

The Value of Labor Unions Today

The Realism of Unions

By CHARLES JOHNSON POST

THE present value of labor unions lies in the fact that they form the battleline for economic progress. Their usefulness to society and to our advancing civilization lies in this fact. Their usefulness can and will increase as they grow in the direction of an already awakened consciousness that—underlying the underprivileged need that forced unions into existence—there is the yet further need for the broader foundations of an economic philosophy that is rooted in economic law.

In other words the unions are the fighting line that corresponds with the grim, hard-bitten lines that faced special privilege at Bunker Hill and Saratoga and Yorktown. Yet, back of those lines of pioneers at Bunker Hill or Ludlow there must be the Washingtons, the Thomas Paines, the Benjamin Franklins and the Thomas Jeffersons who can give form and substance to the half-articulate aspirations on the fighting fronts. There must be an understanding that there is also such a thing as economic democracy as well as the established political democracy; there must be leadership that can clothe the successes of strategy and tactics with the sound principles of economic law. There must be sound leadership that can give a rational form to the vague pressures of the undercrust; there must come recognition that there is a law of human relations as definite as the laws of the physical universe; that there is economic law.

Let no one think that union leadership is not aware of this. I know of no intelligent union leader who believes that mere membership in a union is the answer to the broad, underlying economic problem. He knows that if every plant was a closed shop, and every employee in the nation was a union member in good standing, the union could then ask what wage it would and the employer would pay it; and then the union members, as ultimate consumers, would pay a higher price all around for their commodities—which would of course indicate a demand for an increased wage again. We would be in a state of economic idiocy endlessly chasing our economic tails.

Do not think for a moment that union leaders do not know this—even if many of the prideful single taxers view the union situation from the sub-zero mentality of a Pegler. The union is and has been the only tool to meet a wage-antagonism—and the history of the wage-earner strata from far back shows that the choice lay not between unionism and Utopia, but between unionism and a hopeless wage groove that was only a step removed from a previous serfdom.

There are only two basic economic philosophies in the world today—those of Henry George and Karl Marx. Ultimately,

or in the near future, the world will incline to one or the other; for there are no other choices except that of chaos or successive wars. Henry George will probably be slower of acceptance and of growth, for in some mysterious way his books seem to have inspired people with a stronger desire for a slovenly individualism than for that necessity of social progress and civilization, coherent and orderly organization. Marx is more easily grasped. He is more immediate. The tools of the former craftsman have grown from a simple hammer to a fabulous press. The worker owned the tool once; he should own it again via the state—and thereby Hitler and barbarism can become realities.

The union movement has and does deal directly with the simple and direct everyday needs of a man—with meals, clothes, a place to sleep, with babies, and girls, and two-can-live-as-cheaply-as-one and all of the elements for which wages are needed. Wages reach into the very vitals of every man's life. Wages to wage-earners are not an abstract factor in a very profound and vital economic philosophy. Wages are a pay-envelope; and because it talks pay-envelope idiom instead of professorial idiom, the union has become the vital, progressive and fighting force that is embodied in the union. The union is powerful because it deals with these simple daily needs—our daily bread for today, tomorrow and the day after. It is because it deals with our daily bread in concrete terms that it has become a power—the only organic power for the future other than charity, to which the underprivileged can turn. It has behind it the pressure of needs and aspirations; it expresses these in terms as concrete as the loaves and fishes two thousand years ago. It is by reason of its direct and immediate—and crude, if you will—idealism that the union can and has imposed an influence under which men and women have submerged their individualism in a common discipline. The unions have raised wages—and what abstract economist has an answer to a man who can take his girl to the movies twice a week from his new pay-envelope and damn the expense?

Of course it is all very trivial, perhaps, judged in the light of the vague profundities of economic law, and of many enthusiastic single taxers. But it was a very great man who found a place to mention the vulgar need for our daily bread in a very great and profound prayer, and who first fed a multitude on Galilee before he preached to them the fibre of great laws.

Unions are making their members think; and with thought will come right thinking. The effort for better livelihood will make thinkers. They must think, eventually, in terms of pure economics and basic economic law; they must answer the riddle of the Sphinx—and they are aware of this. Ultimately the basic economic law made plain by George will prevail.

And when the workers do awaken to the truth they will have had the training in discipline, in democratic organization and effort, in the close contact with the world of realities where strategy and tactics and the balances of success and failure have been measured and balanced against their private and individual dreams. They will have had a definite and practical training that gives them coherent vision and a systematized idealism in a related order to this universe of things as they are.

[Charles Johnson Post, son of Louis F. Post, is a Trustee of the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, and a Commissioner in the Conciliation Service of the U. S. Department of Labor. The above article expresses Mr. Post's own views as an individual, and not in any official capacity.—Ed.]