

THE CHURCH AND WORKER EDUCATION IN THE U.S.A.

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THE first attempts in the realm of worker education in the United States were made by Father Paul Dietz, a priest of the archdiocese of New York, more or less at the same time as Father Plater, S.J., was laying the foundations for the Catholic Social Guild in England. In 1910 he started to organize the scattered activities of individual Catholics in the fields of social education and action. He was spurred on by the hostile attitude of a number of Catholics to the American Federation of Labour (AFL), an association of craft unions headed by Samuel Gompers, and so with a group of Catholic AFL officials he founded the Militia of Christ for Social Services. The object of the Militia was to prevent socialist influence from increasing in the unions and to combat the 'integrist' Catholics who would have condemned the AFL out of hand. In the following year the Social Service Commission of the American Federation of Catholic Societies was formed with Father Dietz as its secretary, and with its growth the Militia gradually declined. In 1920 came the National Catholic Welfare Conference, the peace-time successor of the National Catholic War Council, set up by the American bishops to minister to general Catholic life in the U.S.A. They appointed as head of its Department of Social Action Mgr John A. Ryan, who had been the author of the progressive 'Bishops' Programme of Social Reconstruction' published in 1919.

Until the depression of the 1930's most of the social study and social action of Catholics in the U.S.A. was stimulated, encouraged and initiated by the Social Action Department under Mgr Ryan's dynamic leadership. Perhaps the most important of its activities in relation to worker education was the Catholic Conference on Industrial Relations which was founded in 1922. Its purpose was 'to promote the study and understanding of industrial problems in the light of Catholic social teaching and to advance the knowledge and practice of this teaching in industrial life'. Over the years the CCIP has conducted more than 125 such

conferences in major American cities where employers, union officials, economists, clerical and lay speakers were brought together to discuss such matters as wages, hours, prices, social legislation and management-labour relations. Some of the conferences would bring together as many as a thousand participants for one or more days, while the average attendance would be about five hundred with a better than average representation from the trade union movement.¹ These conferences certainly brought—for the first time—the Catholic approach to social problems to a mass audience, although their chief weakness was that in only a few cases was there a sustained follow-up. The conferences stimulated but did not, in any exact and lasting sense, educate. Latterly this 'travelling school of social thought' seems to be on the decline. In one respect this is a good sign, for it probably means that the pioneer work done by the CCIP is now being done by diocesan groups (e.g. a local chapter of CCIP was founded in 1948 in Columbus, Ohio) and by other agencies and groups who no longer feel the need for organization from Washington or for outside assistance. Since 1940 the Social Action Department has also conducted a one-week summer school for relatively small groups of women workers. In recent years, as the interest of the American clergy in worker education has grown, the Department has published monthly *Social Action Notes for Priests* which now goes to 3,500 priests throughout the United States.

It must be said that throughout the delirious twenties the Church in the United States was not seized with the importance of social problems. An heroic lead was given by Mgr Ryan, his assistant Fr Raymond McGowan and a few priests associated with them, but it met with little response. Mgr Ryan himself said that during this period 'social thinking and social action were chilled and stifled in an atmosphere of pseudo-prosperity and thinly disguised materialism'. Even labour had grown listless in its fight for better working conditions and he noted 'a decline in militancy and a spirit of class satisfaction and selfishness' on the part of the unions. Then came the stock market crash of 1929 followed

1 These meetings were important as the only regular organized means of educating Catholic employers. That they are still needed for this purpose, at least in some areas, was demonstrated recently in New Orleans. Last June, in a paid advertisement in a New Orleans daily paper, a group of sixty-six Catholic businessmen criticized their Archbishop for 'injecting a non-existent moral issue' into a controversy over an anti-union bill before the State legislature.

by the great depression of the early '30s. The reaction to this was twofold: the growth of Communist influence and the New Deal legislation of President Roosevelt. This legislation ushered in an era of bloodless revolution, and one of its most immediate effects was the phenomenal growth of union membership. Between the passage in 1935 of the National Labour Relations Act and 1940, the membership of trade unions in the U.S.A. went from three to nine millions—it is now over sixteen million.

The first Catholic reaction to this general ferment was the foundation in 1933 of a monthly paper, *The Catholic Worker*, by Dorothy Day, a convert to Catholicism from Communism, and Peter Maurin, a kind of Americanized Léon Bloy if such is conceivable. The paper became a rallying point for Catholics all over the country who were looking for some dynamic statement of Catholic thought with which to confront the turbulent social scene. Discussion groups were formed in many cities and many of the rank and file for the first time found both a source of social education and a mouthpiece. But the chief importance of *The Catholic Worker* was seminal and catalytic, for it stimulated many new ideas, programmes and activities in the Catholic body. The chief of these was the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU), which was founded to give effect to the instruction of Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno* that 'side by side with [neutral] trade unions there must always be associations which aim at giving their members a thorough moral and religious training, that these in turn may impart to the labour unions to which they belong the upright spirit which should direct their entire conduct'. In February 1937 a number of Catholic laymen met in the New York headquarters of *The Catholic Worker* and launched ACTU to be a bridge between the labour movement and the Church. It spread steadily throughout the country, at its peak reached a membership of ten thousand, and at various times had groups in nearly twenty industrial centres, organizing courses of study in trade union history, parliamentary procedure, Catholic social principles, etc. The Second World War caused a great deal of retrenchment and the ground lost then has never been regained: at the ACTU convention held in Cleveland at the beginning of July seven groups were represented. There are a few other groups not affiliated to ACTU, the Catholic Labour Guild of Boston, St Joseph's Guild of Buffalo, the Catholic Labour Institute of Los

Angeles and the Catholic Labour Alliance of Chicago, which does not restrict its membership to trade unionists but is open to all 'who support the common, democratic objective of building a social order founded upon the principles of the labour encyclicals'. But the membership of all these groups is relatively small, while ACTU itself seems definitely on the down-grade.

Despite their small membership some of the groups exercise a wide influence—through their papers: *Work* (published by the Catholic Labour Alliance of Chicago), *The Labour Leader* (published by ACTU in New York), *The Wage Earner* (published by ACTU in Detroit), *The Catholic Labour Observer* (published by the Buffalo Diocesan Labour School). The first of these has a national circulation of twelve thousand, and the circulation of the others does not exceed four thousand in each case. The Buffalo paper is edited by a priest, the other three are edited and staffed by laymen. All are published monthly. During the years of the fierce internal struggle between left and right wings in the United Auto Workers (CIO) union *The Wage Earner* appeared weekly and played a prominent part. All of these publications are frequently quoted in the columns of official labour papers, and some or all of them are read by the editors and educational directors of most unions in America.

Two questions suggest themselves. What has been the effectiveness of ACTU? Why has it not grown into a nation-wide movement? It may be that the answer to the first question will throw light on the second. In some places ACTU was more of a weapon for fighting Communism than an organization for the formation of Catholic leaders, i.e. the grand strategy was planned by the officials and the members were used like men on a chess-board. In some places where these caucuses have been obvious they have caused factionalism and sectarianism in the unions concerned. More than this, once the job (viz. of blocking or of displacing the Communists) had been done, the members, having no further *raison d'être*, tended to drift away. But on the credit side it should be said that wherever possible ACTU has tried to stimulate the organization of the unorganized, and a number of unions today owe their strength to efforts made on their behalf by local ACTU chapters. Most important of all, it has provided a meeting ground for many Catholics who had been carrying on a lone fight in their unions, either as members or as officials. It has

provided them with a body of doctrine, a set of principles, but above all with the opportunity and the occasion of mutual help and encouragement, with the sense that they are not battling alone. It has kept them in touch with sympathetic and understanding priests who, while keeping them straight on doctrinal matters, have not been afraid to join them on the picket line during a strike. In turn this has brought non-Catholic labour leaders into trusting contact with these 'labour priests' to their mutual advantage. A striking example of this was provided last May when Father Raymond Clancy, Director of Social Action of the archdiocese of Detroit, was, on the occasion of his sacerdotal silver jubilee, made an honorary life member of the UAW-CIO by its president, Walter Reuther, a staunch Lutheran. The chief reason why ACTU has not grown, apart from the apathy engendered by general prosperity, is that the average Catholic worker has found what he needs in the Catholic labour schools rather than in ACTU.

Stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from Boston to San Francisco, there are more than a hundred of these labour schools which have come into existence since the first, St Xavier's, was founded in New York in 1936.² One of the first actions of the newly founded ACTU in 1937 was to set up three labour schools in metropolitan New York. Gradually in one form or another they spread across the whole country. There were, and are, five different types of institute. The simplest is based on a parish and has a purely local appeal. Then there is the diocesan institute, like the Buffalo Diocesan Labour College directed by Mgr John Boland, who was the first chairman of the New York State Labour Relations Board. Or it may be attached to a college or a university; almost every Jesuit college in the country has an institute for worker education attached to it. A fourth type is an institute for general adult education, such as the Sheil School of Chicago and the Institute of Social Education of Cleveland, which includes three or four labour courses. Finally, there are the schools organised by ACTU and similar bodies. The staff of these latter usually consists of priests, lawyers with a social conscience, officials of government agencies (usually from the Department of Labour), university lecturers and occasionally

² This is still one of the most successful schools, offering in its schedule for Spring 1954 no less than twenty-three courses.

industrial relations experts. In almost all cases the teachers give their services free and the fees of students are purely nominal. Typical courses, taken from the current programme of the Xavier Institute of Industrial Relations, are: 'Health and Welfare and Pension Planning', 'Parliamentary Procedure', 'Inside the Union', 'Handling Grievances', 'You and Labour Laws', 'Contract Negotiations', 'Labour's Rights and Responsibilities', 'Beyond Collective Bargaining'.

Despite their initial success, there seems to be agreement between directors of labour schools throughout the nation that in the past five years their influence has been declining. In fact no more than five or six out of the hundred and six operating in 1949 have kept up their numbers. Many of the smaller schools, e.g. the thirty-four parish labour schools that existed ten years ago in Detroit, have disappeared completely. Many reasons have been advanced for this decline in appeal and effectiveness of the labour schools, but two are fundamental. First, a decade or more ago there were few universities with evening classes appealing to union members as such, and few unions had any real education programmes, for they were too occupied with the problems of mushrooming growth. At this time the Catholic labour schools stood alone in offering this service. In recent years, however, there has been a flowering of such programmes in both unions and universities, and they have staffs and facilities that can be matched by only a very few Catholic labour schools. Hence the Catholic schools are now at a disadvantage in providing for those who need *information*. Secondly, now that the immediate problems of union organizing and factional strife have diminished, the keen union members are looking for something more than information, they are looking for *formation*. And this cannot be provided in the lecture hall, even with the maximum of student participation. It calls for different methods and a much greater stress on the idea of a universal apostolate. In other words, a man is far more than a member of a trade union: he has family responsibilities, civic and neighbourhood responsibilities; and a system or organization which merely concentrates on one aspect is bound in the long run to lose its appeal. Two significant facts confirm this. During the past year two of the most successful labour schools in the U.S.A. were those run by ACTU in New York for Puerto Ricans and by the Catholic Labour Institute in Los Angeles for

Mexicans. Both Puerto Ricans and Mexicans are roughly in the same position as the American industrial workers of fifteen or twenty years ago. A number of directors of labour schools are coming to accept the view expressed recently by Fr Donnelly, director of the Hartford Diocesan Labour Institute: 'I am convinced that the intensive training of a small, carefully selected group will be far more successful than the more pretentious programmes with wide publicity, fair attendance and results far out of proportion to the efforts.' Experiments in this direction have already begun in Hartford and in the 'Service Committees' set up last year by the Catholic Labour Alliance in Chicago. It seems likely that at the national conference of labour school directors to be held in Washington this October sentiment will move towards a generally agreed acceptance that formation of the whole man is more important, and probably responds better to the workers' needs and aspirations, than courses that merely provide information. So the next few years are likely to see many experiments in this direction of forming an élite in the mass, and it seems clear that the social movement will concern itself in much more detail with the techniques of training lay leaders. It is difficult if not impossible to assess the extent to which the growth of the Y.C.W. in America has influenced this trend, but it is certain that the fact that there are Y.C.W. groups now in more than a hundred American towns and cities is highly significant. The Chicago paper, *Work*, regularly carries news items and news stories about the activities of the Y.C.W. as well as articles by its leaders, while one of the original founders of ACTU wrote recently in an article in *Commonweal* that he was convinced that the future of Catholic worker education in the U.S.A. must be along these lines.

Thus Catholic efforts in the field of worker education in the U.S.A. are at the end of a phase. Among a few of the old-timers there is a tendency to dwell on past achievement, as was the case, for example, at the Cleveland convention already mentioned, but in general most responsible members and officers are in a mood to re-evaluate the whole movement. One may therefore look forward with confidence to new and realistic development in Catholic social action in America as it moves forward into a new phase of activity geared to the needs of the times.