

THE CHANGING LABOR PICTURE IN FRENCH CANADA

By W. E. GREENING

DURING the past twenty years, French Canada has undergone a rapid process of social change which is nothing less than a revolution. The widespread English Canadian conception of this region of Canada as a land of simple, self-sufficient farmers leading a placid existence under the guidance of their Church, far removed from the turmoil of modern civilization, is a completely outdated one. During recent years, Quebec has become a region of vast industrial enterprises such as the giant aluminium and power developments along the banks of the Saguenay River and the great iron ore project in the barren and bleak wilderness north of the Gulf of Saint Lawrence.

There has been a large scale movement of population from the villages and the small towns in the rural areas to the fast growing industrial cities such as Montreal, Trois Rivières, Granby and Sherbrooke. Contrary to popular belief in English speaking Canada, the urban population of Quebec now considerably outnumbers the rural one. This belated but very rapid process of industrialization has created a host of new complex social problems which were completely unknown in the French Canada of fifty years ago.

One of the most significant results of this industrial revolution has been the rapid rise of the labor movement to a position of prominence and importance in the life of French Canada. In the past, labor organization in Quebec, for a variety of reasons, has lagged behind that in some of the other English speaking provinces such as Ontario and British Columbia. The barriers of race, language and outlook have cut off the French Canadian wage earner from contacts with labor and social movements in the United States and in Europe. Then there is the factor that a large number of the workers in the industries of the Province have come directly from farms and villages and still retain a rural mentality in many matters and especially in their attitude towards such types of organizations as labor unions.

The progress of Labor in Quebec has also been hampered by the unfriendly attitude shown by successive administrations in power at Quebec City towards its claims and by the lack of effective provincial collective bargaining legislation which will guarantee workers complete freedom from employer interference in setting up labor unions of their own choosing. And yet the

need for effective labor organization has probably been greater and more pressing here than in any other region of Canada. The conditions of living in the working class sections of the new industrial cities which have sprung up in mushroom-like fashion during the past few decades have been decidedly bad and the general level of the wages paid in many of the industries of the Province has been considerably below those current in other parts of Canada such as Ontario. The sordid and depressing picture of the life of the average French Canadian wage earner which is to be found in such novels as "The Tin Flute" by Gabrielle Roy is by no means an exaggerated one. There is no doubt that one of the reasons why some large English and American firms have decided to locate their plants in Quebec in the past has been the low scale of wages there.

Both the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor made efforts to organize some of the industries in the Montreal and Quebec City areas as long ago as the last decade of the nineteenth century. The latter federation managed to build up quite a solid membership among the workers in the building and printing trades in these districts, but the first really important step in the development of the labor movement in French Canada was the formation by some of the groups among the local Catholic clergy who were interested in social questions of the Catholic Confederation of Labor in the period immediately preceding the First World War. This federation in its organizational set up was closely patterned on similar federations which had been formed by the Catholic Church in some of the countries of Western Europe such as Belgium, Holland and Germany at this period. Its doctrines and policies were based directly on Catholic social teaching as formulated in such encyclicals as the *Rerum Novarum* and the *Quadregesimo Anno*. And it was an organization of the purely confessional type, its membership was confined to the French speaking and Catholic workers in the Province of Quebec and it had no ties with any labor organization in English speaking Canada and in the United States. From the start, its propaganda and its literature had a strong French Canadian nationalist tinge since one of its chief aims was to prevent the French speaking workers in Quebec from joining unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor and the Trades and Labor Congress in Ottawa, and to group them in purely French Canadian and Catholic unions whose activities would be directed by the Church. Its ties with the Catholic hierarchy in the Province were close indeed. Each affiliated union in the Confederation had chaplains who were appointed by the local

Bishop or Archbishop and who had an important voice in the formulation of policy and tactics.

In spite of this backing by the local Catholic clergy, the progress of the Catholic Confederation of Labor in organizing the French speaking wage earners in the Province in that period between 1920 and 1940 was slow and disappointing. It did not succeed in eliminating the AFL and TLC unions from the Province and the latter still had many locals in the Montreal industrial region. Its activities were also hampered by the inexperience of its officials and organizers and by a chronic lack of funds. Its general policies were timid and conservative and it preached a close cooperation between labor and management which was hardly likely to appeal to the average wage earner. Some of the groups of employers in the Province sponsored its unions in opposition to those affiliated with the AFL for this reason.

It was not until the period of intensive industrial growth in Quebec which started with the Second World War in 1940 that the labor movement as a whole began to make any real headway there. During the years between 1940 and 1945, there was a great increase in the industrial and the wage earning population of the Province. For the first time in the history of French Canada, many women took jobs in industry. The Canadian Congress of Labor and the CIO unions, whose policies have always been more aggressive and radical than those of the AFL-TLC group, began to launch intensive organizing campaigns in the new war industries in the Montreal region. The whole idea of union organization started to spread much more widely among the French speaking workers.

During the years immediately following the end of the War, far reaching important changes took place in the policy and the organization of the Catholic Confederation of Labor. A new group of young, progressive and forward looking officials such as Gérard Picard, the present President and Jean Marchand, the secretary, took control of the administration of the organization. The connections of the clergy with its activities became much less direct and obvious than in the past. These developments were accompanied by equally significant changes in thinking on social matters on the part of many groups in the Catholic Church in French Canada. One group, led by the dynamic Dominican, the Reverend Georges Henri Lévêque, the former director of the Department of Social Studies at Laval University in Quebec City, began to see that the Catholic Church in Quebec must alter its general approach to social questions to harmonize

with the great changes in the whole social and economic structure of the Province which had occurred since the beginning of the present century. Also that it must interest itself to a much greater degree in the situation of this new urban working class and strive to improve the conditions amid which it lived and worked.

The influence of these groups in the clergy, combined with that of the new officials, has wrought a complete transformation in the Catholic Confederation of Labor since 1945. To a large extent, its officials have dropped much of the nationalist and anti-English and anti-American propaganda which was typical of its activities during the earlier years. The federation has become much more aggressive and radical in its general tactics. It supports today, an advanced legislative programme of social security and welfare legislation including health insurance, housing and slum clearance legislation — something which is badly needed in the cities of present day Quebec. Its officers have been making far reaching demands for a voice for labor in the process of management in the industries of the Province. In many respects today, its general programme is very similar to that of the Canadian Congress of Labor.

The Confederation showed its new spirit of aggressiveness for the first time, in the strike for better working conditions which one of its affiliated unions conducted in the asbestos mines in the Eastern Townships region of the Province in the spring of 1949. This struggle which was attended by considerable violence and by the direct intervention of the provincial authorities on the side of the employers, brought the Confederation into direct collision both with the Union Nationale Administration of Duplessis and employers' groups. The cause of the union had the direct support of the most influential members of the Catholic hierarchy in the Province including Archbishop Charbonneau of Montreal and Archbishop Roy of Quebec City and it received publicity far beyond the boundaries of the Province of Quebec.

Since that date, the Confederation has shown great energy in attempting to organize industries in the Province where open shop conditions have been prevalent in the past. As a result of these campaigns, its total membership has almost doubled during the past decade climbing from 50,000 in 1945 to almost 100,000 at the present time. Today, its strength is greatest in the regions of the Province which are still almost one hundred percent French speaking such as the area in the Valley of the Saint Maurice and around Quebec City and in the Saguenay

River and Lake Saint John district. But the unions affiliated with the AFL and with the CCL, who have also been very active on their side, still have the predominant strength in the industries on Montreal Island which today has a population of over one million and a half. Certain important industries in this region such as the clothing and garment trades in which many French speaking workers are employed, are an almost exclusive preserve of the AFL and the TLC.

Today, union membership in the largest industries in Quebec such as pulp and paper and textile manufacturing is almost equally divided between the international and the Catholic groups and the same situation is roughly true in the construction and printing trades. But the combined membership of the unions affiliated with the TLC and the CCL is almost double that of those affiliated with the Catholic Confederation of Labor. And it is significant that the great majority of the members in the first two federations are French speaking and Catholic which shows what little effect the propaganda of the Catholic Confederation has had among many French Canadians in this matter in the past. Today the number of unionized wage earners in the Province is far greater than ever before.

All three federations have also been making efforts to bring the general level of wages in the industries in Quebec up to par with those in Ontario and the other English speaking provinces. But a survey comparing wage rates in Ontario and Quebec which was published by the Canadian Congress of Labor in 1954 shows that there is still much work to be done in this field.

During the past few years, there has been a good deal of co-operation between the Catholic Confederation of Labor and the Canadian Congress of Labor in Quebec especially in combatting policies of the Quebec Government which the two organizations have regarded as being detrimental to the position of the Quebec wage earner and the labor movement. In the winter of 1953-54, the two groups worked together intensively in a campaign against legislation which had been passed by the Union Nationale Administration placing curbs and restrictions on the freedom of activity of unions in the Province. There have also been attempts at co-operation between the two groups in the political field. There are elements in both federations in Quebec who think that the only way by which labor in the Province can make any real progress on the legislative front is by the formation of a new independent labor party in the provincial field which will form a rallying point for all the forces of independent and progressive opinion. These plans, however, have never

advanced beyond the discussion stage. The unions affiliated with the AFL and the TLC in French Canada have always displayed a cool attitude towards such proposals since as in the other provinces of Canada, they have always clung to the traditional AFL-Gompers policy of neutrality in politics.

Of course, the recently announced merger between the Trades and Labor Congress and the Canadian Congress of Labor into the new Canadian Federation of Labour is bound to have important effects on the general situation of labor in the Province. For one thing, the president of the new Federation, Claude Jodoin, is a French Canadian who has long been prominent in labor affairs in Montreal and who understands well the union situation in Quebec and the general views and attitudes of the French speaking wage earners.

He and the other top officials of the TLC and the CCL have, of course, been anxious that the Catholic Confederation of Labor merge its forces with those of the new organization, since this would greatly strengthen the general position of labor both in Quebec and throughout Canada as a whole. But the overall attitude of the high officials of the Catholic organization towards these proposals has been, thus far, not very enthusiastic. Apparently considerable French Canadian nationalist feeling still survives in the ranks of the unions of this federation, particularly in the regions of the Province outside of Montreal. These groups fear that any merger with the TLC and the CCL might endanger the distinctively French Canadian and Catholic character of their own organization and that it might cause an undesirable amount of influence in the labor affairs in French Canada by groups and organizations outside of the boundaries of the Province of Quebec. And certain important changes would have to be made in the internal organization of the Catholic Confederation of Labor before any fusion with the other two federations could become possible. For one thing, the remaining direct ties with the Church such as the institution of the Chaplains would have to be dropped and the Confederation could no longer base its policies directly on Catholic social doctrines and teachings. The higher officials of this organization show no disposition to take such a drastic and far reaching step as this at the present time.

From the national standpoint, this is somewhat regrettable since some of the existing barriers between the French speaking workers in the Province of Quebec and their fellow wage earners in the English speaking provinces of Canada will be preserved. But there is no doubt that the merger between the CCL and the

TLC will greatly increase the general strength of organized labor in French Canada and make it better able to make its influence felt in the legislative and political fields.

On the whole, the progress made by the labor movement in French Canada during the past two decades, in the face of many obstacles and unfavourable conditions, has been a remarkable one. It is typical of the new stirrings of the French Canadian masses which are visible in many other fields and which are going to create profound social and political changes in that whole region of Canada during the next ten or fifteen years.