

TEN DAYS SPECIAL ISSUE

System at fault, Bishops say

by James MacLean

The Roman Catholic bishops of Atlantic Canada have issued a statement condemning the economic system that dominates the region.

In a major document on regional disparity, the bishops affirm that our "human and natural resources (people, lumber, fish, food, minerals) have been rendered cheap exportable factors in the service of a centralized North American capitalism."

The region, they say, has become "a resource and manpower hinterland, a paradise for the lending agency, and a dumping ground for the purveyors of gaudy commodities."

Using a language that is perhaps surprising coming from an established institution like the Catholic hierarchy, the bishops' statement denounces the social and economic effects of this form of capitalism. It refers to the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a small group of people, the inequitable distribution of social goods, and the lack of control that people have over their lives.

Professor John Williams of Memorial University, a specialist in Canadian social ethics, says "this document represents a new departure in the social attitude of the Catholic hierarchy in our region. All too often in the past the Church tended to ignore or even reinforce unjust social structures."

In an interview with *Atlantic Issues*, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of St. John's also referred to the change in attitude. "In the past we tended to see the Gospel as addressing only individual circumstances," Archbishop Alphonsus Penney said. "But since the Second Vatican Council we have come to realize that this was a one-sided emphasis. When I was younger, religion was seen as a relation 'between God and me,' but we now understand that it is also 'between God and us.'"

System irrational

The bishops' statement, entitled *To Establish a Kingdom of Justice*, criticizes the irrationality of the North American economic system, based as it is on the pursuit of profit. "Continuous growth in sales and the unnecessary diversification of product lines, the unwarranted introduction of labour substitution devices and the continuous reduction of the work process to mindless repetitive tasks, . . . the global quest for cheaper raw materials and low-cost adaptable labour, are dictated by demand for profit rather than by the basic needs of producers and consumers."

Under this system, the statement says, the products of human labour "accrue in alarming disproportion to a minority of corporations and individuals."

According to the bishops, this type of capitalism has reduced Atlantic Canada to a "peripheral status" within the North American economy. The document's analysis of the regional economy bears a striking resemblance to the analysis that Latin American bishops have made of theirs.

The Atlantic bishops see our society as being dominated by outside business interests and a small domestic elite that benefits from collaboration with them. Consequently the mass of people are alienated from the economic process and must tolerate high unemployment, low incomes, inadequate housing, the uprooting of families, and pessimism about the future.

Nor do the bishops view the role of government in a favourable light. "Into the breach left by a faltering economic system," they say, "step ever more paternalistic governments delivering ill-conceived programmes which fail to diminish regional disparity and often aggravate it."

As examples, they cite government handouts to corporations "whose profits rest on low-cost labour," an education system that has failed to stimulate reflection on our social problems, and the "sugar-filled recipes" of government-sponsored lotteries.

Call for change

However negative its portrait of the prevailing social system, the bishops' statement is also a call for basic change. "Our goal is to promote fundamental changes," they declare at

the beginning, later they say, "The Christian community should see a challenge and a possibility to develop a socio-economic order based on equity and love."

The bishops do not prescribe any blueprint for such an order, "because programmes and measures must be developed by the people themselves."



'How little we really own, Tom, when you consider all there is to own.'

The bishops ask Catholic communities in the region to seek out and identify with the people who are most victimized by the economic system, to bring these people into the decision-making bodies of the Church, to take

In Atlantic

History of unions

Most Canadians believe that in our society unions are necessary.

A recent poll conducted for Weekend Magazine reported that 58 per cent of Canadians think unions play an essential part in our society. In Atlantic Canada this same survey found that 68 per cent of the people believe unions are necessary for the protection of workers in our society.

We hear a lot of criticism of unions these days, but it seems likely unions will continue to be important social institutions in the coming years.

How did unions come to win a more or less accepted place in our society? And why do people in Atlantic Canada seem to support the need for unions so strongly?

By definition unions are organizations formed by workers in order to strengthen their position in dealing with employers. As individuals, workers have little economic power and little control over the hours, pay, conditions, rules—even the purposes—associated with their job. By joining unions workers have attempted to deal on more equal terms with their employers.

A short look at the history and present condition of organized labour in Atlantic Canada can help answer these questions.

In Atlantic Canada unions have existed since the beginning of the 19th century, but it is only very recently that unions have won legal rights and an accepted position in our society.

In the first half of the 19th century unions were fragile, short-lived and often illegal. In 1816, for instance, the Nova Scotia government enacted one of the first anti-union laws in Canada. This law prohibited workers from bargaining for better wages and hours

and prison terms were provided as a penalty. As late as 1868 a group of coal miners at Port Morien were arrested and forced to disband the union they were organizing.

Despite this atmosphere of hostility, some successful unions were also organized in these years. In the 1850s, for instance, the unions of skilled workers and longshoremen in Saint John made that city one of the strongholds of organized labour in British North America.

In 1872 Sir John A. MacDonald's Trade Union Act reflected changing attitudes towards unions. The new law provided that unions must be regarded as legal organizations and not conspiracies.

One important new union of this period was created by Springhill coal miners during a strike against wage reductions in the summer of 1879. The Provincial Workmen's Association (PWA) soon spread to the other coalfields. At its peak the PWA also

public stands on specific issues, and to associate themselves with groups struggling against the effects of regional disparity.

Mary Boyd, Director of Social Action for the Roman Catholic diocese of Charlottetown, told *Atlantic Issues*: "The bishops understand very well that disparity is a serious problem. This statement was not just rubber-stamped by the bishops," she said. "It was two years in preparation."

Boyd explained that the impetus for the statement came from Bishop Spence of Charlottetown and Bishop Burke of Yarmouth. Each diocese was asked to prepare a background paper in the Spring of 1977, and in August of that year the Charlottetown background paper was accepted as the official one.

A working group in Halifax (Frank Allen, Tom Mabee, and Mike Marentette) then prepared a draft of the statement. It was circulated to the priests' senates in the region for comments, and then presented to the bishops in January 1978. In the revision process the bishops deliberated on the text of the document at four separate meetings during an 18-month period. The final version was approved and released in June 1979.

"The bishops' statement on regional disparity is a pastoral statement to the people, not a brief for government and other officials," Mary Boyd said. "The main thrust in promoting the bishops' statement is going to come this winter. The big challenge is to get parishes discussing it at the small group level."

included lodges of shoemakers, railwaymen and steelworkers.

But in the early 20th century unions still occupied a weak position in society. Unions were legal but had few rights under the law. There was no law to require employers to recognize a union chosen by their workers, and there was no law to prevent employers from dismissing workers who joined a union.

The decline of the PWA illustrated these weaknesses. The organization proved too weak to bargain effectively with the powerful coal and steel companies. When the majority of the miners voted to join the United Mine Workers of America (UMW) in 1908, the coal companies ignored this decision and began to fire UMW supporters. The result was the famous series of strikes for recognition of the UMW in 1909-1911. During these strikes the government assisted the companies by sending armed forces to the coalfields.

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