

Kalmen Kaplansky

The Workers Lead the Way with No. 111

■ The International Labour Organization (ILO) is proud of being 26 years older than the United Nations itself, having been created in 1919 under the Treaty of Versailles. The ILO is sometimes accused of using its senior status to undermine the co-ordinating authority of the infant Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and being primarily responsible for the loose and overlapping relationships among the specialized agencies. "It's not true," says Kalmen Kaplansky, whose connections with the ILO go back to 1957. "What happened was that, when ECOSOC was formed, the Soviet Union wanted to eliminate the ILO; they said there was no need for it any more.

"The ILO in 1919 was conceived by many as a challenge to the Russian Revolution. It was the challenge of the Western states, the Versailles Treaty powers. For they promised the working people during the First World War, 'We will satisfy all social needs through tripartism—through co-operation between government, management and workers—rather than through revolution.' The Soviet Union joined the ILO later, but they never forgot...."

This is living history to Kaplansky, who left Poland at the age of 17. He arrived alone in Montreal in December 1929, after the Depression had begun; "so I couldn't get a job and couldn't go to school. I went to night school for three weeks; this was the total of my education in Canada. When I arrived I knew about 10 words in English, because a friend had said, 'The basics are, you have to know "to do" and "to have," then you can add a string of other words and you can speak.' I stayed with a relative for six months, and he was mad when I left. But it was the best thing I did; I realized that, if I remained there, I would have been part of the ghetto mentality, the ghetto environment." By reading in libraries, he soon had self-confidence in English. "In 1932 I had the audacity to deliver a series of lectures in English on the French Revolution, based on Kropotkin's classic."

He got a break in 1932 when a friend offered him an apprenticeship as a typesetter. He is still a member of the International Typographical Union. He made his way in the union movement, as a delegate of the Montreal Trades and Labour Council to national conferences, and also in politics, as a CCF (Co-operative Commonwealth Federation) candidate and member of its provincial and national executives. After war service, he was asked by the Jewish Labour Committee to develop a program in human relations "and that's how I got into the human rights field, for it was anti-discrimination work. We developed the approach that there is no dichotomy between law and education, that the two are complementary and one without the other is not sufficient. If you add social action involving the public ... and campaigns against discrimination, you are fulfilling an educational purpose and, once the law is in place, you publicize incidents of discrimination. It was a North American invention, and I did this for 10 years."

When the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) was formed by merger in 1956, Kaplansky became its international affairs director.

"People said, 'How can he do it? He's never been to school in Canada.' (I had matriculated in Poland). Claude Jodoin said, 'Don't worry, I'll send you to the international school in Geneva for three months, and you'll learn all you need to know.' They never did, of course.