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The American Labor Movement To-day*

By RALPH H. GABRIEL†

In this troubled post-war age the English-speaking peoples continue to maintain that world importance that characterized their position in the nineteenth century. A common language binds them. There are other ties. When an Australian, a New Zealander, a Canadian, an American and an Englishman exchange observations, unspoken assumptions and understandings born of centuries of tradition underlie their conversation: all four peoples practice industrialism; all have had long and successful experience with political democracy; a labor movement, expressing itself in unions and in political activity is common to all. But there are important differences. In New Zealand and Australia, labor, organized in political parties, has won control and assumed responsibility for government. In Britain also the Crown follows the advice of labor ministers. The people of the United States have watched these developments with the keenest interest, but they have followed a different road. The pattern in Canada resembles that of the United States more than that of Britain. A presentation of some of the more important trends in American labor may shed some light on the reason why the labor movement in the United States has up to the present followed a different course from that which the workers have chosen in New Zealand, Australia and Britain.

The labor movement is both old and new in the United States. Some of the most powerful American craft unions, such as those in the printing trade and among the railway workers, date from the 1850's and 1860's. The American Federation of Labor (A.F.L.), almost wholly made up at first of craft unions, emerged before the opening of the twentieth century. Speaking for the skilled workman, it dominated the American labor scene until the beginning of the 1930's. The rise of great industries, such as steel and automobile manufacturing, so changed the economic landscape that in many areas the craft union, with its limited objectives, became an instru-

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ment less effective for achieving the general advance of the workers than the industry-wide industrial union which includes the unskilled with the skilled. As a result a movement to create a large number of industrial unions began within the A.F.L. in the 1930's. Running into opposition in the Federation, arising partly from philosophy and partly from a conflict of jurisdiction between the newer and some of the older unions, the leaders of the new movement for the industrial type of union fought vigorously for their ideas and policy. They lost. Then they organized a rival federation outside the A.F.L., the Congress of Industrial Organizations (C.I.O.), with the coal miners, steel and the automobile workers, the most important unions.

Congress, in the 1930's, gave legal support to the principle of collective bargaining and the Supreme Court sustained the legislation. The war years brought both opportunity and responsibility to labor. At the end of the conflict American workers could look with pride on their record; they had more than met the challenge to produce. As the war ended their leaders looked forward to difficult times. But labor brought to the reconversion period power such as workers had never before possessed in American history.

When the representatives of the Japanese Emperor signed the documents of surrender on the deck of the U.S.S. *Missouri*, organized labor in the United States had amassed a membership approaching sixteen million workers. The A.F.L. and the C.I.O. each claimed approximately seven millions while perhaps a million and three-quarters were not identified with either of the two great national federations.

Conscious of its power, labor in 1945 determined that its leaders should have a voice, not only as to the contents of the pay envelope, but with respect to the formulation of national and even international policies. During the war, the United Automobile, Aircraft and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, a C.I.O. union, formulated and published a programme of action for the period following victory. Most American labor was in a mood on V.J. Day to agree with one of the opening paragraphs of this publication: "However, there is one fundamental prerequisite to the formulation and execution of any democratic post-war plan. Organized labor must be given full representation and responsibility at all levels. The operation of such a plan would not be possible in a democracy without such participation, not only by labor but also by agriculture and by other affected

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groups." The demands were phrased in general terms. The addition of labor attaches to American Embassies throughout the world, a step taken before the U.A.W. pronouncement, suggested one concrete result of the importance of labor in American life. But it was not clear in 1945, nor is it yet clear in 1946, just how far or in what manner organized labor will attempt to use its new power. The thinking of the leaders of the movement is directed into three channels: the use of collective bargaining to improve the economic position of the worker; the strengthening of the unions and of the labor movement through education and the distribution of information; and the consideration of the advisability of active participation by organized labor as such in political activity.

American labor begins its thinking with collective bargaining. Federal legislation not only guarantees the right to collective bargaining but established in the 1930's an administrative agency, the National Labor Relations Board, to make sure that the right shall be enforced. On complaint the Board can determine what are unfair labor practices on the part of the employer and can compel management to abandon activities so designated. The Board hears arguments from employers that specified unions seeking to bargain collectively do not represent majorities among the workers in the particular companies. In such a case the Board, if in doubt, orders an election among the workmen in question to determine what union they wish to represent them in the negotiations. The Board can compel labor and management to meet and negotiate; it cannot compel them to agree. In the event of a deadlock the Federal Government can attempt to settle the dispute by the use of conciliators. But the strike and the lockout remain the ultimate weapons of the contending parties. The foregoing statement is a simplified picture of the situation in peace-time. During the war the Federal Government exercised as part of the emergency powers of war-time, very important temporary controls over both labor and management.

The extent of the use of collective bargaining suggests its importance in the thinking of American labor. In 1944, sixty-five per cent. of all those employed in manufacturing industries worked under collective bargaining agreements. But in aluminium fabrication, automobile and aeroplane manufacture, men's clothing, non-ferrous metal smelting and refining, ship building and basic steel, over 90 per cent. were under agreement. Among coal miners, long-

shoremen and workers on railroads, more than 95 per cent. worked under collective bargaining agreements. Construction and maritime workers, bus and street railway employees and those engaged in the trucking and telegraph industries numbered more than 80 per cent. under agreement.

Naturally the unions choose those whom they consider their ablest and strongest men to represent them in negotiations so important. Employers follow varying policies depending on the nature of the companies. Both sides come to the council table armed with impressive accumulations of factual data. The agreements are often complicated. They may cover wages, hours, vacations, leaves of absence, seniority, working rules and practices, working conditions, health and safety. Union status is frequently one of the most important provisions. To prepare data for the drawing of a contract containing so many items, the union depends on a research organization of its own creation. It uses also economic and social data accumulated by the States and the central government. The necessity to prepare for such negotiations requires of the unions long and careful investigation, and the development of leadership capable of using effectively the information gathered.

In the dispute between the Chrysler Corporation and its employees, organized in the U.A.W., which occurred in the winter of 1945-46, the union demanded that the company open its books. The union argued that the making of such factual information available was essential to the negotiations to determine, among other things, the ability of the company to pay the wage increase asked for. The company successfully resisted the demand. It maintained that to open the books would put the company at a disadvantage in a highly competitive industry, and insisted that to accede to the proposal would give to the union an important place in management. The episode illustrates a tendency on the part of organized labor in America to attempt to encroach on the prerogatives of management. The demand to open the books also illustrates a policy of C.I.O. to bring about the distribution as wages of a large percentage of corporate earnings rather than to have them returned to the industry to further expansion, if that seems undesirable. C.I.O. leaders maintain that high consumer purchasing power is the chief guarantee of economic stability, and that such purchasing power can only be achieved by raising the wages of unskilled labor.

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The second of the trends in American labor has to do with increasing the usefulness and effectiveness of the individual worker as a member of the organized labor movement. It is based on the principle that knowledge is power. Many of the larger unions have created research and educational departments for the gathering and dissemination of information. Educational activities within the unions had become important before the war. There are vocational programmes for training apprentices and in some cases improving the skills of older workers. These enterprises often operate in collaboration with vocational schools or programmes supported in part by federal funds. A few unions maintain classes in which the worker-student seeks a better understanding of economics and labor problems. Training courses for union organizers, stewards and other officers are designed to improve the proficiency of such officials in the conduct of union affairs. Outstanding for its educational work, the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, one of the larger unions, had more than 17,000 students enrolled in 1943 in some 700 classes in its various union centres. In addition, the I.L.G.W.U. conducted a number of institutes, popular lectures, dramatic and musical activities. A pre-war play, *Pins and Needles*, written, produced and acted by members of the union, was a New York success. The educational work of several other unions has undergone a marked expansion during the past decade.

Outside the labor movement three leading American Universities have organized activities directed specifically to the problems of labor. Cornell has instituted a teaching programme intended to equip students with the knowledge of economics and sociology necessary for the understanding of the problems of industry. Harvard has launched a training programme for union leadership, the students being selected by the unions themselves from among their own membership. Yale has set up an institute with a corps of specially equipped and trained investigators for research in all aspects of the problems of labor. This undertaking enjoys the active co-operation of both labor and management groups.

More important for the immediate education and enlightenment of the great mass of union members, however, are the labor press, labor magazines and special publications. The several labor organizations publish regularly approximately five hundred papers and journals. Most of these are distributed to union members, the price

being part of the dues. Labor papers vary in kind from the general publication issued by the A.F. of L. or the C.I.O. to the papers emphasising local materials issued by city or district central bodies. Both the A.F. of L. and the C.I.O. prepare and distribute a weekly news service in clip sheet form. The material in the labor press varies all the way from the most local information and comment to general national and world news, together with discussion of the broader problems of national policy.

A recent development of particular importance in labor literature is the increasing number of pamphlets issued by unions. A few titles will suggest the kind of materials presented:

Bargaining for the Union, for job stewards and committeemen—

International Woodworkers of America;

Grievance Machinery and How to Make it Work—District 50,
United Mine Workers of America;

Organized Labor and Management—United Steelworkers of
America;

Industry Planning through Collective Bargaining—International
Ladies Garment Workers Union.

The educational and journalistic activities enumerated may fairly be said to be only a beginning. They represent an effort to foster and develop the principles and practices of democracy within the unions themselves by founding the unions, so far as possible, on an informed membership. Much, however, remains to be done. A survey of unions made in 1943 by the American Civil Liberties Union contained the following conclusion: "American trade unions are doubtless growing more democratic. This growth is not uniform; there are unfortunate and glaring exceptions." There are powerful pressures, however, both inside and outside the union movement making for the growth of democracy within the whole area of organized labor. Article II of the constitution of the C.I.O. suggests a present outlook and future possibilities. The objects of the organization are:

First: To bring about the effective organization of the working men and women of America regardless of race, creed, color or nationality, and to unite them for common action into labor unions for their mutual aid and protection.

Second: To extend the benefits of collective bargaining and to secure for the workers means to establish peaceful relations with

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their employers by forming labor unions capable of dealing with modern aggregates of industry and finance.

Third: To maintain determined adherence to obligations and responsibilities under collective bargaining and wage agreements.

Fourth: To secure legislation safeguarding the economic security and social welfare of the workers of America, to protect and extend our democratic institutions and civil rights and liberties, and thus to perpetuate the cherished traditions of our democracy.

The third of the significant trends in the American labor movement has to do with labor in politics. The A.F.L. early adopted and still maintains the policy that the labor union as such, should not engage in political activity. It has traditionally encouraged the laboring man as a citizen to use his ballot in ways he deemed most useful to the labor cause. On occasion the A.F.L. and some of its constituent unions went so far as publicly to endorse individual candidates or even parties. But it refused to turn itself into a political organization or to use union funds for political purposes. The reasons for A.F.L. policy are three. The Federation insists that to bring unions into active partisan conflicts tends to create dissensions among union members, and to distract their attention and activity from more important trade union matters. It maintains that the non-partisan course is more effective for obtaining concrete benefits in the form of legislative action since rival candidates must compete with one another for labor support. Finally the A.F.L. believes that labor runs a serious hazard in identifying itself with a particular party because, if that party is defeated, labor loses all its influence. Behind this reasoning is the peculiar party-political situation that has grown up in the United States over the years.

American political parties are not organized along lines of policy and philosophy in quite the same way as are parties in Britain or Australia. There are wide differences in political outlook in America that are usually referred to as liberal and conservative, but both these patterns are to be found in both the major parties. The United States is a very large area, with a population of some 130,000,000 people. Its government is federal and the States are still important. Much of the legislation that labor desires must be sought in State legislatures. Even in the deliberations of the national Congress, sectional interests play an important part. The Congress is a body of representatives, one of whose prime functions

is to compromise and resolve the conflicting pressures exerted by a great variety of interests. The most important economic groups in America are three—business and industry, agriculture and labor. Each of the two major parties, the Democratic and the Republican, when State governments as well as the Federal government are considered, represents all three of these interests. In general, however, the Republican party has been the party of the industrialists and the Democratic party has favoured labor. The farmers, who for decades after the Civil War, supported the Republicans, swung to the Democrats in 1932. The task of the individual Congressman of either party is to balance and compromise the contending pressures that labor, farmers and business put upon him. To understand the complexities of the political situation in Washington at any particular time, it is necessary to realize that upon a pattern of conflict created by the contentions of the three great economic groups is superimposed a pattern of conflict between sections such as the North, the South and the West.

Against such a background it is possible to understand the political policy of the A.F.L. The traditional attitude was reaffirmed in a leading article in its weekly news service of September 3, 1946, written by John P. Frey, President of the A.F.L. Metal Trades Department:

“We in the American Federation of Labor believe in the free enterprise system. It is our policy to co-operate with industry for the improvement of the American way of life. We seek higher standards for the nation’s workers through practical, above-board, collective bargaining. We do not engage in strikes, except as a last resort. The C.I.O., on the other hand, has demonstrated that it cannot stand on its own feet. It must depend upon the government to force its terms on employers. By partisan political action, it seeks to control the Government and thereby obtain union progress as a political favor. That is not the American way. As we face the immediate future, the members of the American Federation of Labor are determined to seek the elimination of unnecessary governmental controls over the nation’s economy. These wartime encroachments, which closely regulate the daily lives of our people, have no place in a free land during peace. We do not believe that post-war prosperity can be established on a firm basis until the government relinquishes its chafing and restrictive hold on the economic progress

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of labor and industry . . . The C.I.O. to-day is sharply split into Communist and anti-Communist camps. The brazen attempts of the Communists to capture control of C.I.O. unions and the C.I.O. itself, are impelling more and more the organizations which left us to return to the American Federation of Labor."

Granting some bias in the Frey statement concerning C.I.O., it is true that two powerful unions, the United Mine Workers and the International Ladies Garment Workers have left the C.I.O. and rejoined the A.F.L.

The political and social philosophy of the C.I.O. by contrast, is an effort to implement and extend the policies written into Federal legislation in the New Deal period of the 1930's. The C.I.O. seeks to preserve and to extend the policies of the New Deal. In his last written statement before his death in the summer of 1946, Sydney Hillman issued a call to advance on the old battle-ground of the 1930's: "F.D.R. is dead," he wrote, "but the programme he mapped out for America is not . . . C.I.O.: P.A.C. (Political Action Committee) is dedicated to the fulfilment of the Roosevelt economic bill of rights."

Before the end of the war the U.A.W. formulated a post-war programme for the nation that roughly represents the C.I.O. point of view and philosophy. It demands national economic planning in an effort to achieve the objective that every "able-bodied person in America must be given the opportunity for useful work." Among the proposals of the U.A.W. were the following:

"Government or municipal ownership and operation of monopolistic industries and of industries strategically essential to the national safety . . . Government control and regulation of other industries to prevent the abuses of monopoly and to assure production in the public interest . . . the conservation of all natural resources such as soil, timber, oil, minerals, etc., the further development and construction of power projects such as T.V.A."

The programme also affirmed that our "industries can no longer be operated to serve private interests where those interests conflict with the public need." It demanded the "rehabilitation and protection of small business," a 30-hour week without reduction of pay and a revision of patent laws to prevent the use of patents to buttress monopolies.

The C.I.O. stands squarely against any discrimination in the economic or educational field based on race, color or religion. It

advocates the extension of social security and in particular State supported medical service to mothers and children. In a resolution passed at its annual convention in 1944, it "urged the establishment of international labor unity." It helped to create and is represented on the International Federation of Trade Unions. (The President has designated the A.F.L. to represent American labor in the International Labor Organization of the United Nations.)

In the presidential campaign of 1944 the C.I.O. broke completely with the policy of the A.F.L. by establishing the Political Action Committee under the chairmanship of Sydney Hillman. The Committee was an official body representing the political side of the C.I.O. It was quickly and efficiently organized with a central office, regional offices and local offices. Hillman chose the great industrial cities as the front on which to operate. Backed by funds supplied by the C.I.O., the P.A.C. arranged political meetings, prepared and distributed political literature and organized drives to get out the vote. (There is no compulsory voting in the United States.) Through the P.A.C. Hillman sought to mobilize the labor vote in support of the candidacy of President Roosevelt. The re-election of Roosevelt gave considerable prestige to the P.A.C.

At the annual convention of the C.I.O. that assembled shortly after the election, the C.I.O. voted to continue P.A.C. and at the same time took a strong stand against a purely labor party. Hillman, who had made himself one of the important political figures in the United States, was convinced that, were labor to secede from the Democratic party and to attempt to establish an independent party, it would merely divide the forces of liberalism and turn over political power to the conservatives. During and after the campaign Henry Wallace, one of the original New Dealers, was the public official who next to the President, personified the ideals and the philosophy which the C.I.O. sought to achieve, and to put into concrete legislation through the activities of the P.A.C. Though Sydney Hillman died in 1946 the P.A.C. goes on.

American labor in 1946 remains sharply divided. There are no signs that suggest a closing of the breach between A.F.L. and C.I.O. in the near future. In spite of the division, however, labor is a powerful force in American life. As a group the working men and women exercise a power roughly commensurate with that of management and of the farmers. The American labor movement has come of age.