

New Labor Situation in Canada

And the Call of the Time for Constructive Citizenship

By R. M. MacIver

HERE is a social ferment working today in every country which has been shocked by the war out of its accustomed ways. The evidence of this already abounds on every side, though men's minds, absorbed by the war, are slow to understand their meaning. Perhaps in no direction is it clearer than in the new attitude and the new strength of organized labor. In Great Britain, in particular, organized labor has made remarkable progress during the war, and is now preparing to challenge the older political parties in a country-wide political struggle, while it has issued a number of manifestoes, notably "Labor and the New Social Order," remarkable for their vision and their practical statesmanship. But this movement is by no means confined to Britain, and in this article I wish to discuss the very important labor developments which are now taking place in Canada. In the new alignment of social and political forces which will succeed the war, Canadian labor is preparing to take a place it has never attained before.

The first sign of this is the remarkable growth of organized labor in Canada during the past year. In the earlier years of the war, trade unionism in Canada suffered badly. Its membership dropped from 175,799 in 1913 to 145,343 at the close of 1915. 1916 showed a small improvement, the membership rising to 160,407.

The New Ferment

But 1917 revealed unmistakably the working of the new ferment. In that year, according to the official figures contained in the report on Labor Organization in Canada, just issued by the Department of Labor, at Ottawa, the number of local trade union branches increased by 132, and the number of unionists by 44,223, making a total membership at the close of the year of 204,620. This is an unprecedented increase, and raises the total far above any previously recorded. Nearly every form of organized labor contributed to the increase, though it was most marked among railway employees, machinists, boiler-makers, metal workers, and mine workers. Doubtless the pressure of the "high cost of living" did much to stimulate the increase, though I do not think it is anything like a complete explanation of this movement. What makes it the more remarkable is that it occurred at a time when a great many workers were passing into the army out of the industrial field. Nor can it in any way be attributed to the influx of women into the places they vacated. The trade union membership of industrial women is still quite negligible.

A second sign of the times is the recrudescence of labor disputes in Canada. During 1915 and 1916 these sank to a minimum. 1915 showed the smallest number of disputes ever recorded in Canada since the Department of Labor began to collect information on the subject. The number in 1916 was also very low. But in the last year and a half, in spite of the special necessities of war production and the strong partisan appeals to avoid recourse to strikes, the number of disputes has been growing fearfully. Within the last few months even the great apathetic "public" has been roused to the changing temper of labor. There has been serious disturbance all over the country, notably in the coal mines, steel works, and ship-building yards of Nova Scotia, in the street railway service of Toronto, in the civic service of Winnipeg, in the shipbuilding yards of the Pacific Coast, and in the Dominion postal service. The call for statesmanship to face, and if possible to remove the causes of this great and growing trouble, the call, it may be, for the "new social order" on which industrial harmony can be built is already loud.

The third evidence of the new labor situation has perhaps the greatest significance for the future, and is of special interest to other organized movements such as that of the grain growers. It

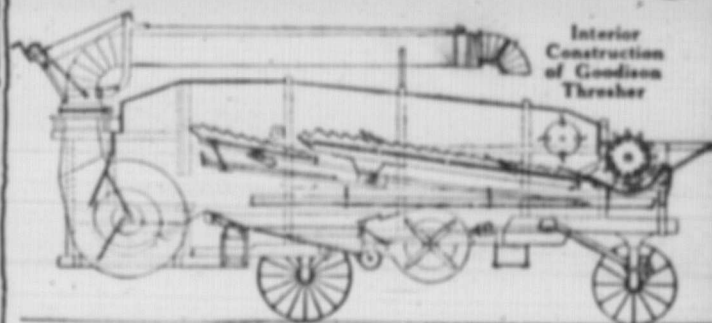
is the recent formation of a Canadian labor party with a definite organization and program. This originated in Ontario, in July, 1917, as a provincial party. Later the Trades and Labor Congress approved of the establishment of a Canadian Labor Party, and by November, 1917, the Quebec and Ontario branches of the party were organized. It sent a number of candidates into the election campaign, fought under such strange conditions last December, but only two of its 53 nominees were successful. This was not surprising nor, in view of the circumstances, even discouraging to its organizers.

There are some features of special importance in this new political development. In the first place, it brings labor in Canada nearer to the position of labor in Great Britain. The British Labor Party is definitely committed to political action, and it has recently widened its range by admitting to its membership all workers "by hand and brain." The Labor Party of Canada has done the same, and it has adopted the general constructive policy enunciated in the British labor manifestoes, a little emasculated to suit the uncertainties of the Canadian situation. In approaching thus closer to British labor the Canadian party has, in spite of its international union organization, moved further away from the American attitude. That attitude, under the influence of conservative leaders like Gompers, is one of abstention from direct political activity. It was noticeable that Gompers, in his recent visit to Canada, bitterly disappointed Canadian labor by his depreciation of party action. The labor press of Canada is unanimous in favor of an independent labor party, and there seems little doubt that in this way it is taking the most effective step it can to make itself more influential in the national life. The Labor Party of Canada does not reject alliance with other bodies working in the same direction, and it will be interesting to see how far it will ally itself with these. On this continent there is a traditional association between the labor and the agricultural interest, and already, in Ontario, the new party has entered into relations with the United Farmers. If this association develops, it might assume a great importance. Another feature of interest is the possible relation between the party and the returned soldiers. It may be significant that in Toronto the party is now running a returned soldier as candidate against Dr. Coyle, the newly appointed Minister of Education in Ontario.

Constructive Citizenship Needed

In Canada, as elsewhere, the forces are being generated which will determine, as much as the war itself, the direction of the coming civilization. This is why we should try to understand and estimate all such beginnings as these. The war has stimulated social and economic forces of the most opposite character, some fraught with the gravest danger for the coming era, others bearing the promise of a better time. The finest opportunity for constructive citizenship ever offered to the world is at hand. The end of the war will shift to another sphere the struggle between the forces of reaction and of progress. There is much to stimulate hope, the breaking of the chains of tradition that bind men to evil lest their good be also disturbed, the widening of the idea of service and responsibility so that the nation has been revealed as a single great inter-dependency, and the relation of nations as a vital concern of the members each; the weakening of men, in the sight of the old order was destroyed, to the possibility and the urgency of building anew; and even the sense of overwhelming war indebtedness which challenges us, by its insistence, to consider anew the whole problem of wealth and poverty. But there is also much ground for fear: The habit of despotism, almost uncontrolled power which governments acquire in war may persist perniciously in peace. The fermentation

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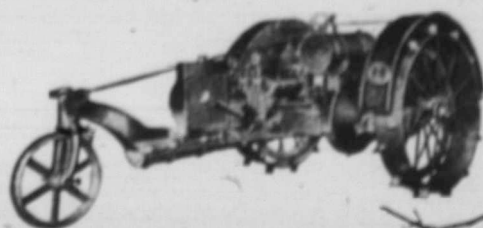
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