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The Building of Ships and Labor Disturbances

Disastrous delay in Shipbuilding Programme—Necessity to nurture industry to perpetuate it.—Complete understanding with labor essential.

Once more the vital war industry in British Columbia is tied up by a strike. On Thursday, May 23rd, the men in the shipyards building Imperial Munitions Board ships laid down their tools and at present writing are still idle. With the exception of plant of Messrs J. Coughlan & Sons whose activities have been very much curtailed by a disastrous fire, not a shipyard in the Province is building ships.

Of supreme importance is the construction of ship tonnage. To feed famished Europe ships must carry food from North America, South America, Australia and India. For the bringing of men and equipment from the United States to France ships in enormous numbers must engage. If food, men and equipment cannot be brought to France, Britain and Italy, the Hun must conquer and his civilization be imposed on an unwilling world. We are glad to note that the seriousness of the ship situation is fully appreciated in the allied countries of Europe, the United States and Eastern Canada, but in British Columbia shipbuilding is carried on for the purpose of providing a perpetual quarrel between employer and employee and having only the building of ships to ply in war trade as an incident. The shipbuilders and the men, simply cannot come to an agreement for the prosecution of this vital work.

Under the most favourable labor conditions the position of shipbuilding in British Columbia ports is in a precarious condition, a condition in which the future not only is not assured but is very uncertain and can be continued after the war only under conditions of extremely efficient management, most careful financing and expert and favourable buying of equipment and supplies. This applies to the building of steel ships only with greater force than to the building of wooden ships and both are involved in a struggle for survival after the present war demands have been filled.

In the face of this condition strike after strike occurs and during nearly two years of building an agreement be-

tween the Board and the men is just as far away as ever. There is one hopeful sign in the situation and that is the anxiety to strike for increased wages on the part of the workmen is gradually becoming satiated; so that today under strike conditions all the men are well satisfied with the existing wage scale with the exception of a small minority who are continually dissatisfied and would yet be dissatisfied with a signed agreement of their own making. It is a pity that in labor circles the preponderance of the members

of one particular union can call a strike affecting every other union that is engaged in the same class of work. Such is the occasion for the present strike. It seems that a few members of the carpenter's union, making a demand for an increased wage out of proportion to wages paid in allied lines, were able to gather a sufficient coterie together to out-vote their fellow members who were well satisfied with the present wage scale; hence the calling out not only of the carpenters but the metal trades group and all other unions connected with shipbuilding.

Notwithstanding all that labor has attained in the way of increased wage and favorable working conditions, under the pressing demands for war work it must be confessed that the trouble lies not altogether at the door of the labor unions. The management of shipyards and the Imperial Munitions Board for British Columbia are in large measure to blame. Not only do they not know what is involved in the building of ships but they blunder more in the manage-

ment of men. They refuse to meet their men in a candid discussion of the problems and issues involved. They display practically no ability in the handling of men and seem to possess little knowledge of human nature and what is worse, they seem to be unwilling to learn.

What is not understood and which is at the heart of the problem is that if capital, meaning in this case the shipyard owner or manager, is making large profits out of the necessities of the Government to supply tonnage labor has the right to share in these profits. Until he is granted that principle he will continue to use the only weapon

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