

There are, of course, things to be said against the yearly negotiation of agreements. It has been argued that annual bargaining means the development annually of the tensions that accompany bargaining, and that every renegotiation of an agreement provides an opportunity for conflict. Some people believe that agreements extending over a longer period are conducive to a more settled atmosphere and, in fact, there have recently been a number of important experiments with long-term contracts. Since the Second World War however, annual renegotiation has been the prevailing practice.

Proponents of annual renegotiation stress the merits of the flexibility I have already mentioned. Almost by definition, a collective agreement is a compromise, a settlement that gives complete satisfaction to neither party. Such a settlement, they say, is reached more easily if the period of its binding application is relatively short.

In one sense, the annual renegotiation of agreements reflects a special interest in the general economic outlook. Because they have come to expect a steadily rising standard of living, Canadian workers tend naturally to prefer bargaining procedures that leave room for frequent improvements in conditions of employment. Management representatives understand this line of thought, which is in accord with the generally optimistic attitude towards the economic future of our country, while naturally maintaining, as they do, the right to make such reservations as to its application as circumstances may demand.

This brings me to the fourth significant feature of the Canadian system--namely a general tendency to rely on collective bargaining as the primary means of achieving economic objectives rather than on legislation or government action. I do not mean to suggest here, of course, that the part legislation plays in the process is unimportant. Labour and management in Canada, and for that matter the general public, look to legislation to provide basic minimum economic and protective standards, and to provide assistance to the collective bargaining process.

So much is left, however, to the results of bargaining, that those who enter into negotiations carry a very heavy responsibility. High stakes make for a serious game; and, in Canada, there is every indication that labour and management representatives bargain soberly with clear knowledge that their discussions constitute a vital part of our economic system.

So far I have been talking about industrial relations in terms of four important features of the Canadian system: bargaining at the plant level; administration of the contract; annual renegotiation of agreements; and the emphasis on collective bargaining rather than state action as a means of determining conditions of employment. I could mention other features but these are distinguishing characteristics that I thought might be of particular interest to this Conference.

Let me now say a word or two about the experience over the years we have had with industrial relations in Canada. It has not been possible--nor is it altogether desirable--to avoid conflict; last year, for example, the