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Labor Conditions Following The War

ONE of the most serious problems which Canada must face at the close of the war is the re-arrangement of our affairs upon the basis of normal civil life, with the incidental question of labor unemployment.

Labor conditions in Canada to-day are, in many respects, very similar to those which prevailed in the United States during their Civil War and the reconstruction period. Our labor conditions immediately previous to the war had the same chaotic aspect. The start of the war first brought depression in industry, followed by a rapid return to the demand for labor in manufacture of munitions and other war supplies extended, and to-day in Canada there is little if any unemployment and skilled labor is in strong demand.

At the close of the Civil War, the United States had a population of about 33,000,000. The Union Army at the time of Lee's surrender numbered slightly more than 1,000,000. It was estimated that another million men and women were employed in the Northern States in the manufacture of munitions. During the four year period of the Civil War immigration had fallen off, and recruiting had depleted the workers on the farms, and drawn largely from the laboring classes in the cities. The call for munition workers was supplied from other branches of industry, and the result of the war enterprises were compelled to run short-handed or pay a high premium for labor.

Compared with this situation, we find Canada's army of about 400,000 drawn from a population of about 8,000,000. The Canadian Army at the time of the armistice numbered 200,000 men and women are now engaged in munition work. Only 12% of our army, however, has been enlisted from the farms and more than half of the total has been recruited from among the skilled and manual laborers of the cities. The same situation regarding the scarcity of labor for ordinary enterprises, because of the drain through the army for overseas forces and munition workers.

During the Civil War period, wages gradually increased. Prices of commodities also increased. The laborer, however, skilled or unskilled, was placed at a disadvantage because his wages did not advance in proportion to the prices of necessities. Even with this situation, conditions were better among the mechanics and trades than among the unskilled and salaried people, whose incomes did not advance in proportion to the increased price of living.

When the Union Army started to muster out in 1865 at the rate of about 300,000 per month for the three months, there was for a time a glut of the labor market. This was but temporary, however, as 1836 witnessed an active industrial and agricultural revival. The returning soldiers, a large percentage of whom had volunteered from the farming districts, went back to producing or migrating to the homestead lands in the newly opened Mississippi Valley States. This wholesale homesteading brought demands for new railroads; more than 15,000 miles of rails were laid in the west during the five years directly following the war. This railway work took up quantities of labor from the eastern districts, and resulted in a marked decrease in the number of men who had gone into the new country without sufficient funds to maintain them through the breaking and re-forming of the first year.

The first annual report of the United States Commissioner of Labor published in 1895, summarizes the reconstruction period, as follows: "The year 1897 can hardly be called one of financial panics or industrial depressions, although hard times apparently prevailed. The stimulation to all industries resulting from the war, the speculative enterprises undertaken, the extension of credits and the slackening of production, necessarily caused a stagnation, and a consequent stagnation of business, but the period was hard on those men as to our resources and of any particular hardship. There was a while been to be conservative, but the impetus gained during the war could not be overcome, and it was not until the crash of 1913 that the effects of war were felt in the country. The five years following the Civil War saw the organization of the first labor unions. These had been started in a slow way during the last two years of the war. In 1878 the first National Congress of Labor met at Baltimore. The slogan of the laborer was the organization of the laborer to protect American labor against invading foreigners, who were immigrating in large numbers during the five years following the war.

The plants established for the manufacture of munitions for the Northern Army during the war marked the beginning of the factory system, and the centralization of industry in the larger cities. A continuation of this system after the war had a further influence in bringing about labor organizations.

Canada has, since the opening of the war, increased her manufacture of staples and reduced her imports. Industry has been given an impetus that should mark a great era of development. We have demonstrated that many new lines can be profitably then entered in Canada. We face the same dangers, however, that culminated in the crash of 1873 in the United States—the danger of speculation and over-production, without properly developed markets.

A general survey of the labor situation in Canada indicates that about 150,000 more men will be required after the war than are now employed in Canada. This would about take care of the proportion of returning soldiers which will require employment after the war. The problem now is to what we will do with our munition workers—an estimated detail of about 200,000 being employed in this work at present, fully 75% of which number will be called upon to find other employment when the war is over.

We will also have the problem of finding employment for these immigrants seeking work, because it will be difficult to restrict immigration to those who wish to engage in agriculture. Our greatest need to-day is more farmers and greater agricultural production, as will readily be recognized from the fact that our population is half urban and we consume more than we produce. There will be great opportunity and a crying need for farmers and farm laborers all through Canada after the war, but unless proper governmental plan is worked out to direct our immigration in that channel, we face the danger of a flood of unemployed in our cities and towns, while our farms remain undeveloped.

Next in importance to the problem of increased agricultural production is that of the development of our vast natural resources through the extension of existing and promotion of new industries. We must replace the munition plants by utilizing them in extending our present lines of manufacture and promoting the introduction of new lines. Canada should prepare for increased participation in export trade after the war and should grasp the opportunity now to extend in every possible way her industrial development to enable the opportunity to be taken advantage of.

The problem of capital is always closely related to that of labor. Statistics show that Canada has always been able to absorb immigration in direct proportion to the amount of foreign capital it has been able to secure. It is estimated that during the six years preceding the war Great Britain invested \$1,500,000,000 in Canada. After the war, the Mother Country will have her own financial problems to solve and we will be compelled to look elsewhere for our capital. So far we have been able to obtain large sums from the United States and they will probably be willing to be our bankers after the war. They have the money and it should be only necessary to educate them as to our resources and opportunities; when we will be able to obtain the capital we require.

Available information shows that more than one-half of our overseas forces were recruited from among skilled workers. Some plan must be put into operation for returning these men to civil life gradually so that they will not glut the labor market; otherwise we can count upon serious labor congestion at many points. If, on the other hand, we were able to grapple with these future conditions, to employ every effort of our governmental, financial and commercial organizations to handle the problems of re-organizing our industrial life, Canada will be able to emerge by great strides and occupy a prominent place among the nations of the world.

(Signed) J. S. DENNY

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