massive confrontations of 1919.

Le mouvement syndical et l'*Imperial Munitions Board*

Les études sur le radicalisme syndical et sur l'agitation ouvrière au Canada pendant la période 1917-1919 se sont concentrées sur des questions comme la conscription, la hausse du coût de la vie et les décrets ministériels restrictifs. On n'a accordé que peu d'attention au facteur moins généralisé, mais tout aussi important, de l'agressivité des syndicats, dont le nombre des adhérents avait augmenté de plusieurs milliers de membres par suite de la rareté de main-d'oeuvre provoquée par la guerre, en vue d'accroître de façon réelle et bien visible leur prestige et leur influence. À l'époque où il n'existait ni précompte obligatoire, ni Commission des relations du travail, ni accréditation, les syndicats se devaient de montrer au membre éventuel qu'ils étaient assez puissants pour leur permettre d'atteindre un stade de sécurité financière et de sécurité d'emploi qu'il ne pouvait pas obtenir par ses

propres moyens. Une façon d'y arriver, c'était de démontrer que les syndicats étaient assez forts pour en imposer aux employeurs et au gouvernement. La bataille menée en vue d'obtenir l'inclusion des dispositions concernant les justes salaires dans les contrats de fourniture militaire adjugés par le *Shell Committee* et son successeur, l'*Imperial Munitions Board* était essentiellement un combat en vue de réaliser les fins précitées.

La déclaration de la guerre et l'implantation au Canada de nombreux arsenaux incita les syndicats à se plaindre que les stipulations relatives aux justes salaires n'étaient pas insérées dans les contrats de munitions, même si cela avait été la politique constante du gouvernement fédéral d'insérer de pareilles dispositions dans les contrats publics depuis 1900. La campagne des syndicats avait l'appui de plusieurs officiers haut gradés du gouvernement britannique qui avaient institué le *Shell Committee*, et du premier ministre Borden. Le *Shell Committee* lui-même, sous la direction du lieutenant-colonel Alexander Bertram, reconnut le bien-fondé des réclamations syndicales et promit de redresser la situation. Il ne put mettre sa promesse à exécution, cependant, parce que à la suite d'un scandale, le Comité fut aboli et remplacé par l'*Imperial Munitions Board* dont la direction fut confiée au magnat torontois des abattoirs, Joseph Westley Flavelle. Flavelle était un véritable tenant des principes de l'individualisme et de la « libre entreprise » et il était en conséquence un ardent adversaire de toute forme de collaboration, en particulier la coopération entre l'industrie et le syndicalisme. Il ne pouvait pas accepter que le gouvernement fasse à la place des individus et des sociétés ce que ceux-ci pouvaient faire par eux-mêmes.

Flavelle était un homme indispensable à l'effort de guerre britannique et canadien. C'était l'organisateur et le coordonnateur par excellence et, pour cette raison, son influence était déterminante dans l'établissement de la politique ouvrière du gouvernement en temps de guerre. Même si les gouvernements britannique et canadien étaient favorables à l'idée d'insérer des clauses de justes salaires dans les contrats de fournitures militaires, Flavelle se rebiffa et demeura inébranlable dans son opposition pendant deux longues années de pression de la part des syndicats. Son entêtement fit de l'affaire une source de mécontentement et d'agitation qui n'aurait pas existés si l'on avait suivi la politique première de Bertram et du *Shell Committee*.

En gains matériels véritables, le mouvement ouvrier n'avait rien à retirer de clauses de justes salaires. Les travailleurs canadiens alors employés dans les arsenaux touchèrent des salaires élevés pendant toute la durée de la guerre, tandis qu'un soi-disant mécanisme existait déjà pour s'occuper des pratiques déloyales de travail dans les arsenaux. Ce fait fut finalement admis par le ministre fédéral du travail, T.W. Crothers et, chose surprenante, par Mark Howard Irish, propre directeur de Flavelle en matière de relations du travail pour l'*Imperial Munitions Board*. Au milieu de l'année 1917, ces deux hommes en arrivèrent à la conclusion que l'inclusion de clauses concernant les justes salaires dans les contrats de fournitures militaires ne donnerait rien d'autre aux travailleurs que ce dont ils bénéficiaient déjà mais créerait une situation explosive en permettant aux dirigeants syndicaux d'obtenir le crédit d'une longue bataille enfin gagnée. Flavelle, toutefois, persista dans son

opposition au mouvement précisément parce qu'il ne voulait pas que les dirigeants syndicaux en tirent crédit.

Ainsi, ce qui n'aurait pu être qu'une difficulté administrative de peu d'importance se gonfla au point de devenir une source de conflit ouvrier et devint un excitant puissant à l'appui de l'opposition de plus en plus farouche du mouvement ouvrier aux politiques de l'*Imperial Munitions Board*. Cette campagne de *lobbying* infructueuse apparut encore plus amère quand on la mit en présence de la campagne victorieuse des travailleurs des usines des chemins de fer canadiens qui obtinrent la parité de salaire avec leurs camarades américains au cours de l'été de 1918. Cette campagne ne fut d'ailleurs réussie que parce que les chefs des syndicats entrèrent dans la bagarre armée de 50,000 votes en faveur de la grève.

Dans de telles circonstances, l'affaire des clauses de justes salaires s'ajouta au voile de difficultés et de méfiance engendrées par d'autres décisions et d'autres actes politiques du gouvernement Borden et de ses agences qui commença à obscurcir les relations entre le gouvernement et les syndicats dès le début de 1916. La plupart de ces questions devinrent les facteurs primordiaux qui donnèrent naissance au grand mouvement d'agitation ouvrière qui, commençant à s'accélérer à la fin de 1916, s'étendit par la suite à la scène nationale au cours de l'été de 1919.

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