

THE SHAMELESS EMPLOYER

BY
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A TRADE UNIONIST, commenting on the recent laying-off workers complained: "Employers dismiss men just when they like." But when a worker finds other employment more to his liking, does he not in effect dismiss his employer? And when Mrs. Trade Unionist transfers her custom from grocer Jones to grocer Brown, does she not in effect dismiss Jones? Or are we to suppose that principles that are right for trade unionists are wrong for employers?

Apparently it was with one eye on such voters as this that Mr. Callaghan said in Washington: "Let us make clear that the day is long past in Britain when individual men and women are treated like pawns in the industrial games." But when Mr. Callaghan employs a man to paint his house or tend his garden, he tells that man exactly what he wants done, pays him when the work is finished, and leaves it to the man to find his next job for himself. Presumably Mr. Callaghan would be indignant if he were criticised for treating the man like a pawn in Mr. Callaghan's game. Yet it is true—just as it is to say that Mr. Callaghan is a mere pawn in his painter's game. In free exchange, both parties benefit. When I buy apples, my motive is not the vendor's welfare, but getting apples. The vendor similarly, although he may (if he is not a post office counter-clerk) smile at me, what he wants is my money. We are both pawns in the other's game.

But the matter goes deeper. Industry and commerce will proceed more smoothly if people do use each other as pawns in their plans, and do not interfere with the other's game. I do not want my painter to criticise my way of life or my political opinions unless I ask him. I want him to do a particular job at an agreed price. When he has done the job and has been paid, he is free to do whatever he likes with the money. It is only if I ask him to do the job for nothing that he can reasonably ask how it comes that I cannot pay. Similarly, if he asks me to continue paying him after he has been paid for my job I shall begin to inquire into his way of life. Let the workers make no mistake: the government that begins to give them something for nothing will eventually be compelled to regulate their lives. It has happened in all the Communist countries; and it could happen here. It is better to be a "pawn" in a free economy than to have one's future depend on governments.

And these "re-training" proposals? The majority of the

jobs in modern mechanised industry are so repetitive that any man who has the will can be useful in them after a few hours' teaching. This repetitiveness has been condemned by reformers as soul-destroying. If repetitiveness is really soul-destroying, then I can say only that the great majority of workers can have no soul to be destroyed; for they certainly do not seem to resent repetition, but rather resent having to learn a fresh job. All over the country there are polytechnics and centres where men can get technical training in any branch, either free or for very small fees, and these centres have to do much advertising to fill the training places available. The man who is determined to learn his trade and improve his position is exceptional, and he generally succeeds. And he succeeds precisely because most men treat others as pawns in their game. They do not ask him who he is, who his father was, what are his political views, why he wants the money, what he will do with it—they ask none of these impertinent questions; they ask only: Can you do what I want done?