

which became the occasion and stimulus for the development of the established shop steward system.

The underlying dispute in Coventry was a mere trifle, comparatively, arising out of the interpretation and application of an award which had been handed down by one of the Government's labor committees. The employers agreed to treat with their employees, collectively. Thereupon the workers sent their shop stewards; but the employers refused to meet them. Many of these shop stewards, in Coventry as elsewhere, had their regular place in the regular trade unions and carried shop stewards' cards. But owing to circumstances created by the war, their number in Coventry, as elsewhere, had grown very greatly; there were 1,500 when the 55,000 workers went out on strike.

The employers of Coventry based their refusal to treat with their employees through the shop stewards on the plea that they had agreements to deal with the district officials of the various craft and labor unions. The workers insisted upon representation by the shop stewards and, when the employers persisted in their refusal to recognize this new type of negotiators, walked out, late in November, 1917.

Now, the point of likeness between the situation in Coventry as here described and the situation in Lynn, Mass., is that, so far as effective functioning was concerned, the district officials of the British trade unions had practically been eliminated from the scene, since they were tied hand and foot by the famous Treasury Agreement stipulating abrogation, for the duration of the war, of trade union rules, customs and practices. The Coventry companies would, therefore, have dealt merely with representatives of their own employees if they had from the outset acceded to the demand that they meet the shop stewards. In Coventry, in other words, the effect of the Treasury Agreement produced what in Lynn is the result of the determination of the General Electric Company¹ not to deal with the trade unions. Again, as in the case of the employees' representatives in the General Electric Company's works, the shop stewards in Coventry were trade unionists, though, at the time of the strike, not all of them may have held official shop stewards' cards.

During the negotiations which supervened after a few days' duration of the strike, between the employers' association, the officials of the national trade unions parties in interest, and the shop stewards'

delegates, a situation developed which, again, is very instructive. The employers presented no objections to dealing with shop stewards as such and pleaded only that the issue of the place and function of this new type of workers' representatives had been forced by the Coventry workers before the convening of the Central Conference, set for December 8, 1917, at which the question was to come up for discussion and settlement. The Coventry Engineering Joint Committee—which would correspond, roughly, to the Metal Trades Council of Lynn—proposed "that the Coventry Engineering Joint Committee shall be the Executive Committee over all Shop Stewards and Works Committees affiliated." The officials of the national trade unions, very naturally, opposed this enlargement of the powers and prerogatives of the Coventry central body and the resultant loosening of contact between the shop stewards and the national trade unions of their own several crafts. In this position the national trade unions had the support of the organized employers, with the result that the Shop Stewards' Agreement of December 20, 1917, embodies their program. For paragraph 5 of this Agreement stipulates that—

Shop Stewards shall be subject to the control of the Trade Unions, and shall act in accordance with the rules and regulations of the Trade Unions and agreements with the employers so far as these affect the relation between employers and workpeople.

When, after the war, at a Central Conference convened at York early in January, 1919, the question of the shop stewards came up again, this time in connection with that of works committees, the organized employers, in another clause of the Agreement then in effect, took a position which seems to signify a change of front. The war being over, and the restoration of trade union conditions covered by a solemn pledge on the part of Parliament, the trade union officials were bound to regain much of their former strength and influence. The employers—shall we say *therefore?*—turned their favor to the shop stewards. What they proposed would, in effect and without question, have taken away from the national trade unions a part in the settlement of local disputes which they had long exercised.

The clause proposed by the employers' representatives at the Central Conference at York had, indeed, been embodied in the Agreement of December 20, 1917, and read:

In the event of a question arising which affects more than one branch of trade, or more than one department of the works, the negotiations thereon shall be conducted by the management with the Shop Stewards concerned. (Paragraph 9, clause 1, of the Agreement).

Now, the trade unions objected that the effect of the clause would be to abolish the right of trade union officials to enter the shops and discuss with the shop stewards grievances that might come up. Moreover, they felt that unless trade union officials were present at the negotiations defined in the above clause, some agreement might be arrived at which would affect not only one section, but the whole trade, leading possibly to a good deal of dissatisfaction. The York Central Conference adjourned without having accomplished the purpose for which it had been called, one cause of its inconclusiveness lying in the absence, or rather non-attendance, of representatives of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, the strongest union in the metal trades.

By early summer of the same year, however, the ever potent and admirable British common sense had prevailed and the difference was neatly compromised. By the agreement reached, the shop stewards received a recognized place and function, the work's committee in the metal trades shops being placed under their direct control, while, at the same time, the entire shop organization was linked up with that of the national trade unions. The controversy which had arisen at the York Central Conference was compromised by the provision that trade union officials should be present at negotiations over questions which affect more than one trade, with the understanding that a district representative of the employers' organization should also be present. Further to safeguard the inviolability of national agreements and arrangements, it was agreed that shop stewards and works committees should make no agreements to stand as valid which in any way conflicted with national agreements and arrangements for the settlement of disputes.

Without pressing too far the comparison between the Coventry situation, and what developed out of it, with the situation in Lynn, Mass., one may, I think, fairly venture the assertion that a closer relationship—and a recognized relationship—between the shop committee of the General Electric Company and the Metal Trades of Lynn is bound to develop in time, precisely as it happened in Coventry. The relation which now exists in Lynn is analagous to what in many engineering shops in England is known as "mutuality." Where this is practiced, an individual machinist bargains with his employer concerning the piece-price to be paid for a given job that cannot be brought under the rules of the accepted log of piece-prices; but there is a tacit understanding between employer and worker, and among the workers taken together, that no bargain will be entered into that will not meet the approval of the entire working force of the shop and, beyond that, of the entire craft. In this way the standards of the trade are safeguarded. Such "mutuality" will, of course, work satisfactorily only in "organized" shops, such as the General Electric Company works at Lynn. If any such pointing out be necessary, it need only be remarked that in Lynn it is not individual craftsmen but entire groups of craftsmen or workers, acting through their representatives, which act in conformity with workers' interests wider than the shop or works in which they are employed.

May not the solution of the conflicting principles of the "closed" and the "open" shop—which upon another occasion the writer has defined as being in one of its aspects merely a phase of a deeper issue, of the conflict, namely, between the principle of representativeness and the principle of competence—lie in the direction which the more experienced British employers and workers have indicated?

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