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 bolchevism.

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 convene, 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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NOTE DE LA DIRECTION


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