

report PUBLIC JUSTICE

Second Quarter, 2006

Vol. 29, No. 2

50 Years of Labor Practice The Christian Labour Association of Canada

Late last year a book that most Christians might find peculiar was published by the Christian Labour Association of Canada. It is Ed Grotenboer's *In Pursuit of Justice: So Far, So Good*, the history of the CLAC from 1952-2002 (go to www.clac.ca or call 905-670-7383). Grotenboer served as a representative and then as executive director of the CLAC for more than 30 years.

What's peculiar about such a book? Well, maybe North American Christians are familiar with Christian publishing companies and Christian colleges, and perhaps even with Christian lobby groups that push their causes in the political arena. But a *Christian* labor association? What in the world would that be? I even suspect that many U.S. Christians think that labor unions are themselves corruptions of the marketplace, working to restrain the freedom of corporate owners and interfering with market forces. How can a labor union be Christian?

If any of those questions comes to your mind, then buy this book and read it. The first chapter tells of the CLAC's origins and why it was formed by Christians who wanted to cooperate in their workplaces for the good of industry, management, consumers, and the laborers themselves. The reader will learn a great deal about contemporary labor practices and what workers are up against in trying to do an honest day's job.

The most interesting and educational chapter for anyone unfamiliar with labor movements and unions will probably be the middle chapter (3), "Campaigning for Freedom of Association." In most cases where labor unions operate, the closed shop is the rule. In other words, only one labor union is given the right to organize all workers at a single company. So if you want to work for that company, you must join the union that represents the workers there. One of CLAC's principles, by contrast, is that workers should be free to join the union they want, and government ought to uphold the principle of the open shop—several unions free to represent workers at the same company, as the workers choose. In other words, there should be freedom of association.

Grotenboer cites two incidents in the 1960s that exemplified the CLAC's approach to freedom of association and helped to launch its influence on the larger labor scene in Canada. First, there was the courage of Clarence Mostert.

After six months of complaint-free employment, Clarence Mostert was discharged in 1964 from his work as a diesel mechanic at Hoffars Ltd., in Vancouver, because he refused to become a member of the International Association of Machinists (IAM), the union with bargaining rights for the employees of Hoffars. Mostert, in refusing to join IAM as required by the collective agreement, stated he was not opposed to unions but that he could not join IAM because it was committed to Marxist ideology, contrary to his religious (Christian) convictions. Mostert was denied a copy of the union's constitution to prove his point, and, incredibly, was told it was only available to members. Eventually, he was permitted to view a copy at the union's head office, which confirmed that IAM was "founded upon the class struggle." The union forced Hoffars to comply with the closed-shop provision in the collective agreement and fire Mostert by threatening an illegal work stoppage. Mostert and CJL [the Committee for Justice and Liberty] appealed the dismissal on the basis of discrimination for religious beliefs to the Supreme Court of British Columbia and then to the province's Appeals Court, unsuccessfully in both instances.

The second case that Grotenboer cites is that of Dirk Hoogendoorn in Orangeville, Ontario. Hoogendoorn was the first employee hired by Greening Metal Products.

In 1965, the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) organized the plant's workforce with majority support and negotiated a collective agreement with Greening that did not require all employees to join the union. Hoogendoorn declined to join or support the union, as was his right under the collective agreement as it then stood. He did so because USWA acted contrary to his political and religious beliefs. Instead of paying dues to USWA, he voluntarily paid an amount equal to the monthly union dues to a charity, the Red Cross, in addition to paying dues to a CLAC local. [Nevertheless] the Steelworkers union engaged in personal threats and intimidation against Hoogendoorn. Finally, in 1966, it staged a week-long illegal strike that concluded when Greening dismissed Hoogendoorn and agreed to add a closed-shop provision to the collective agreement. After legal intervention, USWA agreed that Hoogendoorn could return to work, pending adjudication by an arbitrator of his dismissal, an elementary step USWA, as his representative, had denied him.

The arbitrator agreed with USWA's position, in view of the closed-shop provision that had been added to the collective agreement, and ordered Hoogendoorn's dismissal.

Eventually, and after much contestation, provincial and national authorities were forced to reconsider labor law and the need for reforms, in part due to the impact of the

CLAC. Yet to this day, there is not a solid framework for freedom of association in the labor arena in Canada any more than there is in the United States. The major unions harass the CLAC at every turn, even to the point where, at one stage, they tried to get the government to outlaw the CLAC altogether.

Chapter Three of Grotenboer's book on the freedom of association is just one window on the Canadian labor scene over the last 50 years. The longer, larger story the book tells needs to become familiar to Christians who work in all areas of society in order to stir us to critical thinking about what God calls us to do in our employments and how we ought to work together to strengthen cooperative Christian service wherever we work.

Grotenboer concludes:

A Christian approach to the problems of the workplace gives a vision of how things could and ought to be. Moreover, it instills the conviction that this vision of justice for workers and right relationships among people involved in the workplace is worth striving for, even though perfection is beyond our reach. To be clear, this is not the kind of exercise in pious naiveté of those employers who, for example, apply selective moral imperatives to achieve workplace outcomes that have less to do with the creation of a just work community than with the establishment of a self-serving, paternalistic authority structure. To the contrary, the objectives of Christianly inspired trade unionism are liberating for workers, and they help to close what can be termed "the irresponsibility gap" between labour and management. Cooperative labour relations invite everyone—from the company president to the common labourer—to take ownership and responsibility for the good operation of the enterprise.

CLAC promotes radical new beginnings because the mundane and the usual are put in a different light by its principles. Work is inherently good, and, paid or unpaid, it is a necessary part of being human. We have been created to be responsible and conserving developers and builders. Through our work, we achieve satisfaction and the esteem of providing for ourselves and serving the needs of others. The fact that much has gone wrong in how work is organized and experienced does not change who and what we are as human beings.

—The Editor[©]