

The Application of the Collective Agreement and Personnel Administration

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THE READER'S POINT OF VIEW

THE APPLICATION OF THE COLLECTIVE AGREEMENT AND PERSONNEL ADMINISTRATION

In the month of April, 1949, you published in the Laval Industrial Relations Bulletin an article by M. Jean Gagné entitled: « The Application of the Collective Agreement and Personnel Administration ». The subject interested and intrigued me at the same time; I read the article with professional preoccupation, but I was unable to grasp the author's meaning.

M. Gagné wants employers « to favour the achievement of this improved method of dealing with their employees, through the medium of unions, in submitting themselves to the clauses of a collective agreement, of a decree that is law, or both at the same time ».

Is collective bargaining simply « a new method » of personnel administration? Is it concerned only with adding a new chapter to the old manuals of personnel directors? One gets a distinct impression, in reading M. Gagné's article, that collective bargaining only creates one more problem for the director of personnel. « We concern ourselves », he says, « with the study of the problem which the collective agreement presents to the personnel manager ». A fact « whether we wish it or not! » So why not be practical, admit it as such, and « learn how to fit it into the methods of the personnel directors and the policy makers of the industry? » It is, therefore, simply a problem of fitting a new method into an old policy: a method that cannot be avoided, a method which can perhaps yield good results, a method which can even « translate itself into terms of profit » if only industrial leaders are clever enough to consent to hold discussions with workers' unions.

If this is not the impression the author means to create, why not tell us what collective bargaining is? Why not also give a precise definition of

the true character of an industrial enterprise? Finally, how can one speak of collective bargaining without explaining clearly the role of a trade union in the enterprise?

If we conceive of collective bargaining simply as an instrument of negotiation, it is not surprising that the two interested parties take refuge « in an attitude which is far from the true spirit of collaboration ». For « to negotiate » may mean either to treat of an affair or to yield some powers, and men of affairs know very well, intuitively one might say, these two senses of the verb negotiate; and this has only made of them subtle opponents, would-be psychologists.

A firm, even though well organized and smoothly running, cannot progress without trade unionization, and the first task of union organization is, not to negotiate, but to establish a collective work agreement. If we recognize in a firm its nature as a community-of-work, we will have little difficulty in considering the collective agreement as the charter of that community, the framework in which the one part will meet the other and carry on harmonious relations. At the same time we will find quite natural the presence of a trade union in the firm, and we will recognize its right to participate completely in the directing of the community-of-work, of which it represents, in fact, one of the most important elements.

In this sense, collective bargaining is no longer a problem for the personnel director (to reply to M. Gagné's parenthetical remark: « if problem there is »). On the contrary, collective bargaining helps to solve his weightier problems by defining the status of the company and of the trade union in relation to one another, to the satisfaction of all concerned, and to the greatest interest of the firm, both as an economic unit of

production and as a community-of-work.

In such a conception of capital and labor relations, viz. relations between collaborators in a common task, the personnel director remains the representative of the legitimate authority; but he is at the same time, in his specific function, a collaborator with the union leaders in striving to apply, with the greatest possible harmony, the provisions of the collective agreement, without losing sight of what it is and must remain: the written expression of a common will.

To conceive of the collective agreement in any other spirit, even if one submits to it after negotiated « in good faith », is to make of it a traffic in human labor, the consequence of which can only be a disastrous misunderstanding between the two parties involved.

What, then, does M. Gagné wish to say when he characterizes collective bargaining as a « new method » of personnel administration? Does he mean by that that collective bargaining is a « go-between » (the word is his own) which the employer must, as far as he can, adroitly wheedle into his ancient game; or does he wish rather to indicate that it is the method, new to our century, of conceiving the relations between capital and labor? He does not say, and one has to read between the lines to arrive at the latter meaning, which I consider to be the only correct one.

I ask you therefore, Mr. Editor, to publish this letter in your Bulletin, in the interest of those who, like myself, have been intrigued by Mr. Gagné's article.

Please be assured, dear sir, of the great admiration I have for the Laval Bulletin, and of my gratitude for your attention.

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Quebec, October 6, 1949.