

Royal Commission on Industrial Relations

Majority Report Recommends Eight Hour Day, Minimum Wage, Industrial Councils, and Proportional Representation — State Insurance Against Unemployment Also Suggested—Minority Report Is Less Radical

THE report of the Royal Commission on Industrial Relations which has been holding sittings in Canada during the past few weeks was presented to parliament on July 1st, by the premier. The report is not unanimous, however.

The majority report, which is signed by Judge Mathers, Carl Riordon, Chas. H. Harrison, Tom Moore and John W. Bruce, recommends legislation for a maximum work day of eight hours, with weekly rest of not less than twenty-four hours, minimum wages, especially for women, girls, and unskilled labor; also government action to relieve unemployment through public works, to help the building of workers' homes to restore fullest liberty of speech and press, and to establish a bureau for promoting industrial councils to improve relations between employers and workers. Immediate enquiry by experts is suggested, with a view to early legislation as to the system of proportional representation in parliamentary elections; also state insurance against unemployment, sickness, invalidity and old age. Other general recommendations are: collective bargaining, payment of a living wage, right of workers to organize, recognition of unions, steps towards establishment of joint plant and industrial councils; extension of opportunity to reach highest educational institutions; also that the commission's findings be put into effect in all work controlled by government where the principles of democratic management can be applied; that the report and evidence be printed for general distribution; and that if the Dominion parliament has not power to legislate as proposed by the commission, a conference of premiers and other representatives of provincial governments, also representative labor men and employers, be called in Ottawa in order to reach unanimity on such points and also to unify present provincial and Dominion legislation bearing on relations between employers and employees.

The commission was appointed chiefly to consider and make suggestions for securing permanent improvement in relations between employers and employees. It was deemed necessary to investigate the prevailing unrest, which they ascribed largely to upheavals in Europe and general disturbances, owing to the war, giving rise to a desire on part of workers generally to reach quickly an objective which ordinarily would require a process of evolution covering a long period. Many employers, the report states, agree with the workers as to the need for an ultimate change in the basis of industry, but they do not agree with workers as to methods. Workers also differ among themselves, one group desiring complete possession of the machinery of production, and the full product of their toil, another group simply asking larger purchasing power of their wages, while between these the more moderate, and as the commission, believe, the majority, would welcome co-operation and industrial peace until gradually a system would be evolved by which workers would receive a more adequate share of what their labor produces. The commission holds that as we can see only a little way ahead, all changes should be made step by step, each step being based on experience as it is gained, but the general direction should be determined towards health, happiness and prosperity of workers and the service of the community.

Workers are diligently studying economic questions, and while some of the literature they read may be unsound, or lack of mental training of some workers may prevent their thorough understanding of it, the commissioners are convinced that the good sense and sound judgment of the majority enable them to discriminate, and hence extreme doctrines have been accepted only by a minority.

Unrest was found to be greatest where there was most unemployment, which was found in several large urban centres, though there is little in smaller towns and rural

districts, in spite of the number of discharged soldiers and munition workers released. In some manufacturing centres such as Kitchener, Ontario, there was an actual scarcity of labor. Returned soldiers have to a large extent been reabsorbed into civil life, generally in their old positions. The scarcity of farm help is very pronounced.

Conditions of Labor

At one point the commission learned that the local government employment officer has 1,500 calls from farms, but though 1,000 men on his list were seeking work, none were willing to go on the land, because of the isolation, hard and long hours of work, seasonal employment, bringing wages insufficient to tide over the slack season. Many farmers claim that they cannot compete with the high wages paid by manufacturers. The commissioners believe that if the unemployed of the cities who understand farming methods could be induced to go to the farms, the existing unemployed problem would be largely solved. The commission recommends state social insurance for those unable to work through lack of opportunity, sickness, invalidity or old age.

Owing to unsettled conditions, the commission found everywhere a great reluctance to risk unemployed capital in new enterprises or the expansion of existing ones. The high cost of living was assigned as one, if not the chief, cause of labor unrest, which would largely disappear if living expenses more nearly balanced wages. At present any advance in wages is invariably met by increases in price of prime necessities of life which many people believe is due to profiteering, chiefly through cold storage plants, which intercept food supplies. They also blame the present expensive system of distribution, and declare there are too many middlemen. The commission notes with pleasure that this matter is being investigated by a special committee of parliament.

The commission approves of the labor declaration in the peace treaty, that "labor should not be regarded merely as a commodity or as an article of commerce." If this basic principle, the report continues, were freely and frankly acknowledged by employers, and acted on in good faith, it would go far to improve their relations with employees. Without any extraordinary upheaval, policies may be adopted which will ensure to the worker a fairer reward for his toil and a living wage, and insure him against want during temporary enforced idleness, from any cause, and by boards in Manitoba, British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Quebec should be extended to all the provinces, and should cover unskilled labor as well as women and girls.

At the great majority of places visited the commission found a demand by workers for a shorter working day, based on their desires for more leisure and energy to devote to the things of life other than work. The most common request was for an eight-hour day with the Saturday half-holiday, where already established, and its further extension wherever possible, thus making the 44-hour week. General approval by employers in regard to the shorter working day was coupled with statements of difficulties such as the necessity for using all possible daylight in such industries as farming, fishing, logging, etc., which are sub-vantage of a section of an industry working shorter hours, yet competing with other sections within Canada working longer hours; also the fear that Canadian industry with its small home market, might be unable to meet competition in foreign markets if conditions in Canada are advanced too far ahead of countries manufacturing similar products.

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