



Trades Unions and Public Duty

Jane Addams

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TRADES UNIONS AND PUBLIC DUTY.

The habitual use of "the people" as a phrase practically equivalent to the "working classes" is a constant admission of the fact that the proletariat is not, properly speaking, a "class" at all, but the body of society itself.

—*Auguste Comte.*

IN this paper I have assumed that the general organization of trades unions and their ultimate purposes are understood, and also that we recognize that the public has a duty toward the weak and defenseless members of the community. With these assumptions granted, two propositions are really amazing: first, that we have turned over to those men who work with their hands the fulfillment of certain obligations which we must acknowledge belong to all of us, such as protecting little children from premature labor, and obtaining shorter hours for the overworked; and, second, that while the trades unions, more than any other body, have secured orderly legislation for the defense of the feeblest, they are persistently misunderstood and harshly criticised by many people who are themselves working for the same ends.

The first proposition may be illustrated by various instances in which measures introduced by trades unions have first been opposed by the public, and later have been considered praiseworthy and valuable, when the public as a whole has undertaken to establish and enforce them.

For years trades unions have endeavored to secure laws regulating the occupations in which children may be allowed to work, the hours of labor permitted in those occupations, and the minimum age below which children may not be employed. Workingmen have accepted women into their trades unions, as an inevitable development of industrial conditions, but they resent the entrance of children into their trades, not only because children bring down wages, for women do that as well, but because children are injured by premature labor. The regulation of child

labor is one of the few points in which society as a whole has made common cause with the voluntary efforts of trades unions, but the movement was initiated and is still largely carried forward by them. It is quite possible to understand the reasons for this.

We may imagine a row of people seated in a moving street car, into which darts a boy of eight, calling out the details of the last murder in the hope of selling an evening newspaper. A comfortable-looking man buys a paper from him, with no sense of moral shock; he may even be a trifle complacent that he has helped along the little fellow who is making his way in the world. The philanthropic lady sitting next to him may perhaps reflect that it is a pity that such a bright boy is not in school. She may make up her mind in a moment of compunction to redouble her efforts for various newsboys' missions and homes, that this poor child may have better teaching and perhaps a chance of manual training. She probably is convinced that he alone, by his unaided efforts, is supporting a widowed mother, and her heart is moved to do all she can for him. Let us imagine that next to her sits a workingman trained in trades-union methods. He will probably view with indignation the spectacle of a heedless child jumping on moving cars at the risk of his limbs, shouting out facts and reports that should be unknown to him for many years, and he may wonder for the hundredth time why it is that society allows this utter waste of its immature members. He knows that the boy's natural development is arrested, and that the abnormal activity of his body and mind uses up the force which should go into growth. He is forced to these conclusions because he has seen many a man enter the factory at eighteen and twenty so worn out by premature work that he is laid on the shelf within ten or fifteen years. He knows very well that he can do nothing in the way of ameliorating the lot of this particular boy; that his only possible chance is to agitate for proper child-labor laws in order to regulate, and, if possible, prohibit, street vending by children, so that the child of the poorest may have his school time secured to him, and may have at least his short chance for growth.

These three people sitting in the street car are all honest and upright, and recognize a certain duty toward the forlorn children of the community. The self-made man is encouraging one boy's own efforts. The philanthropic lady is helping on a few boys. The workingman alone is obliged to include all the boys of his class. Workingmen, in their feebleness in all but numbers, have been forced to the state to secure protection for themselves and for their children. They cannot all rise out of their class, as the occasionally successful man has done; some of them must be left to do the work in the factories and mines, and they have no money to spend in ameliorating philanthropy.

In order to secure help from the state they have been obliged to agitate, and to make a moral appeal to the community as a whole—that most successful appeal which has ever distinguished great popular movements, but which we seem to distrust, and do not ordinarily use so often as the appeals to self-interest, national tradition, or class prejudice. Almost all the labor legislation which has been secured in this country to protect the workman against the harshest conditions of industry has been secured through the efforts of trades unions, the training in which naturally leads men to appeal to the state, and to use those tools which democracy affords.

Child-labor laws once enacted and enforced are a matter of pride to the entire community, and they even come to be regarded as a register of the community's humanity and enlightenment.

To consider the second proposition: For many years I have been impressed with the noble purposes of trades unions, and the desirability of the ends which they seek; and at the same time I have been amazed at the harshness with which their failures are judged by the public, and the undue stress which is laid upon the violence and disorder which sometimes accompany their efforts.

How far is this violence and the consequent condemnation of the public the result of ignoble purposes on the part of the trades unions, and how far is it the result of the partial effort and failure which we thrust upon them, when the trades unions alone are obliged to do what the community as a whole should

undertake? Scenes of disorder and violence are enacted because trades unions are not equipped to accomplish what they are undertaking. The state alone could accomplish it without disorder. The public shirks its duty, and then holds a grievance toward the men who undertake the performance of that duty. It blames the union men for the disaster which arises from the fact that the movement is a partial one.

The public is forced to one of two alternatives: that the state should not attempt to ameliorate the lot of workingmen by regulating hours, etc.—and this in spite of the recent decision of the United States Supreme Court in sustaining the eight-hour law—or that the trades unions, unassisted, are doing that for which we are all responsible, and which we all ought to undertake.

What, then, is this labor movement, which, when it incorporates its doctrine into legal measures, becomes orderly and smooth-working, and, when it undertakes to enforce them, itself becomes violent and difficult?

We are prone to interpret the significance of any living institution, not by its creed and its declaration of principles, which we seldom read, but by its actual manifestations when it attempts to make over the truth thus stated into direct expressions of free living. We judge it by its blundering efforts to apply its principles to actual conditions; by the oft-time failure of its representatives, when the individual finds himself too weak to become the organ of corporate action. To judge an organization fairly by these blundering manifestations requires care, and cannot be done easily.

The very existence of failure and blunder may only confuse us as to the moral significance we are striving to apprehend. If we may use a historic instance, we shall doubtless find that two bodies of men developed the doctrine of the Christian church. On one side were the scholars, the bishops, and dignitaries who met in ecumenical councils and determined creeds and definitions. On the other side were the great body of Christians who had to do with the world, who were grappling with the conditions in German forests and on the plains of Spain and Lombardy, and

from these the outside peoples made up their minds what they had a right to expect from Christians. These outside people doubtless often misunderstood, not only the spiritual significance as expounded by the councils, but even the stunted beliefs which filled the cloudy minds of the worshipers. The Moslems who drove them from Spain believe, to this day, that the Christians cannibalistically ate little children at their baptismal ceremonies and became drunk with wine at the holy altar. These false ideas had much to do with the zeal and animosity with which the Mohammedans drove them beyond the Pyrenees. The Moslems retained the field, conquerors who had totally misunderstood the principles and faith of those whom they had conquered. They supposed that they had driven forth monsters, and they swept and garnished the country, and established a national life upon narrower precepts than those which had prevailed before.

It is easy to misjudge from the outside act. The man who reads the newspapers, and has no other acquaintance with labor organizations than the record of their outside and often unofficial acts, is almost sure to be confused in regard to their ultimate objects. It is also difficult for the victorious side to see fairly. There is no doubt that the employer, the man who represents vested interests, often routs and defeats labor organizations, drives them from the field with an honest misunderstanding of what they are trying to do, and of the principles which they represent. He is flushed with triumph and imagines a victory which he has never achieved.

We may consider half a dozen measures which trades unions have urged, and concerning which the community has often been stirred by indignation, and find that, when the public undertakes to enforce identical, or similar, measures, they are regarded with great complacency. The disapproval may be merely the result of the fact that the trades unions alone are doing that which belongs to the entire public.

The following six measures may be thus considered: *first*, the harsh treatment of a non-union laborer during a strike; *second*, the dictatorship of the walking delegate; *third*, the use of the boycott; *fourth*, the insistence upon shorter hours of

labor ; *fifth*, the limitation of apprentices ; *sixth*, the sympathetic strike. It is quite possible to compare all of these to national measures of which we approve and concerning which we are a part, but which the community as a whole undertakes to enforce. Reasoning by analogy is always dangerous, and its conclusions may well be questioned, but to find that we can parallel these six efforts of trades unions with six others undertaken by the government is certainly suggestive.

1. We hear from time to time of a strike in which men are prevented from taking the places of the strikers, and in the ensuing struggle are beaten and injured. We call the whole affair brutal and unjustifiable, and our sympathies are aroused for the men whom the strikers drive away from the chance to work. We make no sincere effort to find out what principle it is that justifies the strikers to themselves in their action. It is hardly possible that large bodies of men, all over the country, should repeat this course of action, over and over again, without an underlying motive which seems right to them, even if they are mistaken. An attempt to take a scholarly and fair view of life is bound to find out what this motive is. To condemn without a hearing, to correct without an understanding, has always been the mark of the narrow and uneducated person. It is not difficult to see the significance of a fine action ; the test of our insight comes in interpreting aright an action such as this.

Let us put ourselves in the position of the striking men who have fallen upon workmen who have taken their places. The strikers have for years belonged to an organization devoted to securing better wages and a higher standard of living, not only for themselves, but for all the men in that trade. To this end they have steadily contributed from their wages. They have given their time to the study of trade conditions, and enthusiastic and unceasing service to bettering those conditions in the only way that seems to them possible. They have thus worked, not only for themselves and their children, but for all their class. Every gain they have made, every advance they have secured, has been shared with the very men who now, when these gains are at stake, range themselves on the other

side. They honestly believe, whether they are right or wrong, that their position is exactly the same which a nation, in time of war, takes toward a traitor who has deserted his country's camp for that of the enemy. It is possible that the deserter from the army has become convinced that his country's cause is not a just one; or that his personal interests are best served on the other side, or that he earns food for his wife and children, but his course is never justified on these grounds. The country which has nourished and sustained him has a claim upon his services in this time of war. When he is punished, society justifies it, even when we may not agree with the principles for which his country is at that moment fighting.

These, of course, are the ethics of warfare, and only on this ground can be defended; but do we realize that the workman considers the entire industrial struggle one of war, and that all the animosity on the part of the community but intensifies this position, and prolongs these ethics? We regard the treatment accorded to the deserter with much less horror than the same treatment when it is accorded to the "scab," largely because in one instance we as citizens are participants, and in the other we allow ourselves to stand aside.

2. We hear contemptuous references to the walking delegate and agitator, without stopping to ask ourselves why the workman is not entitled to his advocate, paid to represent his legal and industrial rights, quite as much as the manager of the corporation is entitled to his lawyer. We ignorantly allow ourselves to believe that a walking delegate may declare a strike at his own pleasure, without taking the pains to discover that the organization of a trades union is so democratic that no one man, even in exceptional crises, can set aside the constitution of his union. Indeed, the walking delegate is almost the only professional man whose fees are set by those employing him. He is paid the standard wage received in his trade, and no more, and holds office subject to the vote of his union, which may fail to reelect him at any annual meeting. In case of his failure of reelection, his chances for obtaining work at his trade are much lessened by the fact that he has held this office. At any moment in his

career he is far from possessing that plentitude of power with which the popular mind has clothed him.

In spite of all these facts, the community continues to dogmatize concerning the dictatorial action of the walking delegate, whose every executive act has been authorized by his constituency. An ignorant person might easily consider a peace commissioner sent by the United States to Paris as a raging dictator. That is quite possible if one looks at his outside acts alone, but we are accustomed to consider a minister plenipotentiary in relation to government, and do not misunderstand his power, but we are slower to realize that it is only as a commissioner that the business agent of the union orders strikes and arranges terms of settlement.

3. We condemn the boycott, and say that the trades unions are bigoted in their allegiance to each other, and harsh to those outside their membership. Within a few years circles of women in several great cities have formed themselves into a "consumers' league," because they have become uncomfortable concerning the conditions under which clothing is manufactured and sold. The members of these little circles, because of a stirring of conscience in regard to social wrongs, exert themselves to buy goods only from houses which conform to a certain required standard of sanitation, wages, and hours of work. They are willing to submit to a certain inconvenience and to a possible loss of opportunity for "bargains." They naturally regard themselves as an advance guard, and if given to self-congratulation would perhaps claim that they were recognizing a social duty which the community as a whole ignores.

The members of these consumers' leagues are beginning to hold conventions to discuss the propriety of a label which shall mean that those houses to which it is given provide seats for their saleswomen, summer vacations, and so on. All this is a valuable effort in the right direction, but it has already been initiated and sustained for many years by trades unions. So early as 1885, in New York a blue label was put upon cigars made by union men, and loyal trade-unionists were supposed to smoke no others. The label claimed to guarantee not only the

payment of union wages, but fair conditions of manufacture. Many a workingman has spent his Saturday evening going from one store to another, until he found a hat with the trade-union label in its lining. He might, possibly, have bought cheaper and better-looking hats elsewhere, and it would have been easy to urge the smallness of the purchase as an excuse from the search. In short, the advanced woman is only now reaching the point held by the trade-unionist for years. The consumers' league carefully avoids the boycott, as does, indeed, the trade-unionist when he purchases only labeled goods. He is again using the method in his organization that the nation has long used when it prohibits by high tariff the importation of certain goods in order that home products may be purchased, which have been manufactured under better conditions. Who cannot recall the political speech urging high tariff for the protection of the American workingmen, in their wages and standard of living? It is singularly like the argument used by the workingman when he urges the boycott, or the more peaceful method of purchasing labeled goods made by union workmen who have been paid union wages. Here, again, as in the case of industrial warfare, I do not wish to commit myself to the ethics involved, but merely to point the analogy, and call attention to the fact that the public is apt to consider the government righteous and the trades unions unjustifiable.

4. For years trades unions in every country have steadily bent their efforts toward securing a shorter working day. In many unions these persistent efforts have been crowned with success, but many others are still making the attempt to secure the eight-hour day, and have before them a long and troublous undertaking. Here, again, trades unions are trying to do for themselves what the government should secure for all its citizens; has, in fact, secured in many instances. Almost all the large cities of the United States employ men upon municipal works for only eight hours a day, and the federal government has established eight hours as the normal working day in several departments. In England eight hours is the established working day for work undertaken by the national government as well as by the muni-

cial governments. Parliament has also passed acts regulating the number of hours a man may work in the manufacture of white lead and other deleterious materials. The factory inspectors of Germany have recently recommended to the government that imperial laws should regulate the hours of work in manufacture, according to the danger involved in the manufacturing process; that the legal hours of work in the manufacture of India rubber, for instance, be limited to an hour and a half per day. The German government is seriously considering these propositions, but we may easily imagine the derision with which an American manufacturer would greet such a proposal if it were advanced by a trade union. A law passed in Illinois in 1893 regulating the working hours of women who were employed in manufacture to eight hours a day, or forty-eight hours a week, was successfully resisted by the manufacturers, and declared unconstitutional by the Illinois supreme court. The argument urged by the manufacturers against its enforcement was that the Illinois employers could not sustain the competition of their rivals in other states, who were not restricted by the same law. The difficulty of limiting the hours of labor in some states and leaving them unlimited in others shows most clearly the magnitude of the undertaking assumed by the trades unions, and the unfairness of leaving the task to them.

5. The limitation of the number of apprentices is a position which the skilled trades-unionists have long held, but which is gradually being given up as indefensible. Still there have been reasons in the minds of trades-unionists, ethical concepts which did once induce them to undertake this line of action; just as governments may give up certain ethical standards which they formerly acted upon with a good conscience. The limitation of number of apprentices was instituted in those trades which required a long apprenticeship before a man became a journeyman or a master workman. The man who had submitted to this long course of training, from one to eight years, during which time he had earned but little, held that he had a right to secure to himself reasonable expectation that this trade would be valuable to him after it was once acquired; he

demand a guarantee that he should not be obliged to throw away all those years of training, simply because too many men were allowed to enter the trade and reduce its wages.

All this was nearly analogous to the plea of the inventor when he applies to the government to protect his invention, which has cost him years of work and study, from the unlimited competition of others; and possibly even more analogous to the position of the author who wishes to be secured by a copyright. Only the federal government can undertake to perform either of these functions. The disorder again arises from the fact that the trades unions undertake to do for themselves what they are not authorized by society to do, rather than from the purpose and end to be attained. If all the living inventors formed a voluntary organization, and declined to allow more than a limited number of new inventors to enter it, we should doubtless have scenes of violence. It required a discussion of many years by the most learned men in the nation to discover the ethical basis of the author's copyright.

6. We see a great sympathetic strike ramifying throughout the entire unions of a trade and its allied trades; we suddenly hear of men all over the country leaving their work, places which they may have held for years, which they know that it may be difficult, and perhaps impossible, again to secure. They certainly do this under some dictate of conscience, and under some ethical concept that stands to them as a duty. Later many of them see their wives and children suffer, and yet they hold out, for the sake of securing better wages for workmen whom they have never seen, for men who are living in another part of the country, and who are often of another race and religion. We see this manifestation, and read about it, and do not make a really intelligent effort to discover its ethical significance. We say the men are foolish and doomed to fail; we allow our minds to become confused between the motives of the strike, and the riots and militia which often become associated with it. We are lost in its manifestation, and do not even comprehend that at such a time a great accumulation of moral force has overmastered hundreds of our fellow-citizens. They are, for

the time being, in the grasp of a great social passion, which is making for the emancipation of the wage-earner, as, in another time, a great social passion insisted upon the emancipation of the slave. We study other great movements toward human freedom, and fail to comprehend that the consciences of our contemporaries are aroused to a participation in the same great struggle.

We condemn in trades unions what we praise when undertaken by the state, when it enters into a prolonged civil war to rid itself of slavery, or finds itself involved in international complications and expensive warfare for the sake of securing political freedom for the Cubans. If the United States undertook the war with Spain for the reasons alleged, the government has certainly taken part in a great sympathetic strike. Concerning the action of the state, we have all been educated by years of discussion and a sense of participation and responsibility. Concerning the action of the trades unions, we allow ourselves to remain singularly ignorant, and insist that they shall bear forward a great movement toward social amelioration, not only without our sympathetic understanding, but with the added burden of public disapproval.

After all, the state, the nation, as Mazzini pointed out, represents no more than a mass of principles in which the universality of its citizens were agreed at the time of its foundation. But we would not have the state remain motionless and chained to the degree of civilization attained at the moment the state was founded. We would have a rational development of the truths and principles which gave vitality to the state at first. If the objects of trades unions could find quiet and orderly expression in legislative enactment, and if their measures could be submitted to the examination and judgment of the whole without a sense of division or of warfare, we should have the ideal development of the democratic state.

Probably the labor organizations come nearer to expressing moral striving in political action than any other portion of the community, for their political efforts in most instances have been stimulated by a desire to secure some degree of improvement in

the material condition of working people. As a whole they still expect legal enactment to satisfy the desire, not only for social order, but for social righteousness, and they are only slowly losing their habit of turning to the law for moral support. They are still endeavoring to secure each advance in ethics by a step taken in politics, and this endeavor is the one safeguard of democracy.

The well-to-do portions of the community are prone to think of politics as something off by itself. They may conscientiously recognize a political duty as part of good citizenship, but political effort is not the natural expression of their moral striving. A contempt for law is almost certain to follow, when we lose our habit of turning toward it for moral support. There is little doubt that appeals through corporation attorneys are often made to legislative bodies solely with the view of protecting vested interests and property rights. In their preoccupation there is no time to consider morals or the rights of the community as a whole. This non-moral attitude, as well as the immoral one of open corruption of legislators, does much toward destroying the foundations of democratic government.

The body of trades-unionists in America are becoming discouraged from the fact that moral appeal and open agitation do not have fair play, because the "interests of capital" are not confined to these, but have methods of securing legislation which are perforce denied to the workingmen. Such scenes as were enacted in the Illinois house and senate in the winter of 1897 do much toward loosening faith in legislatures and turning into cynics men who before believed in legislation. The confidence of workingmen in the courts has been shaken by the fact that the judges have so often been trained as corporation attorneys, and it is a common assertion which may often be heard in workingmen's meetings that the militia and United States troops are almost invariably used to protect the interests of the employer in times of strike. How deep-seated this conviction has become, and how rapidly it has grown, may be illustrated by a little history from the International Cigarmakers' Union, one of the most peaceful and highly organ-

ized trades unions in America. This union, which dates from 1864, sent its first president into the Civil War, where he was killed in battle. His portrait is often found in the local headquarters of the union; his history and character are familiar to many of the members of the organization, and his name has become surrounded by a genuine hero-worship. Yet this same union has now a clause in its constitution providing that no benefits can be paid to any member whose illness results from "the performance of military service," on the ground that his service would only be required to put down his brother-workman when striking for his rights. So thoroughly has a large body of intelligent workingmen become convinced that the country's troops are on the side of capital, and instances may easily be adduced showing a like distrust of the courts and legislatures.

Any sense of division and suspicion is fatal in a democratic form of government, for although each side may seem to secure most for itself, when consulting only its own interests, the final test must be the good of the community as a whole.

One might almost generalize that the trades-union movement, as such, secures its lower objects best where there is a well-defined class feeling among the proletarians of its country, but that it accomplishes its highest objects in proportion as it is able to break into all classes and seize upon legislative enactment. A man who is born into his father's trade, and who has no hope of ever entering into another, as under the caste system of India or the guilds of Germany, is naturally most easily appealed to by the interests within his trade life. A workingman in America who may become a carpenter only as a stepping-stone toward becoming a contractor and capitalist, as any ambitious scholar may teach a country school until he shall be fitted for a college professorship, does not respond so easily to measures intended to benefit the carpenter's trade as he does to measures intended to benefit society as a whole; and it is quite as important that the appeal should be made to him in his capacity of citizen as that it should be large enough to include men outside his class.

That all its citizens may be responsible is, then, perhaps

the final reason why it should be the mission of the state to regulate the conditions of industry. The only danger in the movement, as at present conducted, lies in the fact that it is a partial movement, and antagonizes those whom it does not include. It may certainly be regarded as the duty of the whole to readjust the social machinery in such a way that the issue shall be a higher type of character, and that there shall be a moral continuity to society answering to its industrial development. This is the attempt of factory legislation. It is concerned in the maintenance of a certain standard of life, and would exercise such social control over the conditions of industry as to prevent the lowering of that standard. After all, society as society is interested in this, and there is no more obligation upon workingmen to maintain a standard of living than there is upon the rest of us. It is well, sometimes, to remind ourselves that, after all, the mass of mankind work with their hands.

Is it too much to hope that in time other citizens, as well as trade-unionists, may be educated to ask themselves: "Does our industrial machinery, or does it not, make for the greatest amount and the highest quality of character?" And that when it is answered, as it must be at the present moment, that the state does not concern itself with the character of the producer, but only with the commercial aspects of the product, is it again too optimistic to predict that those other citizens will feel a certain sense of shame and recognize the fact that the trades unions have undertaken a duty which the public has ignored?

JANE ADDAMS.

HULL-HOUSE.