

Focus on the work ethic

By Jenny Pearson

The "work ethic" is a frequent topic of discussion among Canadians today, faced with the interesting and disturbing fact that in certain parts of their country unemployment and unfilled jobs appear to go hand in hand.

What has happened, ask the Blimps, to the rugged dedication of the pioneers, the readiness to put shoulders to the wheel, which went into building the nation? Have Canadians turned lazy or — worse still — work shy?

The situation is serious enough to be under investigation by the Department of Manpower and Immigration. For several months now they have been questioning employers as well as unemployed people in an attempt to get at the true facts and, ultimately, to bring about changes that will help solve the double problem.

Robert Andras, the Minister for Manpower, has himself admitted that "there is something awfully wrong when month after month we see these high unemployment figures yet employers across the country report they can't find the workers they need."

Officials of his ministry are out to discover what, exactly, is wrong: whether there is indeed an unwillingness on the part of unemployed people to take work, or whether there is something wrong with the type of work and working conditions that are being offered to them.

Understandably, the ministry people are uncomfortable about allegations frequently made by critics of the system that generous unemployment pay and welfare benefits are discouraging people from going to work. Mr. Andras concedes that there may be some truth in this. But he believes it is "more true" that many of the jobs being offered are just not acceptable.

His officials are therefore making a study of the neglected jobs with a view to getting the conditions of work improved, in the hope that this will bring the workers in. Employers have been asked to take "a good, hard look" at their unfilled jobs and ask themselves what is wrong. Is it the pay? Is it the hours? Is it something to do with prestige?

While the Manpower officials go around questioning and advising, there are those who shake their heads and say that in one respect at least Mr. Andras is missing the point. Though his campaign could result in employment in some fields being made more attractive, there are jobs which people don't want no-how. Few, for

example, are prepared to opt for the lonely life of a forester. It is even being suggested that such jobs should be put in a special category and made available to "guest workers" — immigrants on short visiting permits who might well leap at a chance to make money out of work which Canadians themselves won't do.

It is an interesting measure of today's social values that everyone in the situation seems to recognize the right of unemployed people to stay away from work on the dole. No one is looking around for ways to force or trick them into jobs they don't want to do. No, it is the work conditions that must change.

Unquestionably Canada's social security has a lot to do with the situation. When it was chop trees or starve, people chopped trees. That's obvious enough and two economics professors at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, recently underlined the obvious in a study of workers' attitudes since higher unemployment insurance and other benefits were introduced in 1971. They concluded that higher benefits had indeed made workers more choosy about job conditions. (see *Canada Today*, March/April (1974) P.14).

Workers want satisfaction

The Government have no plans to go back on the social security programme and cut down unemployment benefits, nor would anyone expect them to do so. The solution, therefore, lies partly with the workers themselves and even more with employers taking the trouble to make their jobs attractive.

It may possibly lie in a much deeper and more searching approach to the whole problem than has hitherto been attempted. It may not be enough to talk about questions of pay and the niceness or nastiness of the boss. Other recent studies have hinted at fundamental changes of attitude which, if they could be understood and tapped, might just conceivably show the way to a broader solution.

These studies become really interesting when questions are asked not only about the behaviour of workers but about the thinking behind it. One becomes aware of a work force of thinking individuals — not trooping in, as perhaps their fathers and grandfathers did, to do a mindless stint for their daily bread, but requiring of their work some kind of meaning and satisfaction or else.

Young people especially seem to be demanding individual satisfaction from their work, often giving that priority over other considerations. At a 1973 conference of the Canadian Institute of Public Affairs on the shores of Lake Couchiching, north of Toronto, delegates concluded after six days' examination of "the present day meaning of work" that the work ethic was alive and well in Canada.

Their diagnosis of the trouble, as reported in *The Financial Post*, was that "workers today, especially the younger ones, are taking their work more seriously than ever before, not less. What is dying, if anything, is the 'success ethic'."

An American delegate, Dr. Harold H. Sheppard, spoke of increasing demands by workers at all skill levels, white-collar and blue-collar, for more autonomy, variety and responsibility in their jobs.

He referred to a nationwide survey in the United States, organized by the Department of Labour between 1969 and 1971. It found that 69 per cent of the younger group (under 30) felt it was very important that a job provide opportunity to develop an individual's abilities: yet only 50 per cent of their jobs met this requirement, in contrast with 89 per cent of workers aged 45 and over.

The "split," Dr. Sheppard said, stemmed from the fact that the young workers were distinctly more anti-authority than the older age groups. This was confirmed by studies of young people in colleges and management.

The survey found:

- increasing resistance to hierarchical authoritarian chains of command.

- increasing proportions of the work force that see work as more than a source of adequate income and security.

- a marked shift in the meaning of "success."

(Here Dr. Sheppard pointed to the results of a recent study by the American Management Association of nearly 3,000 managers, which reported, "For all age groups, only a small percentage of managers now define success as increasingly represented by greater material reward and/or career advancement.")

- decreasing numbers of people willing to do society's lousy jobs, even with the offer of higher pay. (A recent University of Michigan survey showed that North American workers rank "good pay" a distant fifth behind "interesting work,"