

THE LABOUR QUESTION AND STRIKES

S. M. I. '43

Of all the social problems of modern industrial life, perhaps the one which presents the most formidable aspect, and which is most productive of evil effects, is the condition of labour. The origin of this problem, however, must not be sought in our present industrial system, but must be traced back through the years, even to remote antiquity, to the degraded state of the first labouring class of history, the slaves.

Under the benign influence of Christianity slavery gradually became toned down to a more humane condition known as serfdom. With the passing of the years the teachings of the Catholic Church continued to exercise more and more influence so that by degrees slaves were either liberated by their Christian masters or were allowed to purchase their freedom. By the fourteenth century serfdom, as an institution, ceased to exist in England. The period which marked the decline of serfdom saw the growth of craft guilds and the consequent removal of most of the injustices to which the labouring classes had previously been subjected. So great were the improvements effected in the condition of working men that the latter Middle Ages has been called "the golden era of labour." With the advent of the Protestant Revolt, however, in the sixteenth century, a great change was produced in the condition of labour, for within less than half a century the labouring classes were again reduced to a condition almost as degraded as that which existed under slavery. Indeed so great was the oppression of the weak by the strong that between 1541 and 1601 Parliament found it necessary to pass twelve acts with the distinct object of providing relief for the destitute.

With the passing of the medieval guilds, labour became a mere commodity and had to enter into competition on the open market. What followed is well known by every student of history. Unlimited free competition led to the mad rush for the accumulation of riches at the beginning of the factory era and to an "unbridled ambition for domination." The Industrial Revolution, which began in England about 1770, and which marks the beginning of the industrial era, was by no means an unmingled blessing for the workers, who were

made slaves to the new economic order. The evils of the industrial system have grown apace with the succeeding year so that at the present time immense power and despotic economic domination is concentrated in the hands of a few. The weak and poor are exploited by the rich and strong. Society is divided into two classes hostile to each other.

This fierce struggle between capital and labour should not continue. In his famous encyclical *Rerum Novarum* Pope Leo XIII points out the real cause of the trouble in the following remarkable words: "The great mistake that is made in the matter now under consideration is to possess oneself of the idea that class is naturally hostile to class; that rich and poor are intended by nature to live at war with one another. So irrational and false is this view that the exact contrary is the truth. Just as the symmetry of the human body is the result of the disposition of the members of the body, so in a State it is ordained by nature that these two classes should exist in harmony and agreement, and should, as it were, fit into one another so as to maintain the equilibrium of the body politic. Each requires the other; capital cannot do without labour, nor labour without capital. Mutual agreement results in pleasantness and good order; perpetual conflict necessarily produces confusion and outrage."

Strikes are, undoubtedly, a powerful means in the hands of workmen for enforcing their demands and protecting their rights, but they often prove detrimental to the best interests of both employers and employed, and indeed of the country in general. Since a strike is a simultaneous and concerted cessation of work by a group of wage earners to enforce a demand upon an employer, it is not in se unjust so long as certain conditions are observed and the workmen are not bound by any previous contract. A strike is lawful when it will probably obtain a benefit for the employees which their employer unjustly refuses, and which cannot be obtained by less vigorous means. But no matter how just claims may be, they should never be enforced by violence. Besides, there must be in every case some proportion between the end sought and the evils which are likely to result from the strike.

If the evils are sure to outweigh the benefits to be derived, the strike can under no consideration be justified. Because of the many evils of which the strike is either the occasion or the cause, it should be made the last resort. It nec-

essarily affects seriously the business of the employer. Machines lie idle, expenses accumulate without corresponding returns, customers go away perhaps permanently, and the stability of the firm is generally shaken. Workmen receive no salary and are forced to spend the money which they have saved, perhaps over a considerable period of time, for the support of themselves and their families. More serious, however, are the moral evils which follow in the wake of strikes, such as hatred, moral corruption, drunkenness, and irreligion.

Because of the evils that are practically inseparable from strikes, some more peaceful and satisfactory means should be employed to settle disputes. The best authorities on labour do not favor strikes. It would be absurd, however to claim that a lawful strike, carried on without any excess, should be condemned or repressed if it be the only means left to oppressed workmen to obtain redress of grievances. But would it not be equally absurd to say that civilization is making rapid progress if no better means than strikes are to be found to settle disputes ?

There have been many remedies proposed to effect a harmonious agreement between employers and employees. But it seems very difficult to find a remedy that will appear ideal and perfect to both parties. Both contend for a principle involving what they conceive to be their inviolable rights. They should remember, however, that they have not only their respective rights, but also their correlatives duties. If a better understanding of these mutual rights and duties prevailed, there would be less animosity and fewer conflicts between capital and labour.

It is easy to solve the question in theory, but to apply a remedy is more difficult, for it is not an easy task to unite the respective interests of the contending parties. The best remedy, of course, for industrial conflicts is to prevent their occurrence by removing all causes that give rise to them. The present social condition is such that it would be preposterous to expect such a result. Disputes will arise; so the next best thing to do, after having removed causes of the conflicts as far as possible, is to procure means whereby all disputes that do arise may be amicably settled without recourse to strikes. This remedy is one which every government should provide. From the very reason of its existence a government has a right and duty to promote the common

good and to preserve peace and order. Consequently it is within the power of the government to legislate in order to remove to as great an extent as possible all cause for disturbance, and to provide satisfactory means of settling disputes which threaten danger to the public good. To the State the interests of all are equal. The rights of all classes must be recognized and protected. Workmen as well as capitalists must be protected from spoilation. The State is certainly right in encouraging and protecting capitalists in order to promote the prosperity of the country, but it must at the same time protect and promote the interests of workmen. It is largely because the State has failed in its duty towards the labouring classes that so many workmen are subjected to the injustices which call for concerted action on their part.

In regard to the means to be taken for the amicable settlement of all disputes that may arise, those which have been received with most favour are arbitration and conciliation. But in seeking a remedy for strikes, as well as for the many other evils which prevade society at the present day, the powerful influence of Christianity must not be ignored. By teaching all men their duties to one another, religion is the most powerful means to draw all classes together. If employers as well as employed practised this teaching of the Saviour of men, "Whatsoever you would that men should do to you, do you also to them in like manner," there would be no occasion for strikes, the present animosity would cease, and class would be no longer hostile to class, but all members of society would dwell in harmony. If the industrial millennium ever comes, it will be when employers and employed practise those Christian principles which ensure justice and charity to all.

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