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# Troubled Worker Militancy: Challenges Confronting Western Industrial Relations

## Les défis aux systèmes occidentaux de relations du travail

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### Article abstract

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# ***Troubled Worker Militancy***

## ***Challenges Confronting Western Industrial Relations Systems***

**Solomon Barkin**

*This paper presents some thoughts on the development of Western industrial relations systems since the postwar years and dwells on the questions the unions are now facing.*

Unions and collective bargaining in Western countries in the postwar years experienced a cycle of growth and broadening activities followed by years of accommodation to difficulties created by economic reversals. Now they are on the threshold of an era of reconstruction in which they hope better to achieve their goals of providing regular incremental improvements in the standards of employment, security and social services and benefits, promoting the economic growth of their national economies, and extending the coverage and effectiveness of unions and collective bargaining.

In the late sixties and early seventies most countries shared the dominant characteristics of employee militancy, particularly among the youth and other aggrieved groups. They maintained the drive to realize their broadened expectations through the seventies. Only in the eighties when economic stagnancy and inflation seemed endemic, and governments faced mounting deficits did both the private and public sectors initiate demands for cutbacks in the rates of increase in labor costs and at times freezes or actual concessions from employees and unions, both to survive the financial crisis and meet international competition. Unions and employees resisted these proposals and publicly demonstrated against them, but work stoppages declined in number and intensity as union policies became more pragmatic. They agreed to terms which did not meet the rising cost of living, thereby deducing real earnings and benefits. Governments cut back on social entitlements and the costs of the welfare systems without undermining the programs, except for the United States. Facing these challenges, unions sought to stem unemployment through the shorter workweek, which they achieved largely in Western Europe, to an increasing degree by reduc-

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ing the standard weekly hours to 39 or 38 hours, and shortening the work year through longer vacations, more paid holidays and more paid non-work days. They also demanded more public expenditures to create more jobs and reconstruct their national economies to initiate a new cycle of economic expansion. Simultaneously, they sought to strengthen their own internal organizations by intensifying their activities and communications with the lower echelon. Employers in a number of countries, aided in several cases by conservative national administrations, mounted resistance to union programs and created more centralized agencies for countering them. Social Democratic governments secured the unions' reluctant accord to the moderation of demands, while more conservative governments forced these changes into effect through legislative and/or administrative action.

The future course of Western industrial relations will be considerably affected by the speed and extent of the economic recovery. Unions are aware that the economies are beset by stubborn long-term maladjustments. To serve their constituencies, they must offer positive programs for the reconstruction of their economies and business practices and rules. To advance their own internal integration, they must create cohesive bodies for the disciplined expression of their positions and actively cooperate with their political allies on matters of program, policy and action.

### **EARLY POSTWAR YEARS (1945-68)**

Many groups held optimistic views concerning Western postwar societies. Philosophers and sociologists hailed the era of rationality in which differences would be resolved through accommodation. Businessmen assumed continued world-wide growth and expanded operations to meet the projected swelling demand. Economists declared depressions to be obsolete; fine tuning of the economy would overcome cyclical movements. Politicians stressed past and impending achievements and promised further riches, opportunities and equality. The common man was stirred by this message. His lot was improving and he counted on the future bringing even more abundant benefits.

The trade union leader, responding positively to the new scene of advances, sublimated his older class orientations. In most Western countries full employment became a virtual reality. Under the pressures of a tightened labor market, workers gained repeated increments in income, benefits, public services and improved status. Promises for the future were bright and wide-open. Many enjoyed the rewards of upward mobility. People flocked to trade unions, swelling their rolls to historic peaks and raising

their penetration rate of the work population. Union officers, many of them having played a substantial role in rousing the people in wartime to the sacrifices and cooperation essential for achieving victory, retained their preeminence in the peacetime society. Collective bargaining previously banned in some countries and in others highly limited, or hesitantly practiced and in a few, stabilized, now proliferated and became deeply rooted. Adversaries publicly acknowledged its usefulness and positive contributions. Individual unionists were appointed or elected to public legislative or administrative posts. Even middle-of-the-road governments respected, endorsed, and sponsored union rights, recognition and social legislation. Opponents were still recovering from the setbacks suffered during the thirties and were just beginning to rehabilitate their power and influence.

During the fifties and sixties, radicals of action and thought found their influence subsiding. Social Democratic and Labor parties, both those which had or had not participated in wartime or postwar governments, stripped their political proclamations of class and Marxist orientations, reshaping their programs to appeal to wider elements in the population. They sought to win elections by projecting themselves as representatives of the people. Well-established unions embraced more cooperative and accommodating stances toward management and government. Wage goals became more modest; union bargaining power was limited. The new conciliatory attitude emerged from the new practice of granting employees regular annual wage increases, reflecting in part the rising levels of productivity. Hours were shortened and benefits multiplied, as did public services and social insurance payments. Management personnel philosophy and practices became more «humanized».

### **THE MILITANT AGE (1969-73)**

But a new age was soon to come. As members of the postwar baby boom reached adulthood, the optimistic visions implanted in the youth sought more immediate realization. No longer were they content with the slow pace and gains which satisfied their parents who measured their current status by those experienced in the thirties and, later, under war conditions. The youth rallied to more universal motifs and humanistic ideals broadcast by more venturesome philosophers and publicists. Those who became activists pledged themselves to the attainment of a «better world». While the resonance of these new declarations was to be found primarily among the middle-class youth, the message penetrated elements of the working population, particularly the youth, women, ethnic minorities, in-

ternal migrants and in time, the main-stream of wage-earners and among groups of white-collar employees.

The new spirit of the times led people to demand their 'rights'. In industry they sought the removal of their grievances and discrimination, more consultation and participation in decision-making, more input in the review and use of corporate funds for new investments, research and development, elimination of postwar rigid wage systems and cooperative wage policies, uprooting of management and supervisory attitudes denigrating to employees, regular annual wage increases and higher shares in the benefits of rising productivity, shorter hours, more and longer vacations and holidays with pay, cost-of-living escalator adjustments and repeal of judicial and legal constraints on collective bargaining. In the social areas they wanted greater equality of benefits and more opportunities for the lower income groups. As for the political system, they urged the replacement of conservative by labor governments. Within the union structure, they sought more decentralization of authority with more independence granted to local bodies and more attention focused on local shop problems. The membership looked for more non-factional orientations in the central trade union centers. While the schedule was detailed and sought far-reaching changes, they were not revolutionary ones.

The new spirit and outlook impelled the work force to a new state of activism and militancy, forcing a virtual transformation of the industrial relations scene, in Western Europe, reaching Canada toward the end of the period, largely through the initiatives of public employees. It hardly touched the core of the American trade union movement; but concurrently unionism spread in the health and public sectors.

The unrest expressed itself in different forms. Stoppages mounted in number and scope, bringing workdays lost to higher levels and new peaks. Beginning with the general strike of May-June 1968 in France, they spread to most other European countries, with the critical years differing among them. The peak stoppage years were as follows: Italy — «hot autumn of 1969» — with peaks in the same year in Canada and Ireland; the Netherlands Rotterdam harbor strike in September 1970 accompanied by an overt union challenge to the government's wage policies, with Belgium, Norway and the United States reporting peaks in the same year; the 1971 wildcats in Germany and Sweden with workers expressing dissatisfaction with the established collective bargaining system, with concurrent peaks in England and Switzerland; in 1972 occurred the British TUC challenges to governmental industrial relations laws and policies; and in 1973 the peaks were in Denmark and the Netherlands. The first cluster of high stoppage ac-

tivity was in 1969-70 and the second in 1973. Most strikes followed traditional patterns of behavior but there were innovations, including wildcats, usually illegal, sitdowns, work-ins, plant occupations, shortened staggered strikes, demonstrations against management and governments, overtime bans, work-to-rule and going-slows practices and, of course, absenteeism. Among the most active participants were the new groups highly sensitive to their grievances. For the first time white-collar and public sector employees were prominent in industrial strife.

While many stoppages were spontaneous and employee-initiated, unions soon injected themselves into the movement. Their leaders quickly adapted to their new active roles. Employees broadly responded and union membership grew by leaps and bounds, raising the penetration rate for the Common Market countries to forty-two percent of the work force. Many new leaders emerged, including young people and foreign workers who reflected the idealism of the era. To meet the new demands, unions improved their structures to assure direct and more intimate relations with their memberships. As union incomes increased, they enlarged their staffs and extended their services, particularly those addressing themselves to the local branches. More emphasis was placed on standardization of proposals and agreements.

Employers concurrently modernized their personnel and industrial relations practices, transferring more authority to the national and regional bargaining associations to assure greater cohesion in countering union activism. New employer agencies carried on or advised in industrial relations strife. Funds were amassed to help individual employers hit directly by disputes. Public relations programs sought to plead the employers' case to win support for it. Larger employers introduced independent bargaining systems to imprint their own stamp on their industrial relations, often without resigning from their associations or rejecting the industry agreement to retain protection against strikes.

Unions changed their methods of operation. They moved from the geographical units of representation to establish plant and work site agencies. New moves were made to redefine their relations to the works councils, both those created by law and collective agreements. In several countries their shop bodies replaced the councils, while assuring themselves that they retained the rights enjoyed by the latter. In other instances, unions moved to dominate the councils through their successes in the election of their candidates for council posts. They urged and succeeded in extending the council authority and rights to information, consultation and bargaining with management. Employees widely recognized that the gains secured by the

councils were in fact determined by the degree of organized union strength, which could be brought into play at critical occasions. Where employers originally participated in the council deliberations, many lost their seats, thereby creating truly worker councils. The drive for employee or union representation on corporate boards of directors gained considerable momentum.

Most significant was the development and maturation of public sector bargaining. As unions gained the normal rights to organize and strike, they became more significant in the public industrial relations system. Governments in time evolved their own representational systems and agencies to deal with the unions. These became part of the national systems, differing usually only in detail from those in the private sector.

The terms of employment also improved considerably. Regular annual increases brought earnings to new peaks. Real hourly earnings in the EEC countries from 1958 through 1972 almost doubled. Real per capita annual earnings followed upwards even more steeply as the work year was prolonged by an active economy and employees shifted to higher paying employments. Family incomes expanded faster as multi-earner families grew in number. The five day workweek became more common. By 1975, practically all industries had scheduled forty hour standard weeks. Even the developing countries were following suit. But overtime hours continued high as employees sought higher earnings and the demand for output remained strong. The work year also shrank as the length of the paid vacation was extended to four weeks and paid holidays ranged from fourteen to twenty. Social insurance systems were extended and liberalized. Fringe benefits soared in the EEC to at least thirty-eight percent of the total labor cost.

New employee rights improved the worker's status in the plant and made him more secure on the job. Restrictions were instituted on dismissals; employment guarantees were granted older employees; dismissed employees began enjoying rights for retraining and reeducation. Severance pay, liberal unemployment benefits and pensions appeared in contracts or in revised laws. Paid training leave, including instruction of employee representatives in collective bargaining and union subjects increased. Working conditions received more attention bringing about many improvements in the workplace. Union and shop committees obtained more responsibilities and rights to monitor working conditions, gaining the authority in some instances to shut down operations if they were deemed to be threats to employee well-being. In one country, major corporations agreed to substitute employee wage rating systems based on employee skills and competences for those based on current jobs.

During this period union activities on the political front grew. Traditionally, unions and the Social Democratic or Labor Parties operated very closely. The labor wings of the Christian Democratic parties also pressed for recognition of labor rights. Now both union groups intensified their advocacy for similar proposals. As the Social Democratic parties made more headway in taking over the reins of government or led or participated in coalitions, they tended to promote trade union planks. Unions thereby registered considerable gains on matters which they had failed to obtain in collective bargaining, particularly in Great Britain and Sweden.

Probably the acme of this trade union role in national political life was the conclusion of «social contracts» between unions and the parties. Close collaboration and joint statements between the two wings of the labor movement have been traditional but they became critical as the number of labor governments multiplied during this period. The contracts became the basis for actual legislative and administrative programs.

The trade union movements found one vexing problem quite insuperable; namely, the expansion of the multinational corporations. Their holdings scattered among different countries strengthened management's bargaining power and resources and reduced the ability of the nation-state to cope with their internal economic destinities. Seeking to wrestle with this new power, unions first turned to their national governments and found them wanting and then resorted to international bodies to create standards for their performance, particularly in the labor field. The resulting codes are vague and hardly enforceable and no effective policing agencies have been created.

#### **ERA OF ECONOMIC STAGFLATION; UNION MILITANCY MAINTAINED (1974-80)**

Following the preceding era came one of stagflation with rising rates and numbers of unemployed. Most authorities viewed the economic reversals as essentially cyclical and temporary in character. Governments turned to traditional short-term instruments to secure stability. Reduction of inflation became the preeminent goal. Monetary controls were the vogue, bringing restrictive impacts in their wake. Industrial policy, even when applied, remained subordinate to others. The recession of 1974-75 was followed by a short recovery, succeeded by a sagging economy. A modest upturn came at the end of the seventies. Consumer prices spiraled upwards under the impact of the second round of oil price hikes, reaching a peak of 14.3 percent



at the beginning of 1980. Social Democratic and Labor governments in a number of countries lost their support and were replaced by more conservative ones.

Unions maintained their new orientations and stridency, seeking to realize their newly pronounced objectives. As the economy weakened they became more preoccupied with problems of labor displacement, threats to labor standards, social benefits and job opportunities. In some cases they developed cooperative policies with governments and managements without yielding their basic expectations. Demands for structural innovations became more vigorous, hoping thereby to promote job expansion.

Wage increases stayed high prodded by efforts to maintain real buying power. Escalator provisions in agreements or laws reinforced this momentum. Wage inequities and discrimination declined. Liberalized fringe benefits brought the vacation schedules closer to six weeks and holidays to twenty-four. One of the newer benefits was paid educational leave to enable employees to advance their competences. Social benefits were modestly extended and liberalized. The battle for the thirty-five hour week was begun, with inroads being made in Belgium and the United Kingdom.

Non-financial proposals received greater attention. More vigorous emphasis was placed on securing representation on corporate boards of directors and some progress was made. The concept of negotiated capital savings plans introduced in earlier years produced proposals in Denmark, Federal Republic of Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden («wage-earner funds»). Most headway was made in gaining access to corporate financial and operating information and provision for direct conversations between unions and management based on these data. Usually besides financial reports, the information dealt with prospects for technical innovations, new plant sites, investment programs, sums allocated for research and development, subcontracting, homework arrangements and local community social benefits and services.

Stoppages continued at or above the levels of intensity attained in the militant era. Stoppages in six of fourteen European and North American countries exceeded the peaks of prior years; eight countries had higher averages and six lower than previously. Annual fluctuations were greater since stoppages were closely timed to the negotiations of new agreements. There were fewer spontaneous wildcat strikes and much less use was made of the newer forms of protest. Demonstrations became more frequent.

Union membership continued to expand though at a lower rate. One estimate by the European Trade Union Congress places the rise from 1975

at 1.5 percent. Mergers among national unions proceeded; cooperation among union centers was much greater. Closer relations evolved among the shop floor, intermediate union bodies and the headquarter personnel. As emergencies appeared more frequently, contacts and communications among the different levels grew.

The relations between unions and the Labor Parties and particularly Labor governments became more strained. When in office the political leaders responded more sensitively to broader interests, therefore moderating or rejecting their former commitments. Breaks in Great Britain are said to have brought down the Labor government. In other countries, the pressures from the trade unions on the parties restrained them from accepting participation in more conservative coalitions. The 'social contract' declined in significance. The myth of 'cooperative corporatism' popularized by political scientists and some leftist theorizers to disparage tripartitism evaporated.

Employer resistance to union proposals mounted. It was better organized and directed, often by the new central agencies. In the earlier years of the period, however, cooperation between unions and employer bodies became deeper in several countries, resulting in the conclusion of significant national agreements, granting new rights to unions, and improvements in labor standards. Joint management and union statements on public problems were issued. The unions and employer agencies became interlocutors rather than partners, bringing more rationality into the bargaining process.

### **THE EIGHTIES: UNION DEFENSIVENESS, ACCOMMODATION AND PRAGMATISM**

Despite the growing perception in the eighties that the Western economies were in a depression, spokesmen were reluctant so to label it. Growth rates declined below two percent per annum, with the rate falling below zero in some quarters. Inflation slowed down in 1982 under the pressures of contracting demand to the seven percent level. Companies faced problems of liquidity and high interest rates. International commerce contracted and faced restrictive barriers. Unemployment continued to rise, producing in OECD countries a total beyond thirty-two million persons.

Cost and competitive problems prompted individual companies and industries to propose reductions in the rates of wage increases and in some isolated situations, actual freezes, or concessions. Governments also mar-

shalled their political strength to secure reductions in social services and benefits without challenging the basic programs. Currently, governments, finding reliance on market forces to achieve recovery to be insufficient, are considering alternative programs to stimulate innovation, investment and the restructuring of the economies and to increase employment.

The unions' responses to these positions were essentially negative. But having come to terms with the existing industrial and social systems, rationalized their abandonment of more far-reaching doctrines of social change and accepted the articles of faith in the incremental process of growth and improvements, their new demands remained moderate in nature and scope. Few voiced doubts about the adequacies or possible obsolescence of prevailing managerial or governmental philosophies and practices. While they condemned the anti-union activities of multinational corporations, they failed to grasp the implications of the developing high levels of economic and political interdependence among nations and the polarization of views among the blocs of nations. They continued to accept the nation-state as an all-powerful, sufficient instrument for achieving their goals. Few asked how the new technologies and management and political systems would affect the nation-oriented industrial relations systems.

The focus was quite limited and pragmatic. The question for them was how to deal with demands for moderation and concessions and union proposals. The rank and file was most suspicious of management's proposals. They were reluctant to yield. But overt active opposition would not be rewarding, as several strikes had proven. The ultimate objective became to find pragmatic solutions which would help maintain jobs. But the strategies had to have membership support and generate confidence in the final agreements. They had also to seek assistance for the displaced and unemployed, the creation of new jobs, promote the restructuring on industry, and reunite the labor force behind the organization including active employees, unemployed and those in the underground economy.

The spreading demoralization generated by unemployment and short-time and low levels of operations led to accommodations by employees. They accepted moderate terms but remained highly frustrated. Outright rejections or proposals and strikes continued. Though those declined in number and intensity in the private sector, they remained close to prior levels in the public sectors. Demonstrations and short stoppages became more common both to protest proposals and action by individual or groups of employers and governmental austerity measures. Unions ultimately proved pragmatic and entered into agreements which effected compromises with employer proposals. But one common gain in Europe was the reduction of

weekly hours, representing a commitment by managements to try to increase jobs. In some instances savings had to be used by employers for job creation.

The cumulative effect of these negotiations was to reduce the rate of increases in wages. Severely affected were the adjustments for changes in the cost-of-living. Agreements and laws were substantially revised, reducing benefits or even eliminating them. Several countries froze wages for a period and followed this action with pleas for moderation in wage increases in the private sector and governmental wage controls for public employees. Real earnings declined during 1982, with varying degrees of acceleration among the countries. On the whole, only minor adjustments occurred in the schedule of fringe benefits. Social benefits and services, particularly the latter, were trimmed. Employees were required in some countries to increase their contributions to the social funds.

Unions remained the active intermediaries in the negotiating process for these agreements. At the local level they had also to deal with the problems created by plant closures or contraction, seeking in each case to provide the most liberal benefits and services to help employees adjust to this serious rupture in their economic lives. This represented the worst reversal experienced by unions in the postwar years.

One significant institutional development was the display of the shortcomings of the works council as an employee agency for dealing with problems in this critical period. The experience in the Federal Republic of Germany where these councils have been significant agencies revealed that the legal restraints on their activities make them ineffective in negotiating problems for adjustments when management was seeking concessions and rationalizing their operations. As a result unions were called upon to take on these responsibilities. In the United States, on the other hand, some managements seeking employee cooperation to improve efficiency and acquiescence to changes found it desirable to accept labor-management cooperation schemes as a framework for negotiations.

The differences in the role and operations of unions among the European countries and in North America explain in part the different effects which the recessions had on their membership rolls. The unions in the latter countries, particularly in the United States, suffered major losses in membership, whereas the declines in Europe appear to have been relatively minor. With plant closings, American unions lose their bargaining rights whereas European unions continue to represent employees in an industry and in the nation as a whole. They don't have to initiate new organizing

drives since employees maintain their ties with their unions even when they are displaced and the unemployed continue to be served in dealing with their special needs.

In this period, unions have markedly increased their interest and activity in the political realm. The new administrations in Great Britain and the United States are characterized as hostile to unions and the interests of the lower income groups. As a consequence the trade union movements in both countries have organized themselves to secure a change in the national administrations at the next election. The British TUC has worked to revitalize the Labor party, hoping to secure its return to office to reverse the industrial relations policies and legislation followed by the present conservative government. A similar course of action is being pursued by the AFL-CIO. In countries where Social Democratic governments are in control of the governments, unions have been restrained in their disapproval of measures so as not to threaten the governments' lives. In other countries with more conservative governments the trade unions continue to support the efforts of the labor parties to gain their return to power.

Trade union movements have focused more attention on industrial policy and its administration. First, they have sought to maintain and rehabilitate the older industries in which their members are employed. Second, they have favored programs for the 'reindustrialization' of the countries. But discussions within the movement have not produced the premises or blue prints for a reversal of economic tides.

## **NEW CHALLENGES**

As the conviction grew that recovery would be slow and modest and possibly incomplete, the parties to collective bargaining recognized that new policies and programs were needed, or at a minimum, far-reaching modifications of older ones. This conclusion was particularly strongly felt in trade union circles, whose strategies rested on the assumption of continued high rates of economic growth and manageable rates of change. In these final comments we shall dwell exclusively on the questions which the unions are facing, since they are much less often discussed in public than are those for government or management.

First in this roster are the economic-social issues. Since unions are protective and promotional agencies of employee interests and rights, a primary question is how shall these responsibilities be reconciled with the

obligation to assist in the long-term changes in the industrial profile essential to the construction of a viable economy and the attainment of full employment? Are adjustment programs sufficient for this purpose? Shall unions rely primarily on government and management to define the course and provide the financing or should unions seek to participate in the process of decision-making? Shall they call for representation on corporate boards of directors and what role shall they play on them? Similarly shall they be on the public investment agencies? Shall unions promote «wage-earner funds» as a means of amassing new capital? How shall laboristic and social criteria for shaping investment and business philosophy and practices be infused into the consideration of economic and business issues? Where countries continue to rely primarily on the market for guiding the economy what and how should unions press their views and concerns upon the ultimate managers of the economy? What new programs should unions espouse to affect the behavior and policies of multinational corporations and international investment agencies? How shall unions seek to moderate the destructive impact of profound changes in the geographical distribution of the sites of economic activity? The overriding and immediate concern of unions is for the well-being of their following. No long-term program which slights this imperative is likely to command their support or acquiescence.

A second cluster of issues centers on political questions. Confronted by these tumultuous changes, unions are drawn closer to their political associates, the Social Democratic and Labor parties. They realize how important it is to maintain their close ties and coordinate their efforts and programs. The recent harsh treatment dealt labor and unions by conservative administrations in several countries destroyed the principle of consensus evolved in the postwar years. Both the political and trade union wings of the labor movement will continue to work independently of each other but are likely to cooperate more intimately than before. This principle was enunciated in 1905 by joint announcements of the two international agencies of the movement. But the *modus operandi* relevant to the new age must be defined.

A third cluster of issues relates to the institutions of collective bargaining. These differ among the individual countries. They range from the disparate unions of bargaining with continuing and growing opposition to the process in the United States to the well-integrated, often centralized, procedures in most European countries. In the first country a question may be raised as to whether unionism and collective bargaining will be permitted to play their part in the decision-making process. Will further convergence or divergence among the systems be fostered? As governments are employ-

ing increasingly regressive and restrictive action to define the actual terms of employment, unions have to consider the question whether these acts nullify the collective bargaining process. If management is committed to the revival of the institution what strategies and principles can they agree upon to achieve this end? Or will the parties accept the repeated swings in the political bias of governmental decisions? Can new arrangements be devised as an alternative?

Finally, and immediately, there are the issues centering on labor costs. To what extent can labor standards continue to advance or be maintained? How shall concessions if any be negotiated and effected? Shall they be achieved by across-the-board actions or selectively by individual situations, taking into consideration distinctive circumstances? How shall unions deal with inadequate managements and those advancing individual, personal, rather than enterprise interests? In a world where employee well-being is determined by management's performance, how shall unions monitor this record? How shall the international competitive process, with the multiplication of low labor standards production centers, be confronted?

What changes would such active union leadership and participation in the decision-making procedures require in the internal institutional mechanisms and relations between the top echelons and the membership? How can they achieve the requisite cohesion and loyalty to the institutions? What philosophies will further reinforce and explain the new evolving patterns of action?

While other participants in industrial relations are called upon to face new issues and situations, the most soul-searching ones confront the trade unions. Their effectiveness in meeting these challenges will help determine their roles in the years ahead. Will they experience the growth and vitality in this second century of existence and establish a record of achievement observed in the first one?

A new world is in the making but the guides and principles for its operation particularly as they relate to employment, unions and labor standards have hardly been defined or enumerated.

## *Les défis aux systèmes occidentaux de relations du travail*

Les syndicats et les régimes de négociation collective dans les pays occidentaux au cours des années d'après-guerre ont connu un cycle d'activité croissante suivi d'une période d'adaptation aux difficultés engendrées par les revers économiques. Aujourd'hui, ils sont au seuil d'une ère de reconstruction où ils espèrent atteindre de nouveaux objectifs visant à obtenir des améliorations croissantes et continues des conditions d'emploi, de la sécurité, des avantages et des services sociaux qui soient de nature à favoriser l'enrichissement de leurs économies nationales et à élargir le champ et l'efficacité des syndicats et des systèmes de négociation collective.

Au cours des cinquante dernières années, les systèmes de relations professionnelles ont connu un second cycle de leur histoire qui se divise en quatre périodes distinctes. La première, qui s'étend de 1945 à 1968, a vu la maturation des régimes de négociation collective. Pendant cette période, les syndicats se sont développés et ont augmenté leur influence dans la société et l'économie tout en fignant les orientations de la génération antérieure. Par conséquent, une nouvelle attitude, plus conciliante se fit-elle jour au fur et à mesure que les salariés commencèrent à participer régulièrement aux avantages du plein emploi et à ceux d'une économie prospère. La philosophie et la pratique de la gestion du personnel devinrent plus «civilisées».

À la fin de la décennie 1960 et au commencement de la décennie 1970, une nouvelle ère de militantisme prit racine. Elle était dirigée par des groupes d'employés jeunes et frustrés et elle donna lieu à une recrudescence des grèves. La pointe de ces grèves se concentra autour des années 1969-1970 et 1973. De nouvelles contestations spontanées dues à l'initiative des travailleurs gagnèrent du terrain. Pour la première fois, les cols blancs et les employés des secteurs publics jouèrent un rôle de premier plan dans les différends du travail.

Les employés réclamèrent leurs «droits» et élargirent le champs de leurs aspirations dans le domaine des relations industrielles, économiques, politiques et sociales. Ce nouvel esprit et cette nouvelle perspective entraînèrent une transformation potentielle des systèmes de relations professionnelles dans plusieurs pays. Les gains horaires et annuels s'élevèrent rapidement et les avantages sociaux s'amplifièrent et furent libéralisés. Les services sociaux se multiplièrent et leur couverture s'étendit à de nouveaux groupes. Les effectifs syndicaux atteignirent de nouveaux sommets. Leur influence à l'intérieur des pays devint plus profonde. Comme les divergences entre les syndicats diminuaient, les regroupements se firent de plus en plus fréquents de même que la coordination des efforts et les prises de position devinrent plus faciles. Les syndicats se donnèrent davantage de peine pour accroître leur action dans les usines, ce qui, dans plusieurs pays, leur permit de prendre place dans les conseils du travail ou d'accroître de façon appréciable leur influence dans ces conseils. La semaine de quarante heures, des vacances plus longues et des congés plus nombreux se généralisèrent. Ceci apporta des correctifs à plusieurs déficiences de l'environnement du travail. Les syndicats se rendirent compte de la menace que faisait



peser la croissance des multinationales sur leur influence et les conditions de travail des salariés. Mais ils trouvèrent que leur propre poids économique et celui de la législation régulatrice tant nationale qu'internationale ne suffisaient pas à rétablir l'équilibre.

La même approche empreinte de militantisme domina le comportement et l'activité des syndicats pendant la période suivante de stagflation qui dura jusqu'à la fin de la décennie 1970 (1974-1980). La philosophie et les buts essentiels de l'ère antérieure la marquèrent en dépit d'une économie fléchissante. Néanmoins, dans les premières années, la coopération entre les travailleurs et les employeurs s'intensifia dans nombre de pays, ouvrant ainsi la voie à une attitude plus rationnelle dans les relations professionnelles. Les augmentations de salaires continuèrent à protéger les gains réels dans la plupart des pays et s'y ajoutaient aussi des améliorations modestes. Comme les taux de chômage s'élevaient, les syndicats commencèrent à réclamer la semaine de trente-cinq heures et ils firent certains progrès en ce sens, principalement en Belgique et au Royaume-Uni. Les avantages sociaux, les vacances et les congés payés continuèrent à s'accroître tant en nombre qu'en générosité. Les syndicats firent pression pour obtenir la représentation des travailleurs au sein des conseils d'administration et arrachèrent certains gains. En même temps, la campagne en vue de mettre au point des projets de fonds d'épargne négociés pour les travailleurs mit à contribution les ressources des syndicats. Les progrès les plus notables portèrent sur la réclamation de renseignements relatifs à l'expérience financière et opérationnelle des entreprises et sur le droit d'engager des négociations sur leur politique en ces matières. Ce fut donc une période de progrès continu. Mais les syndicats durent faire face à une résistance de plus en plus forte de la part des employeurs.

Les grèves se poursuivirent à un rythme à peu près égal ou peut être un peu plus fort que pendant la période précédente quoiqu'elles furent davantage intégrées dans le processus de négociation et qu'elles furent plus ordonnées et mieux organisées. Les effectifs syndicaux ne s'accrurent que légèrement. Les relations entre les centrales syndicales et les gouvernements socio-démocrates devinrent plus tendues au fur et à mesure que ces derniers s'efforcèrent de poursuivre des politiques plus indépendantes et des cheminements qui devaient refléter des responsabilités élargies et des points de vue d'un électorat plus diversifié. Aussi, le nombre et la valeur des contrats sociaux diminuèrent-ils.

Dans la décennie quatre-vingt, suite à l'augmentation de densité de la dépression, au développement croissant du chômage, du travail à temps réduit et à la dislocation du marché du travail, les employeurs et les gouvernements firent des efforts de plus en plus poussés pour diminuer le taux des augmentations de salaires, geler le niveau des avantages sociaux, restreindre les services sociaux et les prestations d'assurance sociale. Une des cibles principalement visées fut les dispositions d'indexation au coût de la vie incorporées dans les lois et les conventions collectives. Plusieurs furent modifiées et d'autres furent simplement abrogées, ce qui eut pour effet de réduire considérablement le degré de protection et le taux des augmentations de salaires. Toutefois, la structure des avantages sociaux ne fut pas modifiée, même si certaines diminutions eurent lieu et que les frais ainsi que les cotisations furent

augmentés. Les fermetures d'usines causèrent beaucoup d'inquiétude, car elles assombrissaient les perspectives d'emploi pour l'avenir. L'inquiétude au sujet des emplois s'accrut et prit une grande place dans la pensée et les programmes des syndicats. Ceux-ci insistèrent davantage sur la nécessité de réduire la durée du travail et des progrès marqués furent faits dans la plupart des pays européens vers la généralisation de la semaine normale de trente-huit heures. Même des gouvernements conservateurs appuyèrent ce mouvement dans l'espoir de diminuer le chômage. Au cours de cette dernière période, on mit moins l'accent sur l'enjeu de la représentation des travailleurs dans les conseils d'administration et sur d'autres formes de participation des salariés aux décisions de l'entreprise, quoique les discussions sur ces sujets se soient poursuivies.

Dans l'ensemble, les grèves déclinèrent tant en nombre qu'en volume de jours de travail perdus, mais des démonstrations et des protestations contre les fermetures d'usines et les programmes d'austérité des gouvernements continuèrent à s'organiser. Les syndicats perdirent un certain nombre de leurs adhérents, mais, afin de s'assurer l'appui et l'allégeance de leurs membres, ils mirent en place des services variés pour leur venir en aide. Les syndicats donnèrent aussi leur accord aux propositions des gouvernements socio-démocrates destinées à modérer les politiques des salaires et à aider ces gouvernements à maintenir leur puissance politique. Ils connaissaient trop bien les reculs dont ils avaient soufferts de la part des gouvernements conservateurs dans d'autres pays et ne voulaient pas s'exposer à se trouver dans pareille situation.

Face à de nouveaux défis et à de nouveaux reculs, — nouvelle expérience d'après-guerre — les syndicats lancèrent des mouvements en vue de mettre au point des politiques et des programmes aptes à corriger les dislocations cycliques et structurelles et les multiples questions tant économiques que sociales et politiques de la négociation collective et des coûts de la main-d'oeuvre qui se présentaient. S'appuyant sur l'acceptation du rôle-clé des gouvernements pour effectuer les adaptations au plan de la nation, ils ont considéré les questions et les réponses à ces problèmes et l'action spécifique qu'ils voulaient voir entreprendre par les gouvernements. Ils virent à ce que les partis socio-démocrates soient les leviers décisifs qui gagneraient les gouvernements à leurs programmes. Cependant, ils se rendirent compte qu'ils devraient continuer en tant que groupes de pression indépendants à agir sur le front politique; ils visèrent à atteindre à un niveau d'influence plus grand sur la politique et l'administration tant dans les secteurs public que privé. Réagissant négativement aux tentatives des gouvernements et des employeurs qui voulaient diminuer et resserrer les normes du travail, ils ont néanmoins suggéré et formulé des concessions dans nombre de cas variés.