

The Duty of Labor and Management

In commenting on the government seizure of oil refineries the other day Harry C. Wiess, president of the Humble Oil and Refining Company, called attention to one phase of the current labor disputes which seems largely to have been ignored by both the unions and the government. That is the public's interest in the matter. As Mr. Wiess correctly pointed out, the distribution of gasoline is so important that the threat of a paralyzing nationwide strike of refinery workers was more of a public issue than a corporate issue.

Twelve years of temporizing and coddling by the administration at Washington apparently have given some labor leaders, as well as some government officials, an erroneous conception of the proper role of the government in disputes involving two warring groups. The government, which derives all of its powers from the people, should be a fearless and impartial umpire concerned only with the interest of all the people.

There is an abundance of evidence that some labor unions, despite the fact that they represent but a small total of the population, have come to regard the government as the protector of their special interests. A recent indication of this is the statement made by O. A. Knight, president of the Oil Workers International Union, upon his return to Fort Worth from Washington. According to this official, the seizure of refineries by the Navy "imposes upon the government the responsibility of seeing that the oil workers' reasonable demands are met."

The Star-Telegram can not agree that the seizures impose on the government any such responsibility, any more than they impose on the government the responsibility of protecting the refineries against demands which the oil workers might make.

If the government has any responsibility in the matter at all, beyond protecting the public interest, it is as a fact-finding agency to determine both the reasonableness of union demands and the ability of management to meet those demands without adversely affecting the people's interest by setting in motion an inflationary spiral.

As has been pointed out previously, government seizure of the refineries did nothing toward settling the dispute between the workers and the owners of the plants. It did not even carry the assurance that the idle workers would return to work. They did so promptly and of their own volition, rather than be placed in the unenviable position of refusing to work for their government. And certainly it does not mean that the workers will necessarily get all for which they are asking.

After the refinery seizures were decided upon Secretary of Labor Schwollenbach said he did not intend the step to set a precedent for government action in other labor disputes. It is true that the refinery strikes were interfering with military needs, whereas there may be many disputes in which this will not be the case, and in these the authority of the government to take control of private property is in serious doubt.

But under present laws, the determination of whether a work stoppage, or even a threatened stoppage, would interfere with military needs is left solely to the judgment of the president. As long as the War Labor Disputes Act is in effect, the president need only to justify a seizure in his own mind as being related in some way, however remote, to the continuing war emergency, and he can order some government agency to take control.

The War Labor Disputes Act, however, is not a permanent law. It was enacted for the duration of the war and six months thereafter. The fighting phase of the war is over, but neither the president nor Congress has yet proclaimed the official end of the emergency. What is to happen when the end does come and the government wartime power to seize private property ceases to exist? Surely

the only hope of escape from national economic strangulation does not lie in the indefinite continuance of these wartime powers.

As Mr. Wiess said, it is a bad day for the people of the United States when any situation requires the government to enter into private business activities. Another way out must be found, and finding that way is as much a responsibility of labor as of management and the government.

Secretary Schwollenbach, who certainly is no enemy of labor, has given its leaders and unions in general some sage advice lately which they would do well to heed. He has pointed out that labor's most powerful weapon is not the right to strike, as is popularly supposed, but the support of public opinion. The obvious inference, of course, is that the public's patience is being sorely tried and there is a very real danger that when the people have reached the limit of their endurance labor will have lost that support.

Mr. Schwollenbach also has pointed out, and nothing truer has been said, that "every right has its responsibilities." Furthermore, the new secretary of labor has been quoted as saying privately that "the best friend of labor is one who tells it frankly that it is sowing the seeds of its own destruction, and that it should get down to work on peacetime reconstruction."

Industry is by no means blameless for the present status of labor-management relations. It is indisputable that for years it took advantage of labor in the matter of long hours and inadequate compensation, and tried to operate on the basis of "the public be damned." Then the inevitable reaction set in, and more and more government regulation has been the result. Labor should not make the same mistake. Two wrongs will not make a right. Labor in recent years has come into its own with the approval of the public. If it now goes to extremes in exercising its new rights and ignores its obligations to the people it is simply inviting government regulation and taking a chance on losing much of the ground that it has gained.

There is a common ground on which labor and industry can and should meet on the basis of fairness and equitable treatment for both, and it is the duty of both to search for that ground until it is found. A contract which is not fair to both sides is not a good contract, no matter which side has the advantage.

America has won a great victory abroad. It would be a sad state of affairs indeed if industry and labor do not now join hands for a greater victory at home. This can not be accomplished by strikes and lockouts.

The old railroad crossing sign, "Stop, Look and Listen" is mighty good advice which only the most foolhardy ignore. It is to be hoped that in this critical hour the advice will be heeded by industry and labor. Both should use common horse sense and neither should be like the shortsighted man who admitted losing heavily in a poker game but boasted that no sucker ever bluffed him.

Military Justice

When a military court imposes the death penalty upon a German general for having wantonly executed 15 American commandos who were among our bravest fighting men, many persons are reassured that justice in a world afflicted with uncertainty, change and dubious ideas, still prevails.

Army courts-martial in Europe are assessing maximum punishment upon high officers as well as enlisted men who acted in the role of executioners. The court convicting the German general repudiated the stereotyped defense that he was only obeying Hitler's orders, and in that respect a precedent was set for breaking the immunity formerly extended higherups in war. If punishment ever is to be a deterrent of the high crime of aggression and war, it must extend to those at the top.

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