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ARE UNIONS CHANGING?

They're tending toward cooperation not coercion, for the strike is a blunt weapon that hits labor and management alike.

by FREDERICK LEWIS ALLEN

THE LABOR UNION plays today an anomalous part. By its very nature it is divisive, required to be anti-management, anti-company, anti-industry, a sort of His Majesty's Opposition that will never, like an opposition political party, be required—or be able—to take office and show that it can do better.

The union leader is in a curious spot. Unable, himself, to put into practice any of the changes for which he campaigns, he is compelled by his very position to make the most of grievances, to whip up mistrust, and in some cases to keep alive the threat of a strike which may paralyze not only the company or industry against which he is campaigning but many another which has had no part in the dispute. When inflation threatens, the position he occupies almost forces him to keep on pushing for increases which will add to the inflationary pressure; if he doesn't, he may lose his job to someone who shouts more loudly and consecutively than he. For he is cast in the role of a crusader, and if the time comes when the need is not for rebellion but for reconcilia-

Frederick Lewis Allen is editor-in-chief of Harper's Magazine. This article is excerpted from his latest book, "The Big Change," Harper & Bros., N. Y. Copyright 1952 by Frederick Lewis Allen.

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tion and reconstruction, he is in danger of losing status. Furthermore, his search for able subordinates is complicated by the tendency of management to promote some of the ablest potential candidates into ineligibility. He is required almost inevitably to be an underminer of that loyalty to the company which offers one of the deepest satisfactions of corporate work. And the one really strong weapon in his arsenal, the strike, is an exceedingly blunt one, which hits a great many people at whom it is not aimed.

THAT THE RIGHT to strike remains one of the fundamental liberties in an industrial society one may agree. One may agree, too, that unions and their leaders have played and are playing a vital part in the raising of the general standard of living; and that, by and large, the codes of practice which they have written into the statute books of industry (always excepting the featherbedding codes imposed on certain industries) have done and are doing much to make for decent conditions of life which would not otherwise be attained. It seems undeniable, furthermore, that some method of providing an uncringing representation of the rank and file of corporate employees in the contest over the disposition of corporate funds is essential to our general well-being. Yet it remains an anomaly of our industrial life that this deep division of loyalties is built into it in a day when the trend toward a general American standard of living is otherwise such a unifying force.

Under these circumstances it is noteworthy that we have so many ably managed and responsible unions as we have today, and that patience and good will are so often to be found on both sides of the table in management-labor relations. Strikes, like airline accidents, make news; reasonable agreements, like the hundreds of thousands of airline flights that arrive safely, do not. In the reports of the British productivity teams there has been frequent mention of the extent to which managements and unions have been found to be working together toward the improvement of manufacturing and administrative methods. One reason would seem to be that common-sense people recognize that they work better, and are happier, when their loyalties are not in head-on conflict, but overlap.

THAT ALREADY the strike itself is tending to change its character in response to this recognition has been manifest in recent years. Though some strikes have been bitter and violent, these have been the exception; and the contrast of the rest with the strikes of earlier

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years has been very sharp. Mary Heaton Vorse, who as a reporter deeply sympathetic with labor observed the steel strikes of 1919 and 1937 and then that of 1949 at close range, visiting some of the same mill towns and attending strikers' meetings, was astonished at what she saw in 1949: the absence of violent goon squads; the sympathy of the townspeople generally with the strikers, who seemed to them not a mob of red revolutionaries, as they had seemed in 1919, and even in 1937, but a collection of respectable fellow citizens to whom it was reasonable to extend financial credit in the emergency; the action of some company officials in serving coffee to the pickets; the manifest interest of almost everybody in maintaining order. The contrast with the old days has been even cleaner-cut in some other recent strikes, during which there has been noted in the local community an air of friendly excitement something like that at the close of a lively political campaign, or at the time of a big football match; in such communities the strike has been regarded not as class warfare but as a sort of game played between two teams, one of which has numbers on its side while the other has authority and money.

Meanwhile there are further signs, here and there, of a further evolution toward a lessening of the anomaly, toward a conceivable new order of things. Recent contracts tying wages to productivity are one sign. Such innovations as the Scanlon system of rewards, which again emphasizes productivity, are another. The widening group of companies which have introduced profit-sharing — some of them, like Lincoln Electric, with astonishing results — constitute still another. The intense preoccupation of many company officials with the art of communicating with employees and the public, and the studies which are constantly being made of the satisfactions and dissatisfactions of the workers' lot, are likewise encouraging. It may be that one of the changes we shall see during the next generation will be a transformation of the very nature of the union from an instrument of counter-loyalty and coercion into a less emotionally divisive though equally effective part of the organizational machinery of American business. For as it exists today it is becoming something of an anachronism in the more enlightened industries. ■

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