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Reflexions on Strikes

Gérard Tremblay

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REFLEXIONS ON STRIKES

The present post-war period is remarkable for its numerous labour disputes. After originating in the United States with the automobile, coal, and steel strikes, the actual strike wave has spread to most of Canada's national industries and paralysed them successively at such a rate that according to federal statistics (*Department of Labour bulletin* No. 1749 — September 3rd, 1946) 145 strikes broke out during the course of the first seven months of 1946, involving 119,679 workers and entailing a loss of 2,544,581 man-working-days. These figures contrast considerably with 1945 statistics which showed that during the previous year there had occurred 120 strikes involving 37,609 workers and causing 128,208 man-working-days to be lost!

If strikes are as numerous during the remaining five months of this year as they have been during the first seven, our industry will have sustained, by December 31st, a total loss of 4,312,138 man-working-days, an unprecedented figure in the history of Canadian Labour. This would be a loss of nearly a million more man-working-days than in 1919, that unrestful year during which occurred, in the western part of Canada and in the district of Winnipeg, revolutionary strikes inspired by bolshevism.

Indeed, there also had been a strike wave at the end of the first world war. In 1918 there were 230 strikes involving 79,743 workers who lost a total of 647,942 days' work. During the following year, 1919, strikes numbered 336; the number of workers affected was 148,915 and the loss in man-working-days, 3,400,942.

Let us hope that in 1947 both the number and importance of strikes will drop as in 1920. If it is to be believed that history repeats itself, here is what we may expect for next year according to comparative statistics.

In 1920, 322 disputes arose and 60,327 workers lost 719,524 workable days. During the course of 1947, if statistics follow the same curve, 900,000 man-working-days will be lost.

In this field, comparisons often have very little or no meaning at all, but in this instance definite conclusions may be drawn.

1° The two post-war periods have given rise to problems of reconversion from war production to peacetime industry, hence, problems of trying economic readjustments.

2° Labour disputes in 1946 were fewer than in 1919 but were more important individually. In fact, 145 strikes for the first seven months of 1946 as compared with 336 for 1919, or, over a twelve month period, probably 250 strikes in 1946 as compared with 336 in 1919. On the other hand, the probable loss of 4,300,000 days in 1946, to be compared with 3,400,942 in 1919. On an average, the duration of strikes in 1919 was of 10,122 days; in 1946 it will probably raise to 17,000 days. Therefore, to-day, workers and employers are more determined in their respective stands than they were a generation ago.

3° In 1919, preventive legislation relating to labour disputes was quite elementary. It simply consisted of

federal and provincial acts governing conciliation and voluntary arbitration. On the contrary, in 1946, employers and employees may not legally be at strife without previously having recourse to the process of mediation; if wages are the object of the dispute, Order in Council P.C. 9384 obliges the parties concerned to submit the matter to the Regional or National War Labour Board.

4° The strikes which occurred in 1919 were legally called since the law at that time did not forbid them nor prescribe any particular procedure except in the case of public utilities. On the contrary, most of the 1946 strikes were open violations of the provisions of Order in Council P.C. 9384 relating to the control of wages. Let it be mentioned that such was the case of the automobile, steel, rubber, electric appliances and textile strikes.

It is certainly a sign that the respect of the law and public authority has weakened. It must also be pointed out that constituted authority in Canada and in all the industrial provinces, excepting Quebec, did not wish to use against the instigators of illegal strikes the sanctions provided by the law or decrees.

We could also draw other conclusions regarding the present industrial unrest. Let it be mentioned, however, that the Federal Government is deeply concerned about the situation and that it has decided to convoke, for the 7th of October next, a conference of Provincial Labour Ministers which will study legislative propositions intended to supersede Order in Council P.C. 9384 respecting the control of wages and Order P.C. 1003 governing industrial relations. In other words, it is a question of considering a national labour code. A new endeavour of federal centralization of labour questions which, according to our constitution, fall within the competence of the provinces. It is now and henceforth certain that Quebec will be once more the defender of provincial autonomy throughout the course of the coming conference. Quebec has already taken its stand. Besides, the federal experiment in labour legislation has not been very conclusive. The legislative texts were excellent, but their enforcement was, to say the least, generally hesitating. It would be unadvisable for the Federal Government to interfere in questions into which it was driven by the necessities of war and from which it should withdraw now that peace prevails once more. The most it can do is to facilitate exchanges of opinions between the provinces so as to induce the latter to follow, in their labour legislation, standards that would be as similar to each other as possible. On the other hand, this standardization is already quite advanced, and all the industrial provinces generally have laws which adequately meet their requirements. Properly enforcing these laws is the most difficult problem to be solved. It is mainly a question of moral vigour and constructive energy, which alas! is very often lacking in liberal democracy.

The question of wages still remains in the forefront. It is the cause of the strikes which we actually have to deplore and that delay the renewal of our economic

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BIBLIOGRAPHIE

Cette liste indique, sans approuver pour autant leur contenu, certaines publications récentes où le lecteur pourra se renseigner sur l'évolution des idées et des faits dans le domaine des relations industrielles.

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NOTE DE LA DIRECTION

Nous avons le plaisir d'annoncer que Monsieur Jean-Pierre Després, secrétaire du Département des Relations industrielles depuis sa fondation, vient d'accepter l'invitation du B.I.T., faite depuis longtemps déjà, de joindre les rangs du personnel de ses services techniques. Cet heureux choix du B.I.T., dont l'honneur rejaillit sur la Faculté des Sciences sociales où Monsieur Després fut un ouvrier de la première heure, prive le Département de l'un de ses plus dévoués collaborateurs dont tous ceux qui le connaissent ont pu apprécier l'activité inlassable et l'esprit d'initiative toujours en éveil. Monsieur Després demeure toutefois attaché à la Faculté comme professeur et comme collaborateur au *Bulletin des Relations industrielles*. Nous lui offrons, avec nos félicitations, nos meilleurs vœux de succès.

REFLEXIONS ON STRIKES

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activity. It will also be the most thorny problem on the agenda of the conference of October 7th. Would it be right to drop Order in Council P.C. 9384 relating to the control of wages? In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred it caused the rates of wages to be raised. The Regional Boards, which used to carry out the said Order in Council, frequently by ordinance or by authorization, raised 1941 wages by 40% on an average. By doing so they warded off many labour disputes. Every day, labour organizations request their services which prove very useful despite the fact that such Boards are often the object of criticism.

Is the economy of our country stabilized to such an extent that employers and employees may recover absolute liberty of negotiation without labour disputes becoming utterly countless? If the control of wages is lifted, will it still be possible to maintain price ceilings? We are just mentioning these problems here without solving them.

May we add a final remark concerning the vital policy of wages. It would be advisable that the next conference of Labour Ministers approach it from a particular angle. If it is necessary, in a modern industry, to establish scientifically the graded rates of pay for each category of wage-earners, why does not public authority suggest, on a national basis, after an extensive investigation has been made by industrial engineers, comparative average wage rates for most industries, trades and services? For instance, is the average wage of the textile worker equitable at \$0.60 per hour, when services rendered and the requirements of a national economy are taken into account? The construction worker's at \$1.00? the iron worker's at \$0.90? What is the relative hourly value of labour in the various industries in consideration of factors such as productivity, hygiene and security, skill, regularity of employment, service rendered, etc.? The investigation would be widespread and should be carried out on a national scale. The standard averages given by the analysis of the industrial engineers would be useful to employers and employees alike. They would guide them in their bargainings and would allow present injustices to be intelligently rectified. Why should one section of economy be less favoured than another. Enlightened public opinion would impose the corrections required. One might object that this would be controlled economy. We are already engaged therein, but in a haphazard way. At the outset of the atomic age, would it not be right to streamline the relation which exists between the service rendered by a human being and the reward owed him by his fellow-men? And to close this article, may it be added that the scientific organization of wage rates in an industry and the establishment of the relative economic value of labour in industries, trades or services, would reduce the number of labour disputes to an insignificant figure.

GÉRARD TREMBLAY.