

Looking Back and Looking Forward : Can Organized Labour Stand the Test of Time?

John H. G. Crispo

Volume 20, numéro 4, 1965

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/027620ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/027620ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)

1703-8138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Crispo, J. H. G. (1965). Looking Back and Looking Forward : Can Organized Labour Stand the Test of Time? *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 20(4), 700–706. <https://doi.org/10.7202/027620ar>

INFORMATION

Looking Back and Looking Forward: Can Organized Labour Stand the Test of Time? *

JOHN H. G. CRISPO

I deem it a great honour and privilege to address you from this podium this afternoon. It offers me a rare opportunity and I trust you will forgive me if I take full advantage of the occasion and turn immediately to my subject. Even then I am going to have precious little time to develop my theme let alone to document in with specific illustrations.

Traditionally, Labour Day speakers eulogize the past achievements of the trade union movement and hold out even more promise for the future. While I intend to follow the same general pattern, I will spend relatively little time extolling the accomplishments of times gone by and devote most of my remarks to the challenges which lie ahead.

I stress the word challenges because of my conviction that organized labour cannot count on an illustrious future unless it is prepared to adapt to the needs of the times. The periodic transformations which have marked the history of the labour movement in North America bear witness to this view.

Study of this history also reveals, however, that the trade union movement has more often than not resisted any change in the status quo until it was more than inevitable. As a result transformations have sometimes been imposed upon it by maverick forces from within and/or by hostile forces from without. While the outcome has on occasion been salutary this record is a sad commentary on the ingrained conservatism which pervades the internal affairs of the labour movement.

My thesis is that the times are too serious to permit this kind of luxury. While I do not consider myself an alarmist on the subject, I do feel that the labour movement faces a crisis. A crisis, not in the sense that its very existence is threatened, but in the sense that it cannot continue to play the full part in our society that it has a right and obligation to play unless it puts its own house in order.

Since I firmly believe that the maintenance of a democratic society in our advanced industrial civilization depends, among other things, on a strong, free and independent trade union movement, it would be irresponsible of me to ignore this challenge and use this forum merely to share some platitudes with you.

Organized Labour's Record to Date

Before commenting on the future, however, it is only fair to assess the past. This can be done by examining the growth in the absolute and relative size of the labour movement

* Labour Day Address, Directors' Luncheon, Canadian National Exhibition, September 6, 1965.

and by reviewing its record both at the collective bargaining table and in the wider arena of public affairs in general.

In the first place we can note the fact that roughly one-and-one-half million workers today are trade union members in Canada. In several sectors of the economy well over seventy-five per cent of the blue collar work force is organized. Compared to the situation which existed in the depression years of the 1930's this is a remarkable achievement. And yet, having attained a plateau of about one third of the organizable work force in this country more than ten years ago the labour movement has stagnated at that level ever since. In fact, many growing sectors of the economy, populated largely by white collar workers, remain virgin territory as far as union activity is concerned. On the organizational front, therefore, the record of the labour movement has been a mixed one.

Turning to the collective bargaining accomplishments of the trade union movement, I need only point to the impressive advances which labour has scored in round after round of negotiations. Although there are still a few spots union members are now among the better paid in the labour force, especially when one considers the many « fringe benefits » they have won for themselves in so many industries. Indeed, some of the challenges which confront the trade union movement stem from the fact that in most instances it can no longer claim to represent the downtrodden.

An underestimated achievement of the labour movement is the « industrial democracy » it has brought to the workplace. By providing recourse for those treated arbitrarily contrary to their rights under a collective agreement, the trade union has won for workers on the job the same protections which they enjoy as citizens in the general community. In time this may be recorded as the single greatest advance brought about by trade unionism.

In the broader arena of public affairs there is to be recorded the important role which unions have played in the political life of our country. If a democracy is to survive, let alone thrive, differing points of view, if not philosophies, should be available for the voter to choose from. Although with rare exception the trade union movement has supported liberal positions this is not to minimize its contribution in this context. There have been occasions when the liberal cause in this country would have been a lonely one had it not been for the support of the labour movement. For those who believe in a pluralistic society this is an extremely important factor to bear in mind.

Labour's contribution to the political life of our nation has taken many more specific forms. Many policies which labour has long championed have eventually become public policy. Typical examples include organized labour's relatively early support of free public education and of the many social security measures which are now in effect in this country. Today there are few aspects of government policy which have not felt the impact of organized labour's thinking.

The Changing Economic and Social Environment

Having said all this, how can I defend my thesis that the labour movement is in need of putting its house in order? The answer, it seems to me, is obvious. The problems we face are changing and they are changing in such a way as to render inadequate the tried and true approaches of the past, especially on the collective bargaining side. This means that organized labour must not only improve its structure for collective bargaining purposes but must also reassess its entire approach to the major issues of the day. This in turn would highlight the need to find a new and more effective way to combine labour's traditional

dual reliance on collective bargaining on the one hand and political action on the other hand.

To illustrate my thesis I need only cite some of the devastating effects which technological change (using the term in its broadest possible sense) is having upon the labour movement. Directly and indirectly changing technology is one of the major factors contributing to the more rapid growth of the non-union as opposed to the union sectors of the labour force and thus for the organizational challenge which confronts the trade union movement. At the same time, on the collective bargaining front, the forces of technology have been gravely complicating the issues which confront the parties. In so doing these forces have not only made life more difficult for negotiators but have led to some disillusionment among workers about the ability of unions to solve their problems. To further compound the situation, technology has advanced so far in some industries that it has seriously undermined the effectiveness of the strike weapon.

These problems suggest that even if the labour movement is only concerned about the impact of technological change upon its present base of operations, it would be in its own self-interest to re-examine its current structure and approach. To show that the case for such a re-examination is overwhelming, I need only assume that the labour movement also intends to remain concerned about the general welfare and review some of the implications for society at large that lurk in the technological changes that are enveloping us all.

While I share with responsible labour leaders a conviction that the benefits of such changes can more than offset the costs, I am as disturbed as you are by the inequitable fashion in which the costs and benefits of these changes are often distributed. When it comes to the hardships which can be worked on those adversely affected, you are as familiar as I with the injustices which can be done.

But let's look at both sides of the coin. Just as those workers who are adversely affected by these changes sometimes have to bear a disproportionate share of the burden, so can other workers who benefit from such changes appropriate to themselves through their bargaining power a disproportionate share of the benefits. In this fashion individual unions can expose themselves to the charge of engaging in the same kind of public-b damned profiteering that the labour movement as whole is so prone to level at corporate enterprise. Worse still, consciously or unconsciously, labour and management in a given situation may join in a conspiracy against the consumer by dividing up among themselves the available gains in productivity regardless of the merits of so doing.

These risks will of course remain as long as we practice the kind of free-wheeling competitive collective bargaining that has been traditional in North America. Almost inevitably such a system gives rise to a disproportionate sharing of the benefits of advancing technology in accordance with the varying degrees of bargaining power enjoyed by different groups or workers. Besides doing a grave injustice to the concept of labour solidarity, the resulting unfair distribution of these benefits could provoke the public to insist that the government take remedial action. Just as the government has begun to act to assist those unduly injured by the cost side of the technological-change equation, it could with equal validity move to preclude those in a position to do so from making off with more than their share of the spoils. While other groups in society would undoubtedly be more affected by such action than the labour movement as a whole, some segments of organized labour would also almost certainly feel the effects.

The point is that the challenges posed by technological and related changes cannot be handled adequately on a case-by-case basis within a splintered collective bargaining framework. They require a more integrated series of private and public policies than we have

been prepared to consider heretofore except perhaps in wartime. That many labour leaders in Canada have been aware of this for some time is made clearly evident in the briefs which the Canadian Labour Congress and other labour bodies have submitted to government. For years now these briefs have placed organized labour on record in favour of national planning. In view of what I have already said and in the light of the growing significance of non-collective bargaining matters such as the war on poverty this is a perfectly tenable position.

The problem is to reconcile organized labour's advocacy of national planning with the present structure and philosophy of the labour movement. It is my contention that it cannot be done but I would not rest my case for a reassessment of this structure and philosophy solely on the need to better prepare the labour movement for a constructive part in the **nationally planned economy** that it espouses. As I have indicated above, even if trade unionism in North America chooses to confine itself to the limited role envisaged for it by its architect, Samuel Gompers, it will be compelled to re-examine its structure, if not its philosophy, in the not-too-distant future.

The Challenges and the Dilemmas

Speaking first to the matter of structure it is safe to say that almost everyone in the labour movement at least gives lip service to the idea that there are too many unions. The case for a rationalization of the structure of the trade union movement has been made by senior labour statesmen as well as sympathetic observers of the trade union scene. The problem is that most union leaders visualize the solution as one in which their union would absorb some of the others. Those who do not see it this way know they are too small to absorb anyone else and cling to any straw to justify their continued existence. It is the age old problem of the vested interest. No institution likes to admit that it is redundant or obsolete nor do the leaders of any institution care to be absorbed in a subordinate capacity in another.

That this reluctance — of both institutions and their leaders — has plagued the trade union movement is made amply clear by the failure to consummate more than three or four of the mergers of the dual affiliates which were anticipated as a result of the mergers of the AF of L and the CIO in the United States and the T & LC and the CCL here in Canada. Yet it is generally recognized that a way must be found to solve this problem. If union cannibalism is not to prove the answer (and it may, at least in Quebec), then something short of mergers but as close to them as possible must be attempted. One possibility would be a series of councils of unions within a given industry or other jurisdiction. If more and more decision-making power was gradually transferred to such councils, they could form the core of a radically realigned labour movement. While this may be wishful thinking, it would surely be more satisfactory to move at least a step in this direction than to ignore the problem until time and circumstances compel a more drastic and abrupt reaction.

I must now turn to the matter of trade union philosophy. I do this reluctantly because I know that no matter how carefully I choose my words they are bound to be misconstrued. To try to avoid misunderstanding let me begin by asserting that the pragmatic porkchop outlook of the labour movement at the local level in North America has served it well. Business unionism — sometimes termed bread-and-butter or slot-machine unionism — has paid off for the membership and at present most of them would not have it any other way.

Yet, as long as their unions have delivered the goods, the membership has not frowned on their leadership involving the labour movement in the wider economic, social and political

issues of the day. To their credit and probably because of their early realization that appropriate handling of these broader matters could ultimately mean more to the welfare of the members than any gains they could extract at the bargaining table, the leadership at every level of organized labour has usually taken full advantage of this latitude. This is reflected in the concern which the trade union movement has shown in the many attributes of what it considers to be the « good society ». The difficulty is that while the membership has not objected to the leadership taking an active interest in such matters, it has not provided the militant support which it has usually been prepared to offer when a collective bargaining impasse has been reached.

In a very real sense this has given rise to a split personality in the trade union movement. On the one hand, regardless of the possible consequences for society at large, those who do the bargaining pursue the « more, more, more » immortalized by Gompers and demanded by the rank and file. At this level, then, the trade union movement exhibits the same degree of selfishness as any other interest group. On the other hand, in the wider arena of public affairs, the labour movement can normally be counted on to support the cause of the underdog. At this level, indeed, it is usually singularly unselfish in the positions it takes.

So far the labour movement has not suffered any marked adverse effects as a result of these visible contradictions. But the public is becoming more sophisticated and as it begins to discern the open signs of this split personality, it may pay less heed to the pronouncements of the public-interest spokesmen for the labour movement. Since I believe that this would be a tragedy, I cannot avoid the question of how one might reconcile the two approaches.

The problem is that they cannot be fully reconciled until union members realize that their welfare today can better be protected and enhanced if the labour movement places more emphasis relatively speaking on securing appropriate public policies than on its collective bargaining activities. At the present time such a shift in emphasis would be entirely unacceptable to the members of most unions if only because they realize that the multiplicity of unions makes it unlikely that they could ever agree on a co-ordinated approach to negotiations in keeping with their members' let alone the broader public interest. And so in part we are back to the question of structure again.

But there is much more to it than that. If the labour movement is to modify its business-union approach at the bargaining table sufficiently to warrant the kind of support it requires as a social force, it will necessitate a resurgence of idealism from the top to the bottom. What is really needed is a rekindling of the spirit of the thirties in the context of the sixties. To meet the test I have outlined, this new social dynamism would call for at least as much membership militancy on the broader issues of the day as they are usually ready to display on the picket line. If this is ever to come to pass it will require a herculean effort on the part of union leadership and the highest form of labour statesmanship.

To begin with it would require an increase and a reorientation in trade union education activities. No less emphasis must be placed on the problems involved in the day-to-day operation of a union but more, much more, emphasis must be placed on the background knowledge necessary to understand in as much depth as possible the issues confronting society as a whole. This would not only require the utilization of all of the labour movement's internal education machinery but the use of the communities' facilities as well. While the Labour College of Canada represents a beacon of hope it cannot begin to do the job alone. Organized labour should take advantage of every existing opportunity to upgrade

and broaden the horizons of both its leadership and membership and press for even more opportunities in the future.

If I may be permitted a commercial aside I would like to mention the Founding Conference of our new Centre for Industrial Relations at the University of Toronto in which we are featuring a number of outstanding international and Canadian authorities in this field. Nothing has disturbed me more than the fact that only one in five of the registrations we have thus far received are from the labour movement. Organized labour has long criticized the lack of a program in industrial relations at the University of Toronto and yet when we do move in this direction we elicit relatively little support from your quarter. It is doubly disappointing when we have gone to such lengths to plan a program which covers a number of the broader industrial relations problems of the day.

To return to my theme, let me make it clear again that I do not underestimate the difficulty of initiating some of the shifts in emphasis which I have suggested are called for in the trade union movement. Indeed, given the new signs of militancy over job-oriented issues that union members have been evidencing all over North America, it could take many years to bring about such a change. But this is all the more reason to get on with the task. Unless a beginning is soon made the problem of reconciling business unionism at the bargaining table and social unionism in the wider public sphere will become even more confounded. To avoid what might become a long-term exclusive commitment to the former at the expense of the latter is the number one challenge confronting the labour movement. It could survive on a limited basis as an entirely business-union proposition but only at the risk of jeopardizing its social consciousness and its broader public respect and influence.

In the long run the risk is not worth taking in view of the new kinds of problems which are arising. Since many of these problems do not lend themselves to anything but makeshift short-term solutions when left to the remedies available under our fragmented collective bargaining system, it follows that greater reliance will have to be placed on public policies. It is for this reason that the pragmatic bread-and-butter unionist of the future may be more prone to advocate social unionism as opposed to the more narrowly confined business unionism he has known in the past.

Summary and Conclusion

What I have tried to do today is outline some of the reasons why I believe organized labour must be prepared periodically to rethink its structure and philosophy in order to keep abreast of the times. This requires a degree of flexibility and adaptability which the labour movement on this continent has not evidenced in the past. It took a major depression and a serious split in the movement to bring about the last transformation that took place.

I suspect that one of the major reasons why the labour movement has failed to reassess its basic values and prejudices in the past until it had no other choice is because nobody in the labour movement really has the time to think very deeply about the future. Being doers and practitioners, neither the leadership of the movement, nor its staff advisers, have ever been afforded the opportunity to get away from their very active pace to ponder the state of the unions. If and when this opportunity is provided I suspect that the conclusions would not be dissimilar to those that I have shared with you this afternoon. The difference would be that those involved could do more about them and for this reason it would be time well spent.

It is my feeling that the key to the problem lies in the need to dispel the notion that there is any real dichotomy between the business-union and the social-union approach in this day and age. But it will take an effort of some magnitude to convince the member who views his union as little more than a collective-bargaining slot machine that the broader economic, social and political issues are just as important to his welfare in a bread-and-butter sense as anything his union may gain for him through negotiations with his employer. If and when this message sinks in, I am sure, the same member will become a vigorous exponent of a trade union renaissance.

While a major revision in the structure and philosophy of the labour movement in Canada would prove more valuable if accompanied by compatible changes in management and government, it would not prove that much less worthwhile in their absence. What is more, a rededicated socially dynamic trade union movement that was aware and equipped to deal with the problems of the day could do much to induce any necessary changes in our other institutions. For this reason I am unwilling to accept the argument that organized labour cannot be expected to rise to the new challenges of the day until management and government do so. This would amount to an untenable default in union leadership and would be to condemn the labour movement to the scrap heap of obsolescence.

In concluding, Mr. Chairman, may I observe that even those in this audience who know how deeply I believe in the underlying cause of trade unionism will no doubt accuse me of taking undue liberties today. Labour Day, some will argue, is no time to draw attention to the shortcomings of the labour movement. Others, more sensitive, could no doubt be found who would question the right of anyone not a member of the labour movement to voice such criticisms.

I cannot accept any of these interpretations. When I was invited to be your speaker today, I made up my mind not to be trite and gratuitous and take the easy way out. I determined instead to review as constructively as possible some of the things that are bothering me as a sympathetic student of the trade union movement. As I said at the outset I feel the times are too serious to permit me to have done otherwise.

I cherish your achievements in the past and I want to see you play an equally positive role in the future. To do this, however, I am convinced that you must better prepare yourself to meet some of the new problems which are engulfing our society. I trust and hope that you will rise to the challenge.

« La solidarité internationale dans la répartition du produit du travail » *

En ce premier lundi de septembre, on célèbre le travail. Partout, au pays, on rappelle la grandeur de l'activité laborieuse, on met en lumière les divers aspects de cette fonction qui tient une si grande place dans la vie de l'homme. On réfléchit aussi sur ses implications tant économiques et politiques que spirituelles et morales.

Nous voudrions proposer, à l'occasion de la Fête du Travail 1965, quelques réflexions sur un point d'une particulière actualité: la solidarité internationale dans la répartition des richesses que produit le travail.

* Message de l'Épiscopat canadien pour la Fête du Travail 1965.