

Functions and Responsibilities of Labour Unions

From an Address delivered at the Course on Labour Relations for Maritime Trade Unions at Dalhousie University, March 27, 1944

By PAT CONROY

I HAVE been asked to talk on the subject "Functions and Responsibilities of Trade Unions." The content of this subject is an almost never-ending source of comment and discussion among the public at large, and there is no reason why trade unionists should not, of themselves, attempt to assess the meanings of the terms which have come to reflect but generalizations. Generally speaking, those offering opinions on these matters live and work outside trade unions. They offer opinions as observers, and their observations are conditioned by the impact of the functions of trade unions upon themselves as individuals or in their daily associations.

From these fields of observation, one learns that the functions of trade unions should be emphasized with nothing but responsibilities. By inference and direct statement, the request is made that trade unions should be so circumscribed with disciplinary measures, that the position of the unions would be but a subjective one in society. Subjective to the desires of those who honestly feel that unions are overstepping themselves, and also subject to the feeling of others whose desires are not rationally objective, but who see something of a menace in trade unionism, and that the menace should be either removed or restricted.

Depending upon one's position in society, these desires can be regarded as infinitely good things or the reverse. To me, the functions and responsibilities of trade unions can be neither properly assessed, corrected, nor yet rightly charted by mere desire. They have to be examined in the light of what trade unions are, and what place they should occupy in society at large. This examination should

be conducted not by observers, but by trade unionists themselves. If the functions of trade unions are good, trade unionists must know this; they must be conscious of it; they must be intelligently aware of it, and be able to stand on this awareness. If, on the other hand, the functions of trade unions are bad, the one who should first know this is the trade unionist, and he should be the first source of correction. If responsibilities are, or have been assumed, knowledge of this will reflect the union's position. If not, then an irresponsibility in trade unions should do one of two things: either destroy them, or develop the need for a correction that will lift them to the levels on which they should rest.

It is therefore essential that we, as trade unionists, should look at ourselves, and, if possible, find out where we stand with respect to our functions and responsibilities, not merely in relation to society at large, but more essentially in relation to ourselves as human beings. The latter is necessary. If we are not responsible to ourselves, then we cannot be to other individuals and agencies with whom we must live from day to day. If our functions are bad, we ourselves are the first and chief losers, and it will be required that if we must live rightly with ourselves, our functions must be on a right basis.

I suggest, first of all, we examine the basis of trade unionism in the world at large. We must look upon the world as a continuous process of development. It is neither feudalistic, capitalistic nor yet socialistic. It is a continually evolving process, and in this process trade unionism must evolve with it, if it wishes to remain part of an evolving world. The world will not stop on a given deadline. Its record has been one of change. Individuals in our world make contributions to that change. But this is important. It is not enough that the world or its institutions merely

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change, for change for the sake of it does not mean progress. Generally, it means but more confusion. The world may change from day to day, but it lies with us to know and determine that it shall change for the better.

It follows therefore that the basis of trade unionism must be more than a mere static thing, immovable in the face of a constantly changing world. It is not enough to say that trade unions fight for wages, shorter hours and better working conditions. If that were the limit of trade unionism, its horizon would be an extremely narrow one, and what might momentarily be well regarded as a positive position would, in a short time, come to be an exceptionally negative one. Wages, shorter hours and better working conditions are not the saturation point of trade unionism.

Its function must be bigger and greater than that. It must enroll itself in the fight for higher and greater citizenship for its members. The world will not always be competitive in the sense that we understand it. Out of sheer necessity, co-operation will take the place of the orthodox sense of competition. In such development, therefore, the impact of trade unionism on present-day institutions must evolve into a wider and freer play of forces, and have a contribution to make in terms of lifting a large mass of people to a higher material and spiritual plane of living.

Our functions in this respect have not been notable. We have concentrated largely around the rallying ground of immediate material considerations. We have sulked in our corners and denounced those with whom, and perhaps rightly, we have disagreed. But this is not enough. It is negative at best and playing dog in the manger is neither a solution for things as they are today nor a spearhead into the better world of tomorrow in which the trade unionist should be playing a leading role.

Despite the prophecies and the know- ingness of many individuals, not a living soul actually knows what our world will develop into. There is no cut and dried

formulae that will work. Shibboleths remain what they have always remained— shibboleths. The world will be fashioned by people. Most of the people are in what we ordinarily call "the mass." Such a mass are subject to the impact of trade unionism, and if the mass form the society of tomorrow, it is up to trade unionism to do something about it.

While we do not know what form society will take, it is essential for our own sake that it be a good one. If it has to be a good one, it must be founded on character, and as trade unionism will have a large share in determining the future, it is equally necessary that character be rooted in trade unionism, and with a deeper root than trade unionism has hitherto exhibited. Here, I am not referring to trade unionism in the sense of names of organizations. I am dealing with it as an institution which has an important place in the world. On too many occasions it has lacked character, even in its own affairs. It has contented itself with possessing a loud voice that should reflect loud action. It has elected leaders on the basis of a popularity contest, setting up men to knock them down in a few weeks, months or years later. It has shown on too many occasions little respect for its own elected leaders, and consequently very little for its own judgment. By leaders, I do not mean men of national or international importance. It goes right down to the local leader, to the local union committee man, and who invariably is an honest man, until he is elected. Twenty-four hours afterwards he finds himself, by common agreement, to be nothing but a common crook.

This won't do; for the simple reason that it has not worked out. The effects have reached down to the foundations of trade unionism, until instability has become the wind which trade unionism has been riding. It has contributed to many adverse tendencies. It has caused many needless strikes which seem to be very fine dramatic gestures, but were invariably nothing but flashy futilities. Good reasons, strategy or right moments in a good cause have, too often, never

been assessed. Too many strikes have been caused by trade unionists feeling that they were incapable of matching wits with what we call "the boss," and rather than match wits with him and develop our intelligence out of exchange, we have run away from the issue and had a strike.

What is this, and what do these things mean? What are they evidences of? To me, first of all, they show a lack of character, a lack of confidence and a lack of strength. We have got to get down to the roots of character and character-making. Disrespect has to give way to respect, instability has to give way to sobriety, and sober thinking. Strike-running must be looked upon as a last and bad resort. It must be succeeded by a developing intelligence that will get better results by facing up the issue rather than running away from it and seeking refuge in the last resort. In short, we must first function for ourselves and with ourselves. If we do that, we can then think and talk about responsibility. Functioning well, responsibility will automatically come with it. Once we are responsible to ourselves, we can then command the respect of being responsible to society at large.

It is important that trade unionists and trade unionism command the respect of those we live with from day to day. There is nothing in trade unionism that should cause any member to be ashamed of it. Its objective of helping the downtrodden is a worthy one. Its desire of lifting the mass of the people to a higher level of citizenship cannot be relegated to a place of secondary importance, but it is important that trade unionism applies the proper processes to secure these objectives. It can do so in a manner which will not antagonize the world at large and obstruct the securing of things which ordinary people want and are entitled to. No leader, international, national or local, nor yet any group of leaders have the moral right to endanger gains for their members by indulging in personal glorification, or by making the objectives of Labour a plaything for emotional exhibition. Securing a better world for the

common people is a serious business. It is not a thing that should constitute a permit for individuals in the Labour movement to indulge in all sorts of fantasies so that they may be noticed, and the objectives of Labour obscured. The aims and objectives of trade unionism are bigger than this. They must be presented to the world in an intelligent and responsible fashion, if they are to be accepted and considered as things that warrant attention and consideration, and to be dealt with as serious propositions. In short, if we wish the respect of the world, we must in our behaviour demonstrate that we respect ourselves.

I have said these things boldly, because I feel they need to be said. This is the essential purpose of this pioneer movement in Labour Relations Study. Such study should be anchored to the first principle of first studying and finding out about ourselves and what we are doing. Unless we do this, unless we clear away the debris upon which we hope to superimpose the education to be derived from these studies, then the accumulation of certain alleged facts are so much plaster which in time will crack and fall away. You are starting something worth while here. I do not know what will be said by other speakers who will follow me, but I do know this, that it is better for me, as a trade unionist, to say these things to you than it is for anyone else. Were an employer to say them to you, undoubtedly you would suggest that he be thrown out. But that is no solution. It would be merely evidence of a desire to again run away. We cannot throw ourselves out of the game of life; too many people are depending upon us and on what we do. No one can help us but ourselves. If we are to make this truly a better world to live in, then it is up to us to assess our shortcomings, and prepare to make a better contribution than we have been making. Character, intelligent thinking and purposeful action are the things we have to establish and cleave to. With these fundamentals by us, constantly adhering to them, we can go on to a higher level, to what Mr. Churchill has said "to a brighter and happier day."