

# Why Does Labor Strike?

by ALAN ST. DENIS

**M**OST of us grumble a bit, sometimes with good humor, often with bitterness, when we are inconvenienced by a strike. Intent upon our own comfort, we tend to resent it if our usual newspaper is not on the stand, if our usual bus is not at the street-corner, or if we encounter other disruption of our customary daily routine. Some of us condemn the workers who have left their posts, denounce the labor leaders whom we blame as the cause of it all, and pompously proclaim that "there ought to be a law!" While these reactions may be understandable, they are not wholly rational.

Why *do* employees fold their arms and say "I will not work unless. . .?" Being on strike is neither a profitable nor a pleasurable experience, and no worker suspends his occupation just for a lark. Striking is not a matter of fun and games; it is a calculated exercise of a powerful economic weapon—and the adjective "economic" is the key to the entire concept. However much a strike may annoy us personally, let us be objective and try to perceive what may have occasioned it.

Henry George not only asserted, but demonstrated, the fundamental principle that "man seeks to satisfy his desires with the least effort." Assuming a basically honest design on his part, clearly the striker is quite logically endeavoring to carry out this immutable rule of human conduct. In a sense, it would be unintelligent not to do so. Still, we cannot claim this to be the full answer, since it is an expression of economic philosophy, and we are faced with economic reality.

From a purely practical viewpoint, it

seems evident that labor resorts to strikes simply (perhaps over-simply) because workers cannot readily make ends meet at prevailing wages. As *The Wall Street Journal* observed in a recent column, "Rising cost of living shrinks 'real' pay." This, by the way, is a splendid illustration of the true nature of wages, which are not pieces of paper or metal, nor figures on a check, but rather the actual goods and services realized as a return for human exertion. Prompted quite reasonably by pragmatic motives, the worker rationally declines to exert his labor for what he deems an insufficient reward.

Further, when we consider that a strike is a stoppage in production, it recalls George's revelation that such stoppages inevitably occur when men refuse to labor for mere animal subsistence. Thus, again we see how timeless are the truths expounded in *Progress and Poverty*.

This effort to indicate that strikes are not arbitrarily called, and that there is normally a compelling *reason* in the mind of the striker, by no means implies a correlation between the superficial reason for striking and the true *cause* of unjust returns for labor performed. At best, the benefits gained by a strike will ultimately be balanced out via inflation and higher prices. So it is not enough to grant labor a moral justification for striking. Man must be taught that private land-rent, taxes and other impediments to full production, and to equitable economic distribution, must be eliminated ere labor can realize the benefits it has earned through its unique participation in the production of wealth.

It was 70 years before the British Parliament put Adam Smith's free-trade ideas into law, but Keynes wrote his *General Theory* in 1936 and the United States Congress passed the Full Employment Act just 10 years later. It might not be a bad idea to educate the academics in the facts of economic life.

—J. B. Condliffe in *Progress*