

Comment : an initiative in favour of workers in management

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COMMENT

AN INITIATIVE IN FAVOUR OF WORKERS IN MANAGEMENT

THE THREE most important trade union organisations of Switzerland sponsored an initiative to include an article on employee participation in the Federal Constitution. The Confederation would thereby be entrusted with legislation in this field.

This step by the Swiss trade union movement must be praised and welcomed, although one may have doubts as to the real practicality of workers participating in management. But it is to be welcomed because it is constructive and **co-operative**. The general image of trade unionism is that of a force diagonally opposed to the interests and aims of both capital and management. Trade unionism was born, after all, out of the exploitation of 19th century capitalism and its "raison d'être" lies in a struggle against the forces which give rise to its birth.

Although this image may be simplified, there can be little doubt that the line of thought of a British trade unionist is precisely to pit the interests of the working man against those of the boss. The idea of co-operation with management is anathema to a militant unionist. For him, the working man will always be underpaid and exploited by the "few" who control the means of production.

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There is, of course, a wide range of attitudes within the trade union movement. The liberals would seek no more than a fair day's pay (although the interpretation of what that is can conflict with the welfare of the employing firm or the national interests) whereas the hard-core militant would want to destroy the present structure of society, to replace it with something of which he has no clear idea.

In a speech to the students of the South Bank Polytechnic, Mr Briginshaw, General Secretary of the printing union SOGAT, said that the trade union movement had a lot to bring to the country. Trade unionism was a force with human ideals that had to be developed for the welfare of society. But these assertions never inhibited Mr Briginshaw from demanding and winning a 35% increase for his highly paid men in the newspaper industry last year, bringing the national papers to the verge of bankruptcy.

The trade union movement's main problem today is to find a reason of existence. It certainly remains a force and one must recognise that it has ideals. But these ideals have long been shared by management and the Victorian era which many trade unionists find so hard to forget has been over for 50 years. The trade union movement should be a force militating for the welfare of the working man, but the historic tradition of the movement is that this force should be used **against**, or in opposition to the men who have the competence to manage industry and commerce, and this will probably continue until Great Britain becomes the lame duck of Europe.

It is generally not in the present mentality of the British working class to envisage an entirely new avenue, namely to consider co-operating on equal footing **with** their fellow men who handle fountain pens rather than spanners. After all, their welfare is irrevocably linked together and the source of future prosperity lies in a common understanding between management and labour. The only other way would be to undo the present system altogether, which would perhaps soothe the envy of the militant, but hardly improve his standard of living.

The need for reassuring their aims has troubled the Swiss trade unions increasingly during the past years. The movement had become a bit sleepy after 35 years of blessed "Peace of Labour" during which regular and honourable adjustments were negotiated in a spirit of mutual interest and co-operation with the employer organisations. These agreements were taken for granted and accepted by a reasonably contented working class, unwilling to go on strike and loyal to their employers. But the situation has tended to change.

On the one hand, there is a mass of workers who have accepted the order of things and trust everything to their unions. In fact, with the increasing prosperity and material satisfaction of the Swiss, trade unions have lost in membership and audience.

Nothing particular could be expected of them and the phraseology of the "Voix Ouvriere", the organ of the Labour Party, always sounded a little unreal when it referred to "union struggle".

On the other hand, there is a massive influx of foreign workers whose industrial traditions are totally different and who are becoming increasingly aware of the difference in wages between themselves and the bulk of the Swiss employed outside the shop floor. Furthermore, there is the restlessness of the young and the higher exigencies of apprentices.

The rising wave of prosperity has helped to increase industrial discontent because of the unrealistic and unfair disparities in pay. A highly qualified mechanic with many years of apprenticeship behind him cannot hope to earn more than 2000 francs a month in Geneva. But the shortage of labour has favoured typists, with 12 lessons at Pitman's behind them, in earning up to 1800 francs a month!

A situation had thus developed where the trade unions had to take a resounding initiative, if only to make it known that they were still a live force to be reckoned with. They could have acted in a sense of greater militancy, but this went against 35 years of tradition. Instead, they decided that the apathy of the bulk of their members and the incipient militancy of younger or foreign workers could best be remedied by the proposal of involving them actively in the management of the firms employing them. This was indeed a most important decision because nearly all the proposals tending to give workers a say in management have sprung hitherto "from above" — either from managers themselves or from governments.

Ideally, the participation of workers in management should have the effect of increasing their acceptance of economic realities and of developing their sense of responsibilities. It will help them to feel no longer as the "instruments" of management, but partners in an enterprise. The success of participation will depend on just how the Swiss trade union movement will bring this idea home to its members.

It involves on their part a degree of openness and goodwill going against a rising trend of militancy. If the workers designated by the unions to sit on the board are considered as "bosses' men" and "traitors" by their workmates then the scheme cannot bring a positive contribution to the "Peace of Labour". However, it is in the Swiss context that it is the most likely to succeed and one must hope that the present initiative will one day become law.

(P.M.B., "The Swiss Observer")

Locarno celebrated August 1st with a splendid party on the water. Eight half-hour displays of fireworks illuminated the sky over the Locarno lakeside. The intensity grew from display to display.