

The Ideals of Labor

An Interesting and Instructive Article By John P. Frye,
Editor of The Molders' Journal.

It has seemed to some superficial observers that organized labor's ideals consist of nothing more than higher and higher wages, shorter hours of labor, more and more control, and additional rules and regulations affecting employment.

Perhaps the ideals which have guided the trade union movement of our country are not generally known to the public because trade unionists have been busily engaged in working for their attainment rather than in crystallizing them into set phrases.

In discussing Labor's ideals, or the ideals of any other group, it must be borne in mind that human activities are influenced by more than one motive and that it may be possible to lose sight of the ideals which have influenced men because it appears that other motives also actuated them.

We justly honor and approve of the ideals of freedom and independence which influenced the American colonists and inspired them during the period of the Revolutionary War, yet without doubt some of those who were genuine patriots did not lose sight of the broad acres they might be able to secure should the effort for independence succeed, or the public office which they might hold. These motives, however, if they existed, did not necessarily dim the high ideal for which they risked their fortunes and their lives.

It is my desire to convey an understanding of what underlies the efforts and tendencies of trade unionism so that you may discover the ideals which guide organized labor and influence it more profoundly than anything else.

Humanity is under heavy obligations to trade unionism because of the ideals which it has established, and in particular our country owes a debt of gratitude to the trade union movement of England for the special service it rendered to our nation during the darkest days of the Civil War.

The instance I have in mind, unfortunately, like many other great deeds of organized labor, has been passed over lightly or remained unmentioned by our historians.

It will be remembered that, early in the Civil War, cotton was declared a contraband of war by our government, and that this action produced far-reaching results in the cotton spinning and weaving industry of England.

As the war progressed, mill after mill was forced to shut down and thousands of cotton operatives were thrown out of employment.

English bankers and mill owners united in demanding that the British Cabinet should recognize the belligerency of the Confederate States, and all of the methods which capital can set in motion were utilized to bring pressure upon the British Cabinet. The plea was made that Britain's great cotton industry would be destroyed, the invested capital lost and labor suffer as never before.

It was known that the British Cabinet was divided upon the question and in time blockade runners anchored in the Mersey, their holds filled with contraband cotton. Had the government permitted the unloading of this cotton, it would have been forced to recognize the belligerency of the Confederate States.

It was at this time that English trade unionists declared themselves so definitely and so determinedly that the British Cabinet hesitated and finally, in face of a rising public opinion, determined to continue its refusal to give recognition to the southern belligerents.

From the beginning of the Civil War, the British unions had taken a lively interest in the principles involved. They recognized that one of the vital questions was that of the freedom of labor. Mass-meetings were called throughout the land at which the question was discussed.

One of these, a mass-meeting of trade unions, held in St. James Hall in London, was addressed by John Bright and a few lines from his oration will help us to understand better the trade union sentiment.

"You wish," he said, "the freedom of your country, you wish it for yourselves, you strive for it in many ways. . . . impartial history will tell that when your statesmen were hostile or coldly neutral, when many of your rich men were corrupt, when your press which ought to have instructed and defended was mainly written to betray, the fate of a continent and of its population being in peril, you clung to freedom with an unflinching trust that God, in His infinite mercy, would yet make it the heritage of His children."

Throughout England the trade unions were aroused, and none more than in Lancashire, where the closing down of cotton mills had brought untold suffering upon the workers. These trade unionists were determined that the Government of the United States should be

sustained in freeing the slaves; they were determined that contraband cotton should not be landed on English soil, and the demonstrations of their determination were so vigorous that the Cabinet and Parliament were forced to take notice.

These trade unionists realized that the success of their efforts meant continued privations and sacrifices on their part, and yet it was with this knowledge that they served notice upon the English government that the introduction of contraband cotton would mean a strike on the part of all of the cotton operatives. These trade unionists, in their hour of self-sacrifice, were guided by something which we are justified in accepting as the highest ideal.

Shortly after I became a member of my local union, and before I had any adequate grasp of the industrial problems or understanding of trade unionism, it was my good fortune to come into contact with some of the veterans in our movement. One Sunday I went to Boston to secure advice from John P. O'Sullivan, who for many years, in addition to his newspaper work, was actively engaged in organizing and assisting the trade union movement in Massachusetts. Shortly after reaching his home, another man entered and I was introduced to Frank K. Foster, one of the most brilliant laymen which the American trade union movement has produced, and while we were talking another rap came at the door, and in a moment I had the pleasure of meeting Henry Abrahams who, for twenty-five years, has been secretary of the local Cigarmakers' Union and who has served the Central Labor Union of Boston as its secretary for seventeen years.

It seemed strange to me to find an Irishman and a Roman Catholic, a descendant of the old New England stock and a Protestant and a man whose ancestors had heard the thunders of Mt. Sinai, greet each other as though they were members of an affectionate family and then devote an afternoon to the discussion of ways and means for assisting the wage-earners of Massachusetts to secure legislation which would prevent injustice being done to workers, male and female, union and non-union alike.

I was able to understand that something which these men had acquired as trade unionists enabled them to feel that there was no division between them because of ancestry, race, religion or political affiliations, but that in their interest in each other and their interest in all those who toil they were as one. The public gathers its limited knowledge of trade unionism mostly from newspaper items and editorial comment, and particularly when some acute industrial dispute is in progress. The public knows but little, if anything, about the every-day activities which are carried on year by year.

Practically all trade unions have a regular sick committee, who not only visit sick members and attend to their wants, but who, in addition, see that proper comforts and necessities are provided.

The newspapers seldom tell of the beds endowed by trade unions in the hospitals of our cities. The public is unaware of the enormous sums of money contributed voluntarily by trade unions locally for the purpose of assisting the distressed of their own and other organizations.

What is inferred by these activities? Is it not that the trade union movement has brotherhood as one of its ideals—brotherhood so broad and so deep that it obliterates the lines of nationality, race, creed, politics? Brotherhood which extends, without reservation, to all of the toilers of the world?

The time at my disposal will not allow me to present the unbounded material evidence which indicates the ideal of brotherhood which we hold, but I can not pass without calling your attention to some evidences with which you should be made familiar.

For many years the members of the Typographical Union have maintained a home in Colorado Springs, where, without cost, members afflicted with tuberculosis and those who have lost their health are given all of the care which skilled physicians can supply, a home where comfort and kindness surrounds each inmate like sunshine falling upon the flowers.

The Pressmen's Union maintains a similar institution in Rogersville, Tenn. Many of our unions pay out enormous sums each year in sick and death benefits to their members.

The International Molders' Union, up to December 31 of last year, had paid out \$4,128,377.70 to its members in sick, death and disability benefits.

Last year the unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor paid out to their members \$3,482,842.59 in death, sick, traveling and unemployment

benefits, and this sum does not take into account the enormous amounts paid out to members from local sources.

Trade unionism in America is international. The boundary line to the north does not exist so far as our unions are concerned. The delegates from Canada and the United States meet as members of but one organization. They have but one trade union constitution, they have but one set of officers, there is but one treasury into which their dues are placed, and so far as their activities as trade unionists are concerned, they are the members of but one organization.

But in a still broader sense the American trade union movement is international, for it is a part of the International Federation of Labor, which includes the trade union organizations of America and of Europe. These conditions serve to indicate the progress which the trade unionists of the world have made toward their ideal of brotherhood.

If we would examine the constitutions of those trade unions representing skilled or semi-skilled trades, we would find them containing provisions for the education of apprentices. Some, we would discover, provide that the apprentice after a certain period must be placed at work between two journeymen, so that he can have their assistance in qualifying himself as a craftsman. We would find other organizations providing for the technical education of apprentices. Again we would discover local efforts, such as that in Chicago, through which some of the unions, the carpenters for instance, have made special provisions for the education of their members, as well as the apprentices, in the theory and practice of their craft.

Some of the international unions, finding that no other satisfactory medium existed, have established schools of their own, one of the best known being that organized by the Typographical Union, where, through a correspondence course, the members are taught the theory and the art of their important craft.

The Pressmen's Unions has established a school at its headquarters, and members from all over the United States and Canada go to Rogersville, Tenn., to increase their proficiency and acquire a broader knowledge of their trade.

During the winter months, many local unions hold courses of lectures for the education of their members.

For reasons which it is unnecessary to discuss at this time, the trade union movement of the United States has never been given the degree of credit to which it is entitled for the prominent, if not predominant, part which it played in the establishing of our public school system.

But a few years ago the wage-earner's child was practically a charity pupil, the opportunities for an adequate education being confined almost exclusively to the children of the well-to-do.

The history of trade unionism in this country from 1825 to 1885 is filled with evidence that the trade unions of that period were carrying on a tremendous campaign, which had for its purpose the establishing of a public school system, supported and directed by the State, which would guarantee to every wage-earner's child the opportunity of at least an elementary education.

At a mass-meeting of trade unionists held in New York City in December, 1829, the following resolution was adopted:

"Resolved, That next to life and liberty, we consider education the greatest blessing bestowed upon mankind."

"Resolved, That the public funds should be appropriated, to a reasonable extent, for the purpose of education upon a regular system that shall insure the opportunity to every individual of obtaining a competent education before he should have arrived at the age of maturity."

In September of the same year, a mass-meeting of trade unionists in Philadelphia adopted resolutions of like import, the preamble of which read:

"No system of education which a free man can accept has yet been established for the poor, whilst thousands of dollars of public money have been appropriated for colleges and academies for the rich."

At a trade union meeting held in Boston in 1830 it was resolved:

"That the establishment of a liberal system of education obtainable by all should be among the first efforts of every law-giver who desires the continuance of our national independence."

And shortly afterwards the general trade union movement of Cincinnati issued an appeal to the West stating that their efforts would be directed toward elevating the condition of the workmen and obtaining a national system of education.

The trade unions have been foremost in working for the passage of legislation establishing free text books, and one of the prime motives which has led to extended trade union activities for the prevention of child labor has been the intention that the children of the poor should secure at least an elementary education before facing the problems of life.

But the trade unions go farther than this in their efforts to educate their members. Their literature includes the discussion of civic problems, civic duties and responsibilities. Their publications abound with articles dealing with economics, sociology and industrial history. Continual efforts are made to teach every member those things connected with self-government which are essential to every citizen.

No group in the community has realized more keenly that education is essential to their welfare and that without education their ideals are unattainable. Trade unionists look upon education in its broadest sense as one of the cornerstones upon which the structure of trade unionism is erected.

Education, then, in its truest and broadest sense, is one of the ideals of Labor, and as an evidence that this is so today, let me quote a few sentences from the report of the Committee on Labor which was unanimously adopted at the convention of the American Federation of Labor held in San Francisco last year.

"Education," the committee reported, "is necessarily the foundation of any republic. Education is necessary to the perpetuity of any republic; it is, therefore, the essential duty of this Republic to guarantee every child an adequate education. Everybody believes in education. Differences arise not upon its value, but upon the question of what a true education should consist of, who should be educated, how far and by what methods they should be educated, and what persons should conduct such education."

"Education should include whatever we do for ourselves and whatever is done for us by others, and for the express purpose of bringing us nearer to the perfection of our nature. In its largest conception, education should comprehend even the indirect effects produced on character and on the human faculties, by things by which the direct purposes are different, by law, by forms of government, by industrial arts, and by modes of social, economic and civic life. Education should comprehend the culture which each generation gives to those who are to be its successors, in order to best qualify them for at least keeping up and, if possible, for raising the improvement of mankind which has been attained."

It may appear to those who have not seen beneath the surface, that the trade union ideal is more and more, higher and higher wages, shorter and shorter hours of labor, more control in industry and additional rules and regulations affecting labor. It has even been held that the wage-earner in securing an advance in wages is in effect accomplishing what the stockholder secures when dividends are increased.

But what we must understand if we are to grasp the trade union ideals is the trade union's viewpoint. What is it that the trade unionist aims to secure through an advance in wages? What do shorter hours of labor mean to him, and why does he struggle so persistently and courageously to secure both?

What are wages? What do they mean to the wage-earner?

They are not so many dollars and so many cents—they are the man's life, they are the factor which determines what measure of decency, of comfort and of opportunity the wage-earner will have in this life. The amount of these wages determines whether the home shall be a back room in a crowded tenement district or whether it will be a separate dwelling, surrounded by pure air and sunshine and conducive to health and comfort.

These dollars and cents which come in the weekly pay envelope determine the quality and the quantity of the food which shall enter the home. They determine the comforts and conveniences and opportunities which the wage-earner's family can enjoy. They determine the wage-earner's standard of living. They determine whether his body shall be nourished and vigorous or whether it shall be underfed and weakened.

These wages determine still more—they determine the physical, the mental, and the moral standards of the overwhelming majority in all of our industrial centers.

If there is anything in the realm of human activities which has been uncontestedly demonstrated by scientific investigation during recent years it is that wages profoundly influence physical and mental standards.

The vital statistics of both Europe and America demonstrate that the home environment and the quality of the food largely determine the physical and mental characteristics of the toilers and determine also the degree of vitality with which their children enter into this world.

A recent federal investigation in Montclair, New Jersey, indicated that the average infant mortality was 84 per thousand, but in the homes where the lower paid workers lived the rate was 130 per thousand, that where the income to the family was \$12 per week the death rate was twice as large as

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