

THE MORALITY OF THE STRIKE

In these times of social and economic reconstruction, no subject looms up more important than the strike. In it are summarized the principle labor problems of the hour. Over and above the resultant physical injuries to persons and property and the hardships to both employer and employee, the strike is almost always a cause of inconvenience to the general public and because of this is generally discussed. Attempts have been made to prohibit the strike by law; but such procedure involves a question of constitutional and moral rights, which phase of the subject it is not our intention to consider. All are agreed that a solution of this great problem that is presented to our age must be found, if permanent peace and industrial prosperity are to be secured. We offer a part of the Catholic solution to the problem in this general outline of the moral aspect of the strike.

A strike may be defined as the organized cessation from work by a number of employees in an industry to compel the employer to comply with certain demands.¹ In every strike there are two distinct essential actions effected by the individual employees—they agree among themselves to quit work and they actually do so. In quitting their work, they do not sever all relations with their employer. If they did so, there would not be a strike. They cease work with the avowed intention of again resuming their labor as soon as a redress of their grievances is granted by the employer. Hence it is that the usual economic relations of the employer and employee are suspended during the duration of the strike.

Has the individual the right to suspend his relations with his employer or is such action morally evil? A workman before entering into an agreement to work for another is free to give or withhold his labor. When he decides to give his labor to another and receives "just" remuneration in salary, that natural right of giving or withholding his labor is limited by the employer's right to receive the fruit of his employee's labor. Just how far the workman's right to withhold his labor is limited by the employer's right to the fruit of his labor must be determined by the tenets of justice. Absolutely speaking, man has no more right to suspend his relations with his employer when-

¹ Tanquerey, *Theol. Moral*, vol. III, n. 844.

soever he wishes, than the employer has of discharging the employee at his will. Justification for a strike can be found only in the fact that there are present reasons or causes sufficiently just to warrant the precedence of the worker's right over the employer's right. If there is not a sufficiently just cause, the action of the employees in quitting work will be morally evil; for instance, if a valid contract has been entered into by both parties, to break that contract by a strike or lock-out would be immoral.

Therefore, the action of the workmen in suspending relations with their employer will be morally good if there is present a just cause to warrant such action. The pivot question therefore is: What may be construed as a just cause of a strike? As the workmen strike to remove the cause of their discontent and by their action they hope to force the employer to accede to their demands, the consideration of these demands is of utmost importance in determining whether the causes are just and whether this or that strike is morally good or evil.

In considering the nature of strike ultimatums, the action of the employees is either defensive or ameliorative. When an employer subjects his workmen to unjust oppressive conditions of labor, the workmen strike to defend their natural rights and such action constitutes a defensive strike. On the other hand, the employees themselves may seek to better their present working conditions, which however are neither unjust nor oppressive, as when workmen demand a wage increase in excess of the minimum living-wage, or seek shorter hours of employment. The drastic measures taken to enforce such demands result in an ameliorative strike.

Granting for the moment that in the defensive strike, the laboring conditions are oppressive, the defensive strike is always justifiable in itself. Man's right to life must be a fundamental consideration in the relations between employer and employee. To impoverish the workers and expose them to physical and moral dangers are measures unjust and oppressive, for they violate man's inherent right to life. In such a case the employer is an unjust aggressor and it is always licit to defend oneself against unjust aggression. Besides, man has a clearly-defined right not only to a minimum living-wage, a wage sufficient to

support life, but also to earn that wage within reasonable hours of employment and under sanitary laboring conditions.

The question of the worker's wages has been definitely settled in the field of speculation, but to interpret these speculative conclusions in terms of dollars and cents is a difficult task owing to the fluctuating conditions in our costs and standards of living. That all workers are entitled to a living wage "is a dictate of natural justice more imperious than any bargain between man and man."² "Man's labor is necessary, for without the results of labor a man cannot live and self-conservation is a law of nature, which it is wrong to disobey. . . . The preservation of life is the bounden duty of each and all and to fail therein is a crime. It follows that each one has a right to procure what is required in order to live."³ A salary, therefore, sufficient to provide for the workman's daily sustenance and for his future welfare is due the workman by a natural right. "The right of labor to a living wage with decent maintenance for the present and provisions for the future is generally recognized. The right of Capital to a fair day's work, for a fair wage is equally plain."⁴ When an employer pays less than the minimum living-wage, he is guilty of injustice.

An employer may pay a living-wage, but still impose upon his workmen onerous hours of employment or unsanitary laboring conditions. "It is neither justice nor humanity so to grind men down with excessive labor as to stupify their minds and wear out their bodies. Man's powers, like his general nature, are limited and beyond these limits he cannot go. His strength is developed and increased by use and exercise, but only on condition of due intermission and proper rest. Daily labor, therefore, must so be regulated that it may not be protracted during longer hours than strength admits. How many and how long the interval of rest should be, will depend upon the nature of the work and upon the health and strength of the workmen."⁵

It is never right or just to force men to work under conditions that imperil their lives, health or morals. The National Conference of Social Work held in Cleveland in 1912 outlined the plan of social activity regarding unsanitary laboring condi-

² Leo XIII, *The Condition of Labor*.

³ *Op. Cit.*

⁴ Pastoral Letter of the Hierarchy of the United States. Feb., 1920.

⁵ Leo XIII, *The Condition of Labor*.

tions. "Industry must submit to such public regulation as will make it a means of life and health, not of death or inefficiency. This regulation has to do with hours, safety, overstrain and other conditions of the day's labor; with premature employment, unemployment, incapacity and other factors which shorten or impair the length of the working life; with insurance against those risks of trade—death, injury, occupational disease—which break in upon the working years and wipe out earnings. . . . The community should bring such subnormal industrial conditions within the scope of governmental action and control, in the same way as subnormal sanitary conditions are subject to public regulation and for the same reason,—because they threaten general welfare."

But when an employer pays a just salary to his employees, which is at least the minimum living-wage and in no way burdens them with oppressive hours or unsanitary conditions of labor, can such action as an ameliorative strike be justified? The general demand in an ameliorative strike is for an increase in wages or for shorter hours of employment. In this question of the worker's wages, justice places two extremes, which limit the actions of both employer and employee. The employer is restricted from paying less than the "minimum living-wage" and the employees are prohibited from demanding more than the "summum-justum" wage. The "highest-just" wage is the maximum value that labor is worth. However, to determine that wage in a money equivalent is almost impossible, since the various conditions of employment demand individual consideration. Workmen, it is clear, have the right to demand whatever salary their labor entitles them to in strict justice. To demand more than the "highest-just" wage would be to demand more than labor is worth and would be unjust.

A shorter working-day may also be demanded. To lay down general principles in this regard is a difficult matter owing to the diversity of industrial pursuits, some more tedious and irksome, others of a less disagreeable type. To determine just exactly what constitutes a reasonable working day will depend on the nature of the work and upon the health and strength of the workmen. Public opinion in this country places eight hours as a reasonable length of a working day, for "it would seem that the eight-hour day is not too long from the view-point of

health and morals.”⁶ On the other hand, “those who labor in mines and quarries, and in work within the bowels of the earth, should have shorter hours in proportion as their labor is more severe and more trying to health.”⁷

The action of the individual employees in uniting among themselves and agreeing to pit the strength of their numbers and combined resources against the economic forces of the employer can of itself in no way effect the morality of the strike. Should the recognition of the principle that the workmen have the right to combine and bargain collectively with the employer be the cause of the strike, such action would be justified. Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical recommends the establishment of societies among the laborers “to safeguard the interest of the wage-earners.”

Moralists prescribe the fulfillment of certain conditions absolutely necessary for the justification of either the defensive or ameliorative strike. “Such paralysis of labor (as a strike entails) not only effects the masters and their work-people, but is extremely injurious to trade and to the general interests of the public.”⁸ Hence the cause of the strike must not only be just but of sufficient gravity to warrant the many evils to society which inevitably result. “It is an indisputable principle of ethics that so many and such grave evils cannot be permitted without a grave reason which is proportionate to those evils.”⁹ All peaceful means to avoid the strike must be exhausted and there must prevail a well-founded hope of a successful termination of the conflict, before the action of the workers in paralyzing labor and starting an industrial war can be justified. Violence in a strike can never be sanctioned, for the evil effects of violence will always out-balance the good effects that might accrue.

The moral aspect of the strike must necessarily be defined with a certain abstraction, which renders most difficult its application in the particular instances. The partisanship of the daily press adds to the difficulty. Their unfair and biased propaganda preclude the possibility of an impartial moral judgment. Even

⁶ Editorial Cath. Char. Rev., Oct., 1919.

⁷ Leo XIII, The Condition of Labor.

⁸ Op. Cit.

⁹ Tanquerey, Theol. Moral, vol. III, n. 845.

when the clear and unadulterated facts are presented to the public, the causes of a strike are generally interwoven with so many complicated conditions, charges and countercharges, that a definitive decision in each case cannot be reached till the smoke of battle has cleared away.

—Bro. Andrew Nowlen, O. P.

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THE MOUNT OF THE HOLY CROSS

In the heart of Colorado, where the mighty Rockies rise
 Thrusting gleaming silver spires into the sky,
 Where the greenish-purple shadows on the heights delight our
 eyes

As they fall upon the virgin snow on high,
 Tow'rs a peak which since creation has inspired the hearts of
 men

With an all-pervading reverence and awe.
 For upon the lofty summit, where the sunbeams glint again
 Limned in snows too high and rare to dim and thaw
 Gleams a cross, more pure and beautiful, more marvellous and
 vast

Than all this shining wilderness of snow;
 On the rosy granite precipice it has hung through all the past
 Above the surging sea of clouds that rolls below.
 On the summit of the mountain God has placed His holy sign
 That men may see its permanence and light,
 A perpetual memento of the Sacrifice Divine
 Sculptured here before all ages by His might.

—Bro. Francis Vollmer, O. P.