

'Send out your Light and your Truth, let them guide me!
Let them bring me to your holy mountain, to your home!'
(Ps. 43, 3.)

'Make me live, Yahweh, for the sake of your Name!' (Ps. 143,
11.)

With the voice that thundered order into the cosmos, with the breath that blew it into glowing life, Yahweh of the Covenant answers because one small Israelite down there in the darkness is, for one instant in the world's history, frightened, and in pain.

THE TRADE UNIONS IN A CHANGING WORLD

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DURING recent decades the power and prestige of the trade union movement have been greatly increased. In the years between the two wars, the trade unions enjoyed full legal recognition, and even a privileged position at law. (They could induce workmen to break their contracts of employment, for example, without being liable to be sued for damages by the employers, and this meant that in no circumstances could the union be prevented from striking, however unreasonably, by any threat to its funds.) The achievement of full employment during and since the war has naturally increased their bargaining power. Many employers now welcome the co-operation of an organized body representing their workmen where previously they had only grudgingly accepted the existence of the trade unions. The consultations between the Government and trade unions on certain matters of economic policy have continued in the post-war period, though it would not be true to say that there has always been real co-operation.

In the situation now facing the unions, there are different objectives that the unions should be pursuing, or different means of pursuing certain ends that remain unchanged. Yet in many ways it seems that the unions have failed to adapt themselves to the changed conditions. It would be impossible in the space of a short article to consider all of the problems involved in this

adaptation, but a few issues seem of particular importance at the present time. An important problem within the union is that of apathy. Why do so few members take an active part in union affairs? A second issue, of wider interest, is the closed shop. Is it right that the unions should bring pressure on workers to join? Other problems that are important concern the political activities of the trade unions and their continued use of outmoded restrictive practices. The final question that will be considered here is how the trade unions should behave in wage bargaining under conditions of full employment.

I

It is well established that a large proportion of trade unionists do not play an active part in the affairs of their union. Many rarely attend a branch meeting or vote when officers are being elected. The proportion of inactive members naturally varies a great deal from union to union, and even within the same union, but it is probably safe to say that it would be rare to find even half the members really active. Where this is the case, it becomes easy for an energetic and organized minority to exploit the situation for their own advantage, as the Communists have done. Even if such a minority does not gain control of the union it can exercise an influence out of all proportion to its numbers.

This is, of course, typical of many types of voluntary organization. Generally speaking, this problem of apathy is not a serious one. Many organizations, whilst desirable, do not exert any great influence on the affairs of the nation or even on the lives of their members. The member is always free to resign, and this fact alone will make the officials of the organization anxious to meet the wishes of their members, even if they do not take an active rôle in its government. In the case of the trade unions, however, the position is different. A man's working life must obviously have a great effect on his life as a whole; and in so far as the trade union can influence his conditions of employment it is desirable that he should take an active interest in the government of the union. This is especially so since he does not have the same freedom to withdraw, as in the case of other voluntary organizations; there are strong pressures on him to remain a member, even in the absence of the closed shop.

In the last resort, apathy can only be overcome if there is a

change of heart on the part of the ordinary member. Nevertheless, there are features of union organization that may make it difficult for the ordinary member to feel much enthusiasm for taking a more active interest. This is particularly so where there are big general unions, and where the branch is organized on a territorial basis and includes workers from more than one shop or factory. If branches were based on the place of employment and meetings held during (or immediately before or after working hours), attendance at the meetings would be much less of an effort and the numbers taking part might increase considerably. A person might easily stay to attend a meeting held when work ends where he would not go back to a meeting after he had already gone home.

II

It is natural enough that the trade unions should want to see every eligible worker joining, and nobody would raise any objections to a trade union taking steps to encourage non-members to join. Where there is a sharp conflict of opinion is over the use of coercion. It is not uncommon for a union to try and force a workman to join by offering the employer the choice (if the workman still does not join) between dismissing the non-unionist and a strike. Much rarer is for the employer to take the initiative in trying to establish a closed shop. Some years ago, the Durham County Council did attempt to make union membership a condition of employment, but was defeated by the resolute opposition of the unions (principally the National Union of Teachers).

It would be wrong to argue that the closed shop is necessarily wrong. The non-unionist cannot claim an unqualified right to work alongside members of a trade union. Where the presence of non-unionists seriously weakened the bargaining power of the unions to such an extent that they could not secure just conditions for their members, the unions would be fully justified in attempting to enforce a closed shop, though in such circumstances they would rarely have much hope of success.¹ Where the union is

¹ A union would have a good chance of success in such circumstances if it could secure the support of some more highly organized group. Transport workers who boycotted a factory, thereby stopping goods coming out or raw materials going in, could enable badly organized workers in the factory to bring about a closed shop. Such sympathetic action would be fully justified.

most likely to attempt to enforce a closed shop is when its position is already so strong that it is not really weakened at all by the fact that some men have chosen to remain outside the union. The argument used to support such action is that the conditions of employment have been improved by the union's action and that it is wrong for men to enjoy these benefits without contributing to the cost of securing them. This argument, however, is ill-founded. If men act together to promote their own interests they have no right to demand that others who may also derive a benefit from their actions should contribute to the cost; nor is there any obligation on the others to contribute.

Once a closed shop is accepted, the right of the union to refuse membership or to expel a member becomes a serious matter. It is no longer a question of excluding him from the benefits of membership of some voluntary organization but may be a case of depriving him of his normal livelihood. At the present time, a man has no effective redress if he is deprived of his job as a result of the enforcement of the closed shop. The only exception to this is where a man loses his job after being expelled from a union in a manner contrary to the union's own rules. Since there is no reason to suppose that the union's rules are designed to protect the liberty of the individual, this provides no real safeguard. In theory it would be possible for the union rules to give certain officials absolute power to expel a member without stating a reason. And it would be unusual to find a union leader who would not approve of the union's retaining the right to expel a member who did not take part in an official strike, although there can be no guarantee that such a strike is morally justified.²

III

The trade unions have argued that they should be allowed to extend their activities into the political life of the community. They have claimed the right not only to represent their members in negotiations with employers, and to be consulted by the Government on matters affecting the workers, but to support candidates at Parliamentary elections and to affiliate to a particular party. When such rights are claimed, important questions relating

² It is interesting to note that while certain Labour spokesmen were very forthright in their condemnation of the action of trade courts in depriving certain cut-price retailers of their living, they have refused to recognize that any problem arises from giving the trade unions similar jurisdiction over their members.

to the freedom of the individual are raised. In 1907 the right of the unions to undertake such political activities was questioned, and in 1909 the House of Lords ruled that they were *ultra vires*, a decision which incidentally threw doubt on the legality of other union activities (such as the provision of friendly society benefits, and so on). The law was altered in 1913, so as to allow the trade unions to take part in any lawful activity, subject to certain safeguards for the liberty of the individual in the case of political activities.

It has already been argued above that the trade union cannot be regarded as just another voluntary society. There are restrictions on the freedom of the workman to leave the union and it would be wrong to compel a man to join a union as a condition of his employment in a particular job if thereby he were compelled to contribute to the support of Parliamentary candidates whose politics he disliked. The Act of 1913 provided therefore that the union should take part in political activities only after a ballot of the members had been held. Even then, the political fund should be kept separate, and any member not wishing to contribute was to be free to contract out without prejudice to his other rights as a member. Although there is perhaps something to be said for preferring the alternative arrangement in force from 1927 until the repeal of the Trade Disputes Act in 1945, whereby those wishing to contribute to the political levy were required to contract in, it seems unlikely that there is any serious harm done by forcing a dissenter to reveal his politics.

Two further questions arise in connection with the political activities of trade unions. First, the means to be used. Provided the rights of the dissenting individual are safeguarded, there is no reason why the trade unions should not take part in the political life of the country by supporting candidates at elections and by affiliating to one of the political parties. The union has no right, however, to attempt to further its political objectives by industrial action. In this country, to date, the trade unions have not attempted to secure their political ends by strike action, though there was some irresponsible talk of such action when the Conservative Government announced its intention to denationalize steel and road transport. Such action would be a rebellion against the lawfully constituted government, and this would not be permissible unless the Government had forfeited its rights by gross misrule.

Finally, a brief comment is necessary on the political policies that the trade unions in this country have adopted. In this country, nationalization has been an important plank in the electoral programme of the Labour Party, to which the Trade Union Congress is affiliated. Many individuals in both the Labour Party and the trade unions appear to regard nationalization as an end in itself, to be extended when appropriate to *all* the means of production. There is a tendency on the part of many Catholics to neglect this not uncommon attitude when giving their allegiance to the Labour Party. Within the trade union movement, there is a tendency to see nationalization as a solution for the problems of many industries (extending beyond anything ever officially propounded in the Labour Party's programme for any election to date). It is certainly to be deplored that the trade unions have not preferred to think in terms of a wider ownership of the means of production instead of seeing the solution of the problems of present-day capitalism in State monopoly.

IV

The restrictive practices of the trade unions have been the subject of much criticism, some of which has been ill-founded. Some restrictions may be no more than an attempt on the part of the workers to resist any attempt to force them to work at a pace that might be damaging to health. In other cases, low productivity may be due not to any deliberate decision on the part of the union or the workers in the shop to restrict output; it may simply be a subconscious reaction to the failure of the management to treat them as rational beings. Other restrictions designed to protect jobs in time of unemployment are understandable if not always justified.

Under conditions of full employment, restrictions of the latter kind are no longer justified. Their main result is to reduce output, lower the standard of living of the country, and further, to reduce its ability to assist the development of less advanced countries. Where such restrictions have been continued, it is largely the result of the innate conservatism of the trade unions and their refusal to believe that full employment has come to stay. The most futile of these restrictions are the rigid lines of demarcation between particular crafts. Within the last two or three years, two shipyards have had prolonged stoppages because two or

more unions were quarrelling among themselves as to who should undertake particular jobs. The result was a serious financial loss for the employers, a serious loss of exports for the country, and unemployment for other workers as soon as a point was reached where no further work could be done without the strikers. This is serious enough, but it is only part of the story. The usual cause of such disputes is the introduction of new methods of production; so long as employers stick to the old methods they know where they are, even if the rigid demarcation does in some cases add to their costs.³ If they are afraid of a serious stoppage over demarcation when new methods are introduced, they may fight shy of introducing new methods at all, thereby reducing productivity.

This raises the question of the union's attitude to innovations in general. There is a long history of union suspicion of new methods of production, dating right back to the Luddite troubles in the early days of the Industrial Revolution. To the worker, it is obvious that where a machine will do the work of several men there must be unemployment. The increase in demand due to the lowering of costs is hardly likely to offset the often considerable labour saving that new machinery achieves. Given appropriate Government measures, however, the unemployment need only be temporary, and no man should feel unfairly treated if he loses his job, provided an alternative job at a reasonable wage can be found quickly and that in the meantime he receives generous unemployment benefit.⁴ It is also important that the unions should be fully consulted as to the procedure for introducing such innovations and for dealing with the resulting redundancy. But subject to these conditions the unions should welcome the introduction of new methods of production, for only in this way can the standard of living of their members be improved.

V

Finally there is the question of the attitude the trade unions should adopt towards wage bargaining under conditions of full

³ Demarcation rules may, for example, lead to delays when one craft is fully employed at a certain time and the employer is unable to employ other craftsmen on the job, although they would be equally capable of doing it.

⁴ Unemployment benefit should be much more generous than at present, and should be related to normal earnings. No great hardship would then be involved. With the present rates of benefit, even a short period of unemployment may involve serious hardship.

employment. First, however, a general principle needs to be stated. It is sometimes argued, even by Catholics, that the task of the trade unions is to improve the conditions of their members. Therefore, they should not agree to any form of wage restraint. This reasoning is fallacious. Apart from the possibility that the lack of restraint would, in the long run, have adverse effects on the workers' own standard of living, the argument is morally unsound. The workers are entitled to a just wage. Among the factors that must be taken into account in determining the just wage are the legitimate claims on output of the other factors of production and the public good. For the unions to claim more than their just wage is immoral.

Since the war, there has been a steady rise in wages and prices. Whilst many immediately conclude that rising wages are the cause of higher prices, the trade unions deny this, and say that they have merely tried to ensure that the standard of living of their members has not fallen as a result of inflation. An impartial study of the available statistics will show that the latter claim at least is untrue. Whether or not wages have caused prices to rise, the facts are clear enough, and wages have risen decidedly more rapidly than prices. The trade unions have succeeded not only in protecting their members against the effects of rising prices but have actually enabled them to improve their standard of living. Moreover, when it is remembered that the total wage and salary bill is equal to some six times the amount paid out in rents, dividends, and interest, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that wages are an important causal factor in the inflation.

It is not true that inflation is simply the result of the creation of additional supplies of money by the banks. Even if the inflation is accompanied by an increase in the supply of money, this in itself may be a result of rising wages. (In fact, there has been a contraction in the supply of money in this country during the last few years, yet prices have continued to rise faster than in countries where the supply of money has increased.)⁵ If wages rise, industry may be driven to borrow additional working capital from the banks, and this may bring about an increase in the supply of money. But it is the wage increase rather than the increased supply of money that is causing inflation. Going right

⁵ See statistics of the International Monetary Fund quoted on *The Times* city page on October 9, 1957.

to the heart of the matter, inflation comes about because the demands that are being made on the country's productive resources are excessive. The country as a whole wants to consume more than it can produce. Inflation would be checked if the Government were to spend less on the social services and/or defence, or if industry would spend less on investment, or if the man in the street would spend less. If Government expenditure cannot be cut, and if industrial investment is necessary for our industries to remain competitive, it is only the consumption of the ordinary man that can be cut. Wage-earners cannot expect to escape the effect of these cuts, since they are taking by far the largest slice of the national cake, or if they do succeed, it can only be at the expense of less fortunate members of the community, the old-age pensioners and others living on fixed incomes.

In this matter particularly the trade unions have failed to face up to the realities of the situation facing them today. Few union leaders have accepted the desirability of any kind of national policy for wages. No doubt there are those who feel that they should get what they can out of the present situation, as well as those who fear that any kind of restraint would prevent increases being conceded to those whose wages are too low. The fact that real wages in manufacturing industry have increased very much more rapidly than the national average shows that not all workers have benefited to the same extent, and that there may be workers whose real wage has fallen during the inflation. No national wages policy could succeed which did not rectify these unduly low wages.⁶

VI

The raising of the Bank Rate in September 1957 was a desperate measure designed to stop a run on sterling. This originated from the action of foreign holders of sterling selling in order to buy German marks. Nevertheless, it was a situation which arose because inflation here led to a belief that the pound would be devalued, and that the German mark would be appreciated.

It is the duty of the Government, regardless of the external

⁶ It is not suggested that the introduction of a national wages policy would be easy. It is necessary to keep in mind the essential economic function of wages in allocating labour between occupations. Wages will be high in those industries where the demand for the product is increasing and *vice versa*. Wages must continue to fulfil this function if there is not to be direction of labour.

effects of inflation (the loss of exports and the drain on gold), to check the upward spiral of prices. Some of the consequences of this raising of the Bank Rate may be unpleasant. It will make wage increases difficult, but that is no drawback if wage increases have been unjustly squeezing the incomes of other sections of the community. The check to wage increases may involve industrial unrest. That would be unfortunate. It would be far better if the Government could secure co-operation and moderation from the trade unions, but now that the unions have rejected wage restraint then it is clearly the duty of the Government to protect the value of the currency.

Finally, it must be remembered that the position of the trade union leader under such conditions is extremely difficult. Even if he were to see the need for moderation he would have to convince his rank and file. Unless he could do so there would be the danger that unofficial leaders would get control of the union members and bring about a wave of unofficial strikes. The problem, therefore, is one of educating the rank and file as well as the leaders. If wage policy is the most important problem from the national point of view at the present time, its solution may be very closely linked with the internal problem of curing apathy in the unions.

TOWARDS ECUMENICAL UNDERSTANDING

HENRY ST JOHN, O.P.

CHRISTIAN unity is the concern of all these three books,¹ and they are all of some importance; the first two for an understanding of the place of the Catholic Church in the ecumenical scene, and the third for the explanatory light it throws, from the Anglican side, upon the complex and debatable question of the Church of South India.

Mr J. M. Todd sets out to explain the relationship of Catholicism to the Ecumenical Movement. His book, the first of its kind in English and one which supplies a great need, includes a synopsis of the history

1 CATHOLICISM AND THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT. By John M. Todd. Introduction by the Abbot of Downside. (Longmans; 6s. 6d.)

THE SHEEPFOLD AND THE SHEPHERD. By Columba Cary-Elwes, O.S.B. (Longmans; 15s.)

THE CHURCH OF SOUTH INDIA AND THE CHURCH. By Donald Rea. (Published for the Confraternity of Unity, Baxter's Press, Oxford; 5s.)