

A Minimum Wage

(Contributed by The Associated Federal Employees of Ottawa Federal Union No. 66.)

There are several viewpoints from which the question of a minimum wage may be considered. The very meaning of the expression is not settled; frequently a discussion brings out the fact that two disputants are using the term in entirely different senses.

Considering it first from the employer's standpoint, the term minimum wage means either:

1. The smallest wage or payment for which he can secure necessary help, having no regard to the welfare or comfort of that help. Employees are worked to the limit of endurance, must use up what reserves of vitality they originally possessed to keep up, and are then thrown aside for new hands. Such a system, frequently called the sweat-shop, can only be used to its full advantage when the work is so simple as to require little or no training, when labor supply is more than ample, and where such labor supply is of the lowest type — *i.e.*, unskilled or unspecialized, reduced by bitter poverty to fighting for the merest existence, frequently of foreign origin, and, above all, unorganized. Among such, the minimum wage is found at its lowest ebb, in short a modern form of slavery worse than that of former days.

2. In occupations requiring a certain amount of training, where labor supply is to a certain extent limited, employers, in order to reduce their labor turnover and keep up the quality and quantity of their product, are forced to accept a somewhat higher definition of the minimum wage. Any sensible teamster knows that his horses must have a certain minimum of feed and attention if their strength for work is to be kept up to standard; this is their minimum wage. As applied to human labor, this conception of the term may be defined as the least amount which will serve to keep up the productive power of the employee.

At first glance it might appear that an employer of the second class had a somewhat fairer view of the relation of the wage earner to his employer, but such is not the case. The relation between the two classes of

employer is a very close one, and there is a constant shifting from one to the other. Should manufacturing methods be so simplified as to permit of comparatively untrained help being employed, or should available labor supply become greater, wage rates tend to fall below the level indicated in Class 2. Under reversed circumstances they tend to rise until an employer in Class 1 is forced to enter Class 2.

The feature common to the two is that low cost of production at the expense of the employee is the object aimed at. Decency or humanity does not enter into the problem. In Class 1 the employee is of infinitely less value than the machine; in the second, of no greater value.

The third class of employer comprises those who recognize, in varying degree, the fact that their employees are human like themselves, and equally deserving of something more than bare subsistence. They also recognize that a wage permitting of

1. The obtaining of the necessities of life;
2. A fair share of its comforts;
3. Education of his children to be useful citizens;
4. Provision for illness, accident, and old age, is well repaid in actual cash value by the greater willingness and loyalty, keener concentration on work, and better health of the employees. This, then, is the third and the only true minimum wage.

It is seldom indeed that an employer of this class slips back into either of the two previously mentioned. As a matter of fact, the tendency is in the other direction. Provision for the employee of something above the minimum return for his efforts has been found to give such good results in higher production and, vastly more important, in the feeling of fellowship and friendliness between employer and employee, that the impulse to go farther in improvement of working conditions is almost irresistible.

Whether, had it not been for trades unionism, the third class of employer would ever have existed except in isolated instances, would make a good subject for debate. It must be agreed, however, that had it not been for the

trades union, with its organized and directed power and efforts, the worker would be much farther from the goal than he is today. The trades union, in some form, has been a necessity since men entered into the relation of employer and employee; it must continue to be a necessity until the basis of such relation is perfected upon a plan of justice and humanity to all concerned. When such a plan is realized in fact, then, and then only, may it be said that the trades union has fulfilled its purpose.

Governments of civilized countries have recognized their responsibility in this matter by legislation controlled employment conditions, by establishing Departments of Labor, by keeping records of living costs, by establishing Boards of Conciliation and the like. The voice of labor is being heard more and more clearly in Houses of Parliament. The Government of Canada has not been behind in this matter. Only a few days ago our Prime Minister addressed a convention of Labor delegates at Windsor; our Minister of Labor has declared that the trades unions have been the one great bulwark against the spread of radicalism, of the worst type, throughout Canada.

One would naturally expect, therefore, that our Government, if not already a model employer, would be making every effort to become so, that full advantage would have been taken of the recent reclassification to do away with the salary scales of past years, so preposterous under present conditions; that the greatest care would have been taken to see that the Government, as an employer, led the van of progress in humane treatment of its employees, confident that its efforts would be repaid the country a thousand-fold in the greater devotion of public servants. It is to be regretted that this great opportunity has so far been neglected.

We do not intend, in this brief article, to confuse the main issue by including in this discussion salaries in the higher grades of the service. A deputy minister receives a higher salary than a messenger because his training, duties and responsibilities