

International Trade Unionism

IN CANADA, as in most industrialized countries, trade unionism has a day-to-day impact on the lives of most people which gives rise to a general awareness of unionism as a domestic institution. There is, however, less consciousness of trade unionism in the international field. To the public at large, international unionism presents a vague and apparently insignificant picture.

Yet international unionism is important. It plays a noteworthy part in international affairs and affects or may be affected by events throughout the world. Canadians have a special interest in international unionism. Few countries have had as long a relationship with international unionism as Canada.

Eighty Per Cent Membership

Canadians have been members of and participants in international unions for over a hundred years. Belonging to and taking part in the affairs of international unions is now the rule rather than the exception for organized workers in Canada. Out of a total of more than a million and a quarter Canadian trade unionists, some eighty per cent belong to unions whose headquarters are outside Canada.

Canadian interest in international unions began in the days of the free border between Canada and the United States. Those were the days when passage to and from the two countries was a casual affair, unimpeded by rigid immigration inspection, or by the need for passports or border-crossing cards. Much of the continent was of a frontier nature: labour was extremely mobile and the "tramp" worker was common. A worker might be in Canada one day and a week later in the United States. Workers were constantly on the move and were not too conscious of the name of the country in which they worked. The whole continent was their workshop. With industry and, consequently, unionism having an earlier start in the United States than in Canada, United States or international unionism became the instrument to be used by migrant United States and Canadian workers to improve wages, working conditions and living standards generally.

"Tramp" miners, printers, construction and building workers and railroad "boomers" carried their union cards and unions with them into all parts of the continent. International unionism thus took root in Canada.

As the years passed, the industrial base was widened and expanded. This development brought about a decline in the mobility of labour, and workers settled down. Their unions evolved into permanent institutions. With the growth of permanent communities in the two countries, branches of United States unions were formed all over Canada. Belonging to the same union became the accepted thing for both Canadian and United States workers.

The flow of United States capital into Canada added an inducement for Canadian workers to become and remain members of international unions. Often working for the same employer as United States workers, Canadians concluded that their economic position would be strengthened if they also