

THE STRUGGLE IN ASBESTOS

The situation in Asbestos has been repeatedly described by commentators as complex. And complex it certainly is. Yet there has evidently been a powerful influence underlying it. It has not been a strike involving particular issues that have been exceptionally difficult to settle by negotiation. It has been a strike in which the leaders of the Catholic Syndicates appear to have shunned the prospects and the machinery of settlement. There seems to be a reaching after objectives that have never been clearly and publicly stated. There is reason to believe that these objectives are not of a kind to lend themselves to frank public statement.

It remains true that in Asbestos there are important issues concerning wage levels and health conditions. But it does not appear that these matters have not been marked by improvement in the last few years, nor does it appear that further improvements could not be achieved by proper and normal methods of arbitration.

It would seem to be nearer the core of the situation to say that what is taking place in Asbestos has some of the character of a jurisdictional dispute. The contest is not simply between the organized employees on the one hand, and the employers on the other. It is also a struggle for place and position among the different and competing types of labor organization.

The aspect of the dispute in Asbestos is nonetheless real, though the struggle of the Catholic Syndicates with their rivals may not appear to be as closely joined as in some other cases. The fact is that Asbestos remains as one of the last of the great strongholds of the Catholic Syndicates. In other parts of the province they have lost in the struggle with the so-called international unions, which have their headquarters in the United States.

The anxieties which jurisdictional disputes, or struggles for ascendancy, may cause are quite natural and easy to understand. In times past the Catholic Syndicates have tended to stand for orderly labor relations, for the observance of law, and for the improvement of conditions within the scope of legalized negotiation. But in pursuing this moderate course they have found themselves in competition with some international rivals which have been quite prepared, upon occasion, to adopt more spectacular and violent procedures, to ignore the machinery of negotiation provided by law, and to break through, by more or less one-sided action, to achieve their gains.

It now appears that the Catholic Syndicates have been led to make a serious and questionable decision that they must attempt to outmaneuver their competitors by adopting their methods. In making this decision, the Catholic Syndicates have evidently had the influence and the support of a certain portion of the Roman Catholic clergy. Exactly what proportion of the Roman Catholic clergy favors this departure, and to what extent they have higher – or the highest – ecclesiastic sanction are serious questions not as yet fully answered.

Whatever the precise intention may have been, or may now be, the results have been those which inevitably follow from attempts to fight fire with fire. There has been the

disinclination to resort to the regular methods of arbitration; the readiness (even the determination) to launch an illegal strike to win a spectacular triumph; the bitterness and restlessness that come from prolonged inactivity under tense circumstances; the open defiance of authority, and the use of violence; the reaching after rights vaguely defined and supported by incoherent emotion.

This decision to fight one type of demagogic leadership by a demagogic leadership of another type has evidently been resisted by a number of the Roman Catholic clergy. One parish priest in the area directly involved has emphatically disassociated himself from this experiment, which he denounces as both wrong and dangerous.

A similar stand is taken by other clergymen. It appears, for example, in an article by Rev. Father Pierre Gravel in the current issue of *La Semaine Religieuse*, the official organ of the archdiocese of Quebec:

“The Sovereign Pontiff never, never approved such excesses of demagogy,” he writes. “On the contrary, he loudly reprovved them, and under all circumstances. And, on all occasions, he recommended respect for truth, respect for persons, respect for property, respect for authority also. Let us take care. Our province in other days had the reputation for the most truthful of social orders because it was closed to all demagogic infiltrations... Now the seeds of hatred are being sown.”

No doubt the Catholic Syndicates have suffered in the past from the more aggressive and irresponsible methods which some of their international rivals have been prepared to adopt. But it hardly seems that the best course has been chosen to meet this competitive challenge. Demagogy, on whatever grounds, is no key to sound progress.

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