

How to Interest the Workers

Uncertainty on the part of both employer and worker regarding the length of time they will be associated exerts a baneful influence—A plan for taking workers into the business

By B. K. SANDWELL

The New Republic recently contained a very able article on The Psychology of the Worker, written by Mr. I. Tannenbaum, a brilliant young sociological student who has himself suffered the sentence of a year's imprisonment for certain activities in connection with a New Jersey strike. We mention this latter fact not to discredit Mr. Tannenbaum, for in the present state of liberty in the United States it is by no means sure that a jail sentence for strike activities may not be a first-class testimonial, but to indicate his qualifications for discussing his subject. The article deals almost wholly with the psychological consequence of that condition of uncertainty as to the future (in regard to wages, continuity of employment, etc.) and that inability to acquire a substantial stake in the community which are unfortunately characteristics of the great majority of industrial workers at the present time. It is difficult for those who are not industrial workers to appreciate how radically these two conditions alter the entire mentality of those affected by them, preventing them from sharing in most of the feelings and ideals of those differently situated.

The Uncertainty of Employment.

It is these two conditions which differentiate the industrial worker not only from the property-holding class but also from the clerical workers and the lower professions. Clerks, bookkeepers, teachers, newspaper writers, are in other respects far more closely allied to the industrial worker class than to the propertied class; but they do not suffer nearly as much, on this continent at least, from uncertainty of employment. Newspaper staffs, school staffs, bank staffs, are never cut down 50 per cent, or 99 per cent, at a week's notice, as a factory payroll may be whenever the manager decides that costs will be lower next spring than they are this autumn. And it is because this uncertainty is at the very root of the class-consciousness of the class-conscious worker that so little of that class-consciousness is to be found among the workers just named, as indeed among the higher grades of factory workers whose employment is fairly regular.

Results of the Present System.

There can be no doubt that this uncertainty of employment, with its attendant worry and uneasiness, is not productive of a healthy state of mind. It serves a useful purpose, akin to that of the slave-driver's whip, in making a man mind his job pretty carefully when he has one; but it is questionable whether the deterioration which it causes in other directions is not too high a price to pay for this compulsory keenness—which is rather a keenness to dodge detection in non-productivity than a keenness for productivity. Until a few years ago economic thinkers devoted all their attention to the advantages resulting from competition among a hundred laborers for ninety-nine jobs, and overlooked entirely the disadvantages—which are not confined to the one jobless individual at the margin, but extend to all those who are haunted by the fear that they may be pushed out to the margin themselves.

Healthy State of Mind is to Desire Ownership.

The men to whom the right of property, reasonably limited and restricted, offers no attractions whatever is a dangerous man to a state whose whole structure is based upon property rights—to a civilization whose whole functioning is moti-

vated by them. Yet there are an immense number of workmen in the United States, and quite a few even in Canada, for whom the right of holding property possesses no allurements, because they never expect to hold any and do not believe they would derive any advantage from it if they did. Among such men it is not hard to spread the idea that property is nothing but a right to tyrannise over one's fellowmen. It is only the man who has experienced the innocent and healthy pleasure of possessing (and sharing with those whom he loves) some piece of property of his own acquiring, who can possibly have a true appreciation of the value of the institution of property as a cement of the human fabric. And the man who possesses neither property, nor the expectation of getting it, nor the single remaining economic safeguard of the individual in these modern times, namely a special skill in the performing of a service which is in reasonably constant demand, is a man to whom the existing economic system offers no apparent advantages, and who is likely to lend an open ear to proposals to overturn it without too carefully weighing the results of its destruction.

Uncertain Employment not all the Fault of Employers.

It is extremely unfortunate that industrial employment has been allowed to become so uncertain, and that this uncertainty has thereby been made so prominent a factor in the worker's psychology. Critics are apt to lay all the blame on the side of the employers. This may not be altogether just. The employers have had to conform the terms of their employment contract to the tastes and demands of the workers, and the workers, resentful as they are of the lack of certainty, have not made or offered any great sacrifices to obtain it. It is by no means universally true that men are employed by the week because the employers want to be able to fire them at any weekend. In an immense number of industries the employer would be only too glad to engage his hands by the year, if only he were sure that they would continue on the job and continue keen on the job throughout that period. Some of them would: the percentage would vary in different plants and different industries. But in the average plant a very considerable number would not. If debarred by a contract from leaving (and unwilling to break that contract, which is not always the case) they would feel resentful of what they would regard as a shackle on their freedom, and would "grouse" and sulk; or would take advantage of the fact that they could not be immediately fired, and grow careless and slack. The plain fact is that the prevalence of the terminable-at-any-minute employment contract is not by any means the result solely of the greed and tyranny of the employer, but is also caused by the desire of the employee to be free to move off in search of better wages or a better home or a mere change of air at the first opportunity.

Agreement that Would be too Binding.

If there is to be a new form of labor contract, from which the element of certainty about the future is to be largely eliminated, there will have to be concessions on both sides and not merely by the employers. The employer cannot undertake to guarantee continuous employment, and yet remain liable to the loss of large numbers of his workers overnight. The guarantee must be

mutual. This does not of course mean that any individual is to be absolutely bound to work on every working day for twelve months whether he is physically fit for it or not, or whether his wife be dying at home or his daughter married at the church; such a contract would never be accepted by any employee (a fact which rather disposes of the idea that the employee is a miserable slave at the disposal of his employers), and would never be enforced by the courts if it were. Probably it does not mean any change in the legal force of the contract at all, but merely a change in the spirit in which it is regarded by the two parties; for the contract in the case of clerical employees and professional workers is seldom a written one, and the security of both parties rests far more upon custom and the sense of mutual obligation than on any law.

In the industrial labor contract, both parties derive certain seeming advantages from the immediate terminability of the employment relation. The employer can add to his payroll whenever the demand for his products is high, without incurring the least obligation to look after the extra workers, or indeed any workers, when trade is slack. The worker can take up a job today with the pleasing confidence that if he doesn't like it, or feels tired, or sees what may be a better one, he can chuck it to-morrow with no further trouble than that of staying away. These seeming advantages are largely illusory, and would be vastly offset, for most employers and most employees, by the advantages of steady operation of plant and steady employment of workers. But neither side can retain the advantages of both systems. If the employee is to have continuity of employment, with all the immense economic and moral advantages which it comports, he must give up the one advantage of non-continuity—the right to flit away whenever he likes. If the employer is to have the right to call upon his workers to go on working whether they happen to feel just like it or not, he must undertake to keep them working whether he feels like it or not.

There need be no grave difficulty about this. It is, after all, merely a matter of wise management on the part of employers and of wise signing-on on the part of workers. But a recognition of the mutual community of interests between the two parties is essential. A certain amount of elasticity, a certain come-and-go between minimum and maximum output, is probably necessary in every industry according to its particular character; but there are other ways of securing this than by hiring men when times are busy and firing men when times are slow. The elasticity could easily be provided by the permanent staff of workers, if they were given a sufficient of the resultant profits to convince them that it was worth their while; and I am certain that that share would not diminish the profits more than does the cost of breaking in the newly hired hands when expansion of output is procured by expansion of payroll.

An Experimental Agreement.

It would be interesting to draw up an experimental employment-agreement between a factory, run by broadminded and up-to-date managers, and a labor group consisting of broadminded and up-to-date workers, whose class-consciousness did not take the form of the belief that all that capital gets is stolen from labor. Such an agreement might provide for a certain minimum output to be maintained at all times, sufficient to afford a living wage to each of the permanent members of the labor group; with provision for the expansion of that minimum to any point up to a certain maximum, the additional labor to be performed by the members of the group working more than the minimum time, and remunerated on a graduated scale of overtime plus a share of the resultant profits such share to be marked out by certain definite principle. No contracts for manufact-

(Continued on Page 18)