

962

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
ACADEMY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Volume II

1911-1912

EDITED BY
HENRY RAYMOND MUSSEY

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THE ACADEMY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, NEW YORK

1913

A FEDERAL COMMISSION ON INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS—WHY IT IS NEEDED

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THE most critical issues pending in modern states are those between employers and employed, and in our own country they are coming to have an overshadowing importance. This is because the nation is democratic and is becoming more and more industrial, and the demand is insistently made that the voting power be used to improve the laborer's economic status.

How much a government can do in promoting the settlement of the wages problem can be known only after rather long experimenting; but it is clear that in any case the problem must be settled by some action on the part of the people. If the manner of settlement is right, we can count on prosperity, peace, and at least an approach to contentment; if it is wrong, there will be embitterment and serious peril; while so long as there is no settlement at all, industry will go haltingly, classes will be increasingly antagonistic, and the government will have no basis for a permanent policy. Law-making will yield to whatever pressure is for the moment the strongest.

No one can guarantee that a commission will be able to answer, once for all, the questions that chiefly perplex us, but it should be able to do much in that direction, and at least put us in the way of getting the answers we seek. Some of the most essential facts are not now known. No one can positively tell how great the income is which has to be divided between employers and employed. Statistics of income have never been made complete, but a commission can make the most of what figures there are and it can obtain more. Moreover, testing, collecting and arranging figures will be a service of the highest value, and a commission which has the confidence of the public

will be able to prepare statistical material which is fit to be the basis of public and private action.

Some facts which are needed have to do with the difficulties inherent in the industrial system, and others with experiments already tried for dealing with them. There is a long chapter of attempts made in our own states and in foreign countries to make employer and men more like partners and less like enemies. It is necessary to know how much each one of these efforts has accomplished.

The supreme question is a moral one. Is labor generally getting its due? A belief in some quarters that it is not, explains the embitterment of the once cordial relations of employer and employe. If there is any way of knowing in what part of the system labor gets all that is due to it and in what parts it gets less, and if there is any way of ascertaining what preventable causes stand in the way of justice, that discovery should be rated as in the first rank of discoveries making for the improvement of mankind. A belief that the laborer is wronged and that he will never get justice without a revolution accounts for the growth of the dangerous parties that constitute the extreme left of the labor movement. A belief that much can be done without revolution—that reforms will work well and revolution extremely ill for the workers themselves—accounts for the earnest constructive work to which a great majority of citizens are committed. We need therefore an authorized list of such reforms as can claim immediate support.

There are many things we need to be sure of in connection with the policy of reform. Some efforts to change the terms of distribution in favor of the workers react badly on the amount to be divided. Strikes and lockouts do so, and so does the policy which organized labor sometimes adopts, of reducing its own efficiency—the so-called “ca’ canny” of the English trade-unionist. Different in its working, but closely connected with these measures on the part of the workers, is the employer’s effort to reduce the output of his own mills and of other mills of like kind, for the sake of exacting higher prices from the community. If we can stop all such efforts, how much will society gain and what part of the gain will fall to the laborer?

Of course there will be more to be divided, but how can we cause the excess to be shared fairly?

In so far as the laborers’ plan of limiting the number of pieces they can turn out is concerned, that appears, on its face, to be an absurdity. How can any one expect to make his wages greater by making his product smaller? And yet this plan of action has some motive. There must be a way in which, during a limited time and for a limited number of persons, it may do something which, in their view, is rational. The whole evolution that has led to such tactics should be examined and, in the light of history, statistics and economic principles, a reasonable plan of action should be determined.

Even the basic question of the justice and the utility of the organization of labor is here and there called in question. This means more than the rightfulness of particular things that trade unionists do; it concerns the principle of trade unionism, rather than the practises which have grown up under it. If there were any real doubt as to the necessity and the justice of organizing laborers for collective action, that question would easily take the first rank in importance. There is no real uncertainty, however, as to this fundamental point, but there is actual danger that, in taking ground against the violent measures of some unions, even reasonable men may range themselves against the principle of union; and they will do so more and more as the opinion gains ground that strikes are useless without violence.

Can labor get on without actual strikes? How far can strikes, when they occur, succeed without violence? Is there any danger that a rigorous enforcement of law, without tribunals of arbitration for the settlement of wage questions, will leave laborers helpless in their employers’ hands? On the other hand, is there danger that no enforcement or a lax enforcement of the law for protecting persons and property would make the employers comparatively helpless and invite anarchy in every great industrial center?

Sad indeed would be a state in which peaceful strikes would lead to starving the workers and violent ones would destroy the social order. Verily, it is a choice between the devil and the deep sea! But fortunately there is an alternative. Suc-

cessful arbitration may both preserve order and do justice. Recent history records a long series of possible measures aiming to secure the laborer against exploitation, and the employer and the non-union worker from the various forms of *sabotage*. There are conciliation, arbitration by committees created by the contestants, each for a particular dispute, and arbitration by permanent tribunals. There is adjudication having no coercive power, and taking place only as a tribunal is invoked by one or both contestants, and there is the same kind of adjudication which acts on its own initiative, though still without power to enforce its decisions. There are tribunals that have full coercive power, since they can fortify their decisions by fines or other penalties for those who refuse to accept them. There is a plan which requires no formal coercion, but invokes a very real power when it publishes a decision. It investigates the claims of workmen, announces a just rate of pay and merely relies on a stern repression of disorder in case the rate is refused. Workers who then refuse a really just rate are not able to carry their point by "slugging" the men who accept it.

There is much more to be investigated and it is clear that the field of inquiry is enormously large. That many studies and fruitful ones have been made in this domain is no reason for opposing the creation of a commission. It can serve as a competent jury to weigh the arguments of those who have already put their conclusions on record. The mass of literature on this subject is so vast that no one reads the whole of it, and many valuable parts of it reach very few persons. If a commission makes the most of the studies of the past, if it summarizes conclusions and weighs the arguments in favor of them, its reports should be very illuminating to the general public. Even a small measure of success in so a vast an undertaking would be a sufficient reward for the labor and the outlay it would cost. It might easily open a vista leading to a state of future peace, comfort and justice, gained without an overthrow of the social order followed by a more than doubtful effort to build a new one.