

# Present Industrial Problems

## A Short History of Trade Unionism—The Effect of the War on Employees and their Employers—Canada's Present Labor Problems and the Possible Solutions.

By FRANCIS HANKIN.

The hearty reception by the Social Workers' federation of Montreal of Mr. Francis Hankin's Lecture on the "Historical Background of the Present Industrial Situation", encourages its publication as a contribution to public discussion of what is perhaps the most urgent question with which the country is confronted to-day. The return from war to peace conditions is being brought about with difficulty, owing largely to sectional and class thinking and to lack of knowledge. The study of industrial problems and an unselfish national outlook should therefore be encouraged if we are to build up a future worthy of the sacrifices which have been made during the war. This address is also published in pamphlet form by the Social Workers' Federation of Montreal, 70 Jeanne Mance Street.

Mr. Francis Hankin is a Montreal business man, whose name is familiar to many as Extension Lecturer on the Industrial Problems of Reconstruction at McGill University, as well as Secretary of the Canadian National Reconstruction Groups.

The outbreak of industrial discontent and the efforts to bring about social reorganization which followed upon the conclusion of the war may be thought by some to arise solely from the disturbances that accompany war itself, whereas, whilst these disturbances are no doubt contributory causes the origin of this post war activity must be sought in the early days of our industrial era which began with the introduction of machinery about 1760. The period of 1760 to 1832 is known as the Industrial Revolution, for machinery, operated by steam and water power, displaced the simple instruments employed by the handicraftsman and revolutionized not only industry itself but also the social life of the worker.

Before steam was harnessed to machinery, the implements of which the handicraftsman made use were, to the eyes of the twentieth century, of extreme simplicity and of negligible cost. The requisites for production being only acquired skill and uncouth implements, the workers of those days could, with comparative ease, be either employers or employed.

No insurmountable barrier faced either the apprentice or the journeyman denying permanently to him the opportunity of achieving the freedom and independence of a master craftsman. Hence, there did not obtain in the days of handicraft that clear cleavage between employer and employed which is the feature of our day. Apprentice, journeyman, and master-craftsman were of the same social status; their interests were, on the whole, guarded by one body, the Guild; and further protection to the workers was afforded by Statutes which limited the number of apprentices employed by one master.

The use of machinery harnessed to steam or water power changed this condition, for the cost was so great that few of the handicraftsmen could expect, even by much saving, to be able to purchase these new-found aids to production. Hence, with the use of machinery, began the divorce between the ownership of the means of production and the work of production itself.

Another result soon became apparent. The new

machines could be operated by women and children, and the little skill that was necessary could be acquired by them after a short training. Women and children were numerous, and therefore cheap; consequently wages fell rapidly, and when the craftsmen could no longer compete with the new machine industries, he also had to accept the prevailing low wages so that, in the end, the labor of whole families was necessary in order to provide even the meagre budget required for a minimum subsistence.

The operatives sought means with which to combat this powerful force which could so depreciate their standard of life, and endeavored to use the counter-vailing force of combination amongst themselves. The employers soon saw the menace of such a policy, and met it by allying themselves with the powerful land-owners who were in control of the political machinery. They secured the passing of the Combination Laws in 1799 and 1800 which prohibited the association together of workpeople for the purpose of securing an increase in their wages. It is stated that these Combination Laws were of such severity that they really proclaimed a doctrine of serf labor and low wages.

The laws were supposed to prohibit also the association of employers but whilst thousands of workpeople were sent to prison for contravening them, there is no record of a single conviction of an employer.

The conditions brought about by the prohibition of attempts on the part of workpeople to force from their employers an improvement in their wages are a blot upon the record of the people of Great Britain for justice and liberty.

Wages fell to a low ebb; those of the Bolton weavers were at one period only about five shillings per week. Young children were forced into the mill in order that their scanty earnings might supplement the family income. What was really serf child labor was secured by the workhouses of the large cities where, in many parishes, relief to families was refused unless the children were sent to work. They were eagerly sought by the factories and were often sent there in cartloads to be bound to an apprenticeship beginning at seven years of age and continuing until the age of twenty-one.

The new factory and mill industries drew the population from the countryside into the towns where some form of housing accommodation had to be provided.hovels were rapidly erected, often with entire disregard of conditions that health demanded. One case is recorded where a row of houses was built upon an open sewer because there was thus avoided the necessity of digging for cellars. Not a single house in this street escaped the cholera.

The hours of labor were limited merely by the endurance of the workers. The children's workday varied from 14 to 18 hours. In 1819, the Cotton Factories Regulation Act limited the age to nine years and the hours to 13½ per day for children from nine to sixteen years of age.

The effect of these conditions upon education was disastrous. Dean Alford wrote in 1839 "Prussia is before us; Switzerland is before us; France is before us. There is no record of any people on earth so highly civilised so abounding in arts and comforts and so grossly, generally ignorant as the English."

Describing the workers, men and women, girls and boys who appeared as witnesses before a Select Committee appointed to examine into Factory Children's Labor, the authors of the "Town Laborer" write: "Stunted, diseased, deformed, degraded, each with the tale of his wronged life, they pass across the stage, a living picture of man's cruelty to man, a pitiless indictment of those rulers who, in their days of unabated power, had abandoned the weak to the rapacity of the strong".

In spite of the rigorous penalties of the Combination Laws, subterranean association by the workers was carried on in order to secure their repeal. Their leaders also began to attempt to secure their objects through Parliamentary channels. Francis Place, a successful master tailor who had been a journeyman, lent his energies to the cause and, with the assistance of J. R. McCulloch Hume, secured in 1824 with remarkable cleverness, the repeal of the obnoxious Combination Laws "almost without the notice of the members within or the newspapers without."

The repeal of these laws, while not marking the beginning of the Trade Union movement for organisation of craftsmen had existed long before 1824, removed largely, though not entirely, the disabilities of the workers in respect or the right of association together to improve their circumstances. There followed soon afterwards a perfect mania for organisation. Unions were formed for shop assistants, chimneysweeps, ploughmen, shearmen, bonnet makers and workers in all classes of industry. An endeavour was also made by Robert Owen in 1834 to form what in reality was a forerunner of the One Big Union. It was called the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union; there were numerous lodges and its members came from all classes of trades. Within a few weeks, the membership appears to have reached half a million including tens of thousands of farm laborers and women.

The workers, however, had not that experience which could teach them how to use their power effectively and with judgment. Mr. Sidney Webb writes of them: "In council they were idealists, humanitarians, socialists, moralists; in battle, they were still the struggling, half emancipated serfs of 1825 armed with the rude weapon of the strike and the boycott. They dissipated their strength over wide areas, and did not recover their advantage until they concentrated their efforts on narrower and more manageable aims."

Thus ended what has been termed the Revolutionary period of Trades Unionism."

Between 1843 and 1860, the Unions limited their efforts to the building up of stable organisations and to resisting the more important of the legal and industrial oppressions under which they suffered. They began to see the necessity of engaging an adequate and expert staff, particularly as many of them specialised in insurance and friendly benefits.

The next important phase was that in which the Unions took an active interest in political matters. Between 1858 and 1867 there were formed in the leading industrial centres, permanent Trades Councils consisting of representatives of the various unions. In 1861, the London Trades Council was formed, but, at first, it was composed mainly of the representatives of the smaller societies. In 1864, however, the larger Societies sent their representatives among whom were five Trade Union secretaries of marked ability, namely William Allan, Robert Applegarth, Daniel Guile, Edwin Coulson and George Odger. This London Trades Council henceforward acted as a Parliamentary Committee and enlisted the effective assistance of brilliant middle class sympathisers such as Frederick Harrison and Professor Beesley. In 1866, they worked enthusiastically in favor of the Reform Bill which became law in 1867 and enfranchised the workmen in the Boroughs.