

THE CATHOLIC TRADES UNIONS OF CANADA

A SOURCE of continual irritation in Canada, not only in industry and business, but among the great mass of the people, is the existence of affiliations of foreign organizations in labour ranks and the influence, upon Canadian workpeople and their affairs, of unions with their headquarters and greatest membership in the United States. Trades-unionism has made giant strides in Canada in the last twenty years, more than doubling its membership; but to-day international labour unions have three times as many local branches and members as Canadian central labour bodies (largely founded by former members of international unions who for various reasons severed their connection with the parent bodies and are for the main part in direct opposition to the international organizations), and twice the local branches and members of all Canadian labour bodies taken together.

Without going into instances or details the objections to such a situation can readily be appreciated. Under existing conditions Canadian labour, and indirectly Canadian business, can be dictated to by United States organizations possessing the balance of weight and power and Canada, perhaps against her own will and her own best interests, involved in labour wars which may be politically inspired across the border or waged purely for the benefit of workers in a foreign country. A feeling has long been gathering strength that Canadian labour should be organized in purely Canadian organizations and Canadian workmen be free from foreign dictation and possible exploitation.

Until recently, however, one has failed to discover in Canadian organizations indications of the necessary strength or growth to combat adequately the invasion of foreign labour organizers. Now, however, the calling and successful terminating of several strikes in Quebec, climaxed by the victory in the major textile dispute, and in general the strength and confidence exhibited in action, have drawn wide and interested attention to the Federation of Catholic Workers of Canada and caused many students to wonder

whether in their continued expansion may not lie the hope of eventual freedom from the domination of foreign labour unions.

In the *Syndicats Catholiques Nationaux* (National Catholic Unions) Canada has an organization which is unique in the British Empire and on the American continent. At the opening of the century there existed in Quebec four independent labour unions, one of labourers and three of leather and shoe workers and the last of these in 1901, following involvement in an industrial dispute which was settled by the intervention of the Archbishop, accepted the social doctrines of the Catholic Church after the manner of the Catholic union movement which years before had been initiated in Germany and spread to many European countries, admitting a chaplain to their ranks.

In the following years, as trades-unionism made progress in Canada, other similar national unions were formed in Quebec province, all of which accepted for their guidance the declarations of Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical, "The Condition of the Working Classes," subsequently proclaimed by Pope Pius XI as fundamental rules for workingmen's associations. As expansion continued the idea developed of federating these scattered units to co-ordinate their work and render them more efficient in operation. Meetings took place in 1919 and 1920, and in the latter year the 225 delegates from the 120 unions then existing decided to establish a central body. Thus the Federation of Catholic Workers of Canada came into existence.

After that date, except for participation in a few local shop strikes of minor interest, the organization did not come into frequent or prominent notice, and in fact the general public at large seemed scarcely aware of its existence or to attach any great significance to it. It is doubtful, in fact, if the Federation were even regarded very seriously by industry. There was evidence, however, that it was a source of some irritation to rival union bodies. Pledged to and adhering to a policy of conciliation and avoidance of strikes, of fostering, as far as possible, co-operative, reasonable relations with employers, it was claimed the Catholic

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unions operated to impede improvement of conditions for non-sectarian unionists and workers generally.

Then suddenly out of relative obscurity the Catholic unions came very much into the limelight. Displaying amazing aggressiveness, determination, and assurance they called strikes in several rural areas as well as in Montreal, and were successful in securing their demands for better pay and hours of work. Public attention came to be really focussed on them when they launched their efforts to improve conditions in the textile industry, one of Quebec's largest and most important activities. They proceeded by every peaceable means and only after these had failed called a strike involving ten thousand workers. They were successful in compelling recognition of their organization for the purposes of collective bargaining and secured other concessions calculated to ameliorate considerably the lot of the workers in the textile plants.

Even those best informed on the Catholic unions were astounded at their temerity in engaging in a labour war of such magnitude. It disclosed that in a serious and big way they had taken up the cudgels on behalf of better labour conditions in Quebec and come to constitute themselves a real and definite factor in any labour war which might develop in the future in the province. People began to investigate what had happened.

The Catholic movement had all these years been gradually developing and strengthening, quietly getting itself into position where, when it acted, it could do so effectively. It had been organizing in unorganized industries, competing with other unions in trades partly organized, concentrating on the attainment of a goal where all Quebec labour, or at least French Canadian, would be enrolled under a single banner proclaiming Catholic principles. It still has some distance to go to attain this end but a great deal has been accomplished since federation and it is in a most favourable position to go forward.

In 1924 the Federation of Unions had 30,000 members throughout the various trades in Quebec. Ten years later the figure was found to be about the same, this largely due

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to losses in the period of industrial depression. Then within three years it recruited some 15,000 additional workers and membership stood at 45,000. Improving conditions in employment partly accounted for this, but in addition the passage of the Quebec government's Collective Labour Agreements Act, which gave the labour minister power to withhold recognition from unions lacking a defined status which closely resembles that of the Catholic unions, imparted a distinct stimulus to all union expansion. Due, it would seem, in large measure to the organization's active campaigning seventeen new unions have been established and five thousand new members added since the beginning of the year. The 50,000 membership in the Federation of Catholic Workers at the time of their convention in September would appear to make this, by a small margin, the largest single union in the Dominion.

This very satisfactory development was disclosed at the time the Catholic unions engaged in the textile strike, when it was found they had the workers virtually one hundred per cent organized. It was revealed they were almost as strong in a few other industries, possessed majority membership in others, and in yet others were still battling for supremacy with rival unions. They are becoming increasingly strong among building artisans, pulp and paper workers and shoemakers, leading industrial activities in Quebec, while they also have unions among barbers, railway employees, printers, asbestos workers, furniture workers, and general labourers, as well as street-railway workers in Montreal.

As the general public views them the Catholic unions are merely organizations of workpeople banded together like any other labour group for protection. But there is a very essential difference and they have a real right to the adjective Catholic. It must be remembered that these unions are confined to Quebec except for a lapping over into Ontario where the French-Canadians have extended, and that more than eighty-five per cent. of the population of Quebec province is Catholic. Unions of this description, however, do not mean merely the union of co-religionists but action that is prompted, guided and restricted by principles enunciated

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by the Church. Unions are pledged to the use of every means of conciliation before resorting to strike, and then that this be carried out in an orderly way.

At the time of early organization and for a considerable period thereafter, membership in the various unions was limited to those professing the Catholic faith, and some of the exclusively French-Canadian sections of the province still enforce this regulation. As unions made progress in others of mixed population, such as Montreal, however, and attracted workers of all creeds through sympathy with their principles and objectives, the practice was adopted of admitting non-Catholics on equal terms.

The organization goes to some length, however, to ensure strict adherence to the principles laid down in the papal encyclicals. The National Federation and all local unions have chaplains officially appointed, who while ostensibly spiritual guides actually oversee proceedings and ensure there is no serious deviation from the line of conduct laid out for labour by Church doctrine. In the smaller communities in the rural districts, where the clergy is so extensively the guide of the people in all its affairs, the importance and influence of the chaplains is much greater and they have considerably to do with the operation of business and other affairs of the syndicates. Their work, however, is mainly educational and it is the aim of the federation to have the workmen placed in complete conduct of all matters as soon as they are fitted for it.

Thus while the connection between the unions and the Church is not official or tangible, it is nevertheless most intimate. The organization in fact constitutes a most effective and practical form of Catholic Action, and in this respect has been considerably strengthened in the public view in recent years by the repeated enunciation on the part of the hierarchy of the Church's attitude towards social and economic problems of the day and pronouncements reflecting antipathy to international unions in general and those suspect of being infected with Communism in particular. It has been further aided by the Quebec government's patently sympathetic attitude towards Catholic social principles.

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With fresh prestige by reason of their recent victories the Catholic unions feel to-day they are in a stronger position than ever and are prepared to move on more vigorously towards their goal. In the more limited sphere of the province they should become an increasingly effective instrument in banishing the admittedly lamentable conditions which still prevail in certain industries, and in the general pressure for improved working conditions, consequent upon business recovery, become a factor of increasing potency in elevating labour standards in Quebec.

At their recent convention the Federation of Catholic Workers of Canada passed a resolution asking the government to amend the immigration act to prevent organizers of foreign unions from entering Canada. This step would go a long way towards curbing the inroads made by international unions into Canadian labour ranks and hastening the day when all Canadian labour will be organized in its own national unions. In bringing this about the Catholic unions are destined to become increasingly important, and when it is accomplished their influence in Canadian labour will be stronger than ever.

E. L. CHICANOT.