

Human Rights and The Labor Movement

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The early history of the trade union movement in Canada reveals that working men banded together to protect what they felt were their rights as individuals and as human beings. Two of these rights could be defined as decent wages and decent working conditions. But underlying these two aims was a more fundamental one — the desire of every man to be treated with dignity and respect.

Too often, the owners and managers of the shops and the factories, of the big and the little industries, had treated the wage earners as commodities or mere numbers on a time card. The managers felt that the working man had as much right to protest about his wages or working conditions as the bale of cotton or steel bar lying in the plant had a right to protest against the uses to which it was put.

This idea, still prevalent perhaps in management circles, is being fought by over a million organized Canadian workers. This battle for workers' rights could not be fought successfully unless there was co-operation and mutual respect for one another in the ranks of labor itself. Collective bargaining could never be successfully carried on with one religious or racial group in a local union hating another group; or with one group in the local determined that another group should not share in the benefits of the collective agreement.

The proposition that labor's gains should be made available to all — regardless of race, creed, religion or national origin — is an accepted part of trade union philosophy. It is the result of long and bitter experience on the part of workers, that unless they can get together and present a solid front to management they will never obtain the goals for which they are fighting. And unless we can treat each other equally and with respect in our own unions, regardless of racial, religious, or ethnic differences, we will be tremendously handicapped in our efforts to get management to treat us the same way.

FAIR PRACTICES LEGISLATION

Labor has been in the forefront on the legislative field also to ensure everyone a fair job opportunity without fear of racial or religious discrimination. Provincial statutes have been passed in Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Manitoba to prevent employers from arbitrarily barring any person from a job because of that person's race, creed, colour, nationality, ancestry, or place of origin. The Federal Government has adopted a Fair Employment Practices Act (in addition to an Order-in-Council and a section in the Unemployment Insurance Act) which forbids discrimination in matters relating to employment or employment referral policies.

The Ontario Legislature, under pressure by labor and other civil rights groups in the community, passed a Fair Accommodation Practices Act this year, which says in part . . . "No person shall deny to any person or class of persons the accommodation, services, or facilities available in any place to which the public is customarily admitted because of race, creed, colour, nationality, ancestry or place of origin of such person or class of persons."

Such legislative gains for labor and the community are wasted unless we are ready to police these Acts and the government departments responsible for enforcing them. Trade unions must educate their own members as to the

their own local unions channels for action on complaints of discrimination.

LABOR'S FAIR PRACTICES PROGRAM

In addition the labor movement must maintain pressure on the responsible government departments for prompt handling of legitimate complaints; for showing offenders that the law means what it says; and for the inauguration of programs of public information and education on Fair Practices. For truly effective action in this field the present aim of the labor movement should be to strive for the formation of separate Fair Practices Bureaus within the present framework of Provincial and Federal Departments of Labor. These bureaus, staffed by competent personnel, and having the assistance of special citizen advisory councils, would do much to eliminate some of the loopholes and delays in the present legislation.

Such measures, however, do not mean that the battle for human dignity and brotherhood has been won. We still have to learn, often the hard way, that our fellowmen in the shop and in the community want to be treated with understanding and respect.

FIGHT SCAPE-GOAT THEORIES

In times of unemployment and insecurity there is a tendency to pick out certain groups in the community as scape-goats and blame these groups for the moment's economic difficulties. Such scape-goat theories are seized upon and exploited by racial and religious hate-peddlers who would like nothing better than to split and weaken trade-union organization in Canada. The scape-goat theory should be exposed whenever encountered and the dangers that it presents to a united and democratic union movement should be made evident.

ECONOMICS AND BROTHERHOOD

The fight for human dignity, as well as the battle for a decent standard of living and good working conditions goes on side by side. We, in the labor movement, have the job of educating our own members, especially new ones, as well as the community around us to the principle of brotherhood which is the very basis of our movement. This responsibility is translated into action through standing committees against discrimination of our national labor congresses, through local Joint Labor Committees and what is most important, through the examples set by hundreds and thousands of trade unionists as individuals in their countless shops and local committees.

These activities are an indispensable part of the union's economic program. As long as people can be exploited by an employer because they belong to certain racial or religious groups, labor's rights won at the bargaining table are under attack. As long as there is tension or animosity between different religious or ethnic groups in a union, labor's bargaining power is made that much weaker. As long as there exists the practice among employers, governments, or unions, of treating certain groups in our land as second-class citizens, the very existence of our free society is at stake — and along with it the existence of our free trade union movement.

In order to build a better and more democratic society and a better, stronger, and more democratic trade union movement in Canada it is imperative that we practise the principle of brotherhood in our unions and in our com-