

Political Strike or Economic Strike ?

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POLITICAL STRIKE OR ECONOMIC STRIKE?

The right to strike is a natural right. If a worker has the right to refuse to work for a given employer, it is not because of the mere fact that they have grouped together that two or more workers lose such a fundamental right, the abolition of which, under normal circumstances, would be equivalent to the establishment of forced labour which in itself is only a mitigated form of slavery.

For purposes of public welfare the State may suspend the exercise of this right. During the war, as we have just seen, practically all the democratic countries prohibited strikes and lock-outs; special organisms were formed and entrusted with the settling of clashes of rights or interests between employers and employees. Moreover, even in peacetime, but nevertheless in view of the interests of the public, several governments forbid strikes and lock-outs in certain essential public services; the parties to a dispute must refer their claims to special bodies endowed with the necessary jurisdiction to achieve a settlement.

The State may also limit the exercise of the right to strike. Many governments, such as our Federal Government and that of the principal Canadian provinces, compel the parties to a dispute to submit to a procedure of collective-bargaining, of conciliation or of arbitration before resorting to strikes or lock-outs, which indeed constitute solutions by force. When the foregoing procedure is exhausted, the parties may make use of their economic weapons: strikes and lock-outs, if they so desire.

Such are, in short, the standards that most civilized countries impose on their subjects in questions of employer-employee relations; if employers or employees violate any statutory provisions, the strike or lock-out becomes illegal, and the parties involved are subject to the sanctions provided for.

Should the strike be limited as regards its object? In other words, can a union call a strike for motives that do not fall within its competence? Can a union call a political strike? To these questions we would answer in the negative. Indeed a union has « as object the regulation of relations between employers and employees and the study, defence and development of the economic, social and moral interests of its members, with respect for law and authority. » Therefore, a union is not a political organism. Its object is the study, defence and development of professional interests.

Should collective-bargaining, conciliation and arbitration not permit a union to sufficiently promote the professional interests of its members, it may then call a strike. Absolutely nowhere in labour legislation is it mentioned that political revendications may constitute the object of the foregoing proceedings. Consequently, how could the union legally call a strike to achieve an object which is foreign to its nature and to its action alike?

The meat-packers' strike has doubly illustrated such putting aside of legality and the distortion of the mechanism of trade-unionism for political purposes.

First of all, the meat-packer's unions refused provincial government conciliation offers in the Province of Quebec as well as elsewhere. In view of this fact, six of the provincial Labour Ministers who met in Toronto declared this strike illegal.

At the same time, the strike leaders demanded federal intervention in the dispute, although they knew very well that such intervention was forbidden by the constitution. Certain centralizing-minded labour leaders wanted to put over the political stroke that would have made a clean sweep of the British North America Act and of the statute law established. Their campaign for a National Labour Code and for the discarding of provincial autonomy had been an utter failure. The next thing to be tried was therefore the « accomplished-fact-technique ». The leaders of the meat-packers strike have not been very successful with their political scheme. Why do not these leaders limit their offensive to the economic field; since their duty was to behave as guardians of the rights of trade-unionism? Should they have done so, the meat-packers' strike would not have been called and the labour movement would not have had a few feathers plucked out of its wings.

THE EDITORS