

X

SELECTING THE NEW EMPLOYEE

THE NEW EMPLOYEE enters the field of industrial relations through a gate casually known as the Employment Office. The name of that office varies from company to company. The functional content of the employment office job varies much more widely. No matter what may be its actual duties in any one establishment, the office or the person doing the hiring exerts an important influence over the whole spread of employer-employee relations.

As long as the closed shop was legally permissible, some local unions performed many of the functions which are found in the employment office of most business and industrial establishments. Even under the tightest closed-shop contract, the local union did not and could not take over the whole job of adding a new employee to the group. The local union took over the job to different degrees in different situations. There was always a considerable function left to be performed by the employer. The employer did not always perform this function, or even recognize it. But this is equally true of situations where the employer did his own recruiting and hiring without a closed-shop contract, or even without any union relationship.

The closed shop is now forbidden, in any enterprise affecting interstate commerce, by the Taft-Hartley Act and the earlier Railway Labor Act. It is prohibited in intrastate commerce by the laws of many states. However, it is still important that we view it historically in order to appraise the tasks of management in the employment of new workers. In its original and ideal form, the closed shop assumed the exist-

ence of a fraternity of workers possessing certain specific skills, a fraternity of carpenters, or of typographers, of glass blowers, or of any one among some sixty other distinct crafts. To each of its members, the fraternity supplied a certificate of membership which served as evidence that he had acquired the skills and knowledge involved in the craft, usually through a long and systematic apprenticeship. It also signified that he had attained a sense of responsibility for the performance of his work, and in large measure it guaranteed that the fraternity would ensure his responsibility, as well as his competency. Because of the customs of most such unions, the card also signified that the member had qualified "on general principles." That is to say, in modern parlance, he had been found personally and socially acceptable.

In this original and ideal form, the closed shop involved very little of the effort to bar competent workmen who were not members of the fraternity. In general, the only means by which a young man could attain the competency of the craft was by serving an apprenticeship under journeyman workers. The journeyman workers were almost invariably members of the craft fraternity, the union. The graduate apprentice automatically became a member of the fraternity; his membership card was his certificate of graduation. It followed that the fraternity, in its insistence upon a closed-shop relationship with the masters, was not primarily protecting itself against competitive workers who might offer to do the work at a lower price. This type of self-protection was certainly present, but it was incidental to the other protections which gave power and value to the fraternity, and dignity to the craft. One of these was the protection of the reputation of the craft based on the quality of work done by its members. Another was the protection of the employer against incompetent or irresponsible workmanship.

The beginnings of this original and ideal aspect of the closed shop are obscure. It is reported that explorations on

the site of ancient Carthage revealed a closed-shop contract of the ideal type covering the building trades engaged on the construction of public buildings. When the original aspect began to fade, or to be adulterated, is also uncertain. It seems to have been the dominant pattern as late as the middle of the nineteenth century. The closed shop lost its principal economic function, and became a desperate defensive weapon, with the rise of thousands of semiskilled occupations during the early part of the present century.

The expansion of mass-production industry made possible the employment of millions of workers, unskilled or semiskilled, to produce results which had previously required the highest skills of craftsmen. Many of the resultant jobs were given the same titles as those which had previously designated the conventional journeymen. The availability of automatic machines and machine tools, semifinished parts, or completed parts ready for assembly, discounted the skills required of craftsmen on the actual jobs. Untold thousands of men were able to attain sufficient skills without the traditional apprenticeship. The immense production job of World War I, and more recently of World War II, produced hundreds of thousands of "90-Day Wonders." The politically dictated union arrangements required almost all of these workers to become members of some union; in World War I, it was almost always a craft union.

The years 1917 and 1918 practically marked the end of the universal value of the union card as a certificate of competency in many of the crafts. Whether the war-trained machinist or boilermaker or electrician continued his union membership or not, he was able to call himself a craftsman. In some cases he had a skill fully equal to that of the member of the craft fraternity. In most cases he had limited and specialized skills, and the kind of work habits which could be expected from rush work under cost-plus contractors. The years from 1919 to 1933 saw a mixture of competent and in-

competent members in the craft unions, and a mixture of union and nonunion members among the competent craftsmen. A membership card was no longer a certificate of competency, and the lack of a card no longer carried a strong suggestion of incompetency. There was a steady decline in the actual membership of the principal craft unions, a steady increase in the volume of construction and other craft work performed by nonunion workers.

The years following 1933 saw the rise of industrial-type unions. Their memberships eventually included hundreds of thousands of craft mechanics, both competent and incompetent. They covered and enrolled most of the "90-Day Wonders" in the shipyards and aircraft plants of World War II. Their membership cards never professed to carry any guaranty of craft skills.

Most of the old-line craft unions met the competition of the industrial unions by adopting the same form of organization. Some of them followed the practice of designating the occupation of each member; stenographers, janitors, and ditch diggers in public utility companies are frequently members of the International Brotherhood of Electric Workers, although their membership cards may designate their occupations. Other craft unions organized subsidiaries to enroll miscellaneous workers. Examples are the Printing Specialty Workers unions chartered by the International Printing Pressmen and Assistants, the Lumber and Sawmill Workers chartered by the International Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, and the Warehousemen's unions chartered by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Members of the teamsters' union are operating breweries, roofing mills, and soda fountains.

In effect, the craft unions originally controlled the supply of competent workers in the craft. The closed-shop relationship was almost automatic, and its recognition by contract was incidental. It rendered a service to the employer as well

as to the members. During the last twenty-five years, such unions have largely lost their control over the supply of skilled craftsmen. As they have become miscellaneous unions, their membership cards have become less and less certificates of competency. The membership card in the industrial type of union has never professed to be a certificate of competency. The closed-shop relationship was transformed from one based on the control of the supply of competent craftsmen, into one based on the contractual or political control of available jobs, control by the union instead of by the employer.

It should not be assumed that there are no occupations in which the union membership card today is not a certificate of competency. The condition varies from city to city, but there are many trades in many cities, in which no skilled workman is available who is not a member of the union, and any member of the union is reasonably sure to be a skilled workman. This survival of the reliability of the union card will be found in most of the building trades and printing trades, and many of the metal trades, throughout most of the northern and western portions of the United States. Without the closed-shop contracts which have been outlawed, intelligent employers will continue to seek new employees among the members of the union. Some employers have agreed voluntarily to patronize the union as an employment agency. This theoretical use of the facilities of a craft union, without a closed-shop relationship, helps to emphasize the part of the job which an employer must do for himself in the addition of a new employee to his working group. It helps to describe more clearly the part which he always needed to do, even when he operated under a closed-shop contract.

In contrast to the exceptions described above, management is usually on guard against any attempt of a union to influence the selection of new employees, where the union has not been the official agency to supply new workers. This

attitude is understandable and usually justifiable. But it should be tempered by recognition of the proper interest which a union has in the selection.

The president of a company employing some 15,000 workers was engaged in an "adjustment" conference with the head of the union which represented most of those workers. He relieved his irritation by a denunciation of the union for the low-grade, shiftless, unreliable, trouble-making type of people who were its members. The union head was the kind of loud-voiced, oversized individual who usually relied on the tactics of noise, profanity, and toughness. This time he listened quietly until the corporation executive stopped for breath. Then he said, softly and slowly: "John, you are absolutely right. I could say a great deal more about why I am ashamed of the caliber of our members who work for you. In fact, I'll say it is a —— —— crime that you hire such —— —— tripe and we have to take them into our union. Why don't you hire the kind of men we can both be proud of?"

The representative of another union made a special visit to talk to a headquarters executive of a large corporation. He apologized for discussing a matter which concerned a single branch plant, but justified himself by the statement that he had talked to the local manager several times with no effect. He said: "I'm worried about what is happening to our Local Union at ———. The quality of our membership is on the down-grade and pretty soon we are going to have a problem on our hands. I have told Mr. Blank that he ought to be a lot more careful about the new people he hires. We certainly can't refuse to accept them as members, but we certainly don't want our Local to be made up of the kind of ignorant, dirty, disloyal people he has been hiring lately."

The new employee is selected carefully, in a well-managed company, to meet certain standards. He is tested or investigated as to his skill, intelligence, physical ability, and

any other measurable characteristic related to the work. How much attention have we given to his ability to become a welcome member of the social group into which he is being injected? Under the old closed-shop routine, he was already an accepted member of the formal group, before he came to work. Under a strict union-shop routine, he must eventually be accepted as a member of the union, or the employer must discharge him and start all over again on a new selection. Such contracts are still the minority pattern even in unionized plants. With or without a union contract, the selection job is an employer responsibility. One of the most important and most neglected standards of selection is the fitness and acceptability of the new employee as a new associate of his older fellow employees.

Whether an employer recruits his new workers through the office of a craft union, through a public employment office, or through a private employment agency, he expects certain standards to be observed. If he places an order for three carpenters with any one of these three agencies, he expects the men who are sent to him to be carpenters, men who have worked at the trade and have been paid the wages of journeymen. If he places his request with the union secretary or business agent, he understands that the first three men sent to him are likely to be those who have been longest on the list of unemployed members. If he is dealing with a public or private employment agency, he may or may not know what priority is used in selecting the men sent. In either case, he expects reasonable attention to be given to his specifications; that is, if he asks for finish carpenters or cabinet makers, he does not expect to have to interview men who are admittedly rough carpenters.

He is not required to engage the first three men who are sent to him from any agency. He was seldom required to do so even under the old closed-shop arrangement. He usually expects to perform a further process of sifting and selecting.

If the work is sufficiently important, he is likely to want to check some references. He may substitute a trial on the job for a few hours or few days. He may be performing a contract for public construction which requires citizenship; if so, he will check on this qualification. Assuming that he finds the referred men fully acceptable, he must assign them and introduce them to the foreman. He must see that they are given instructions as to sanitary facilities, tool storage, and any special arrangements as to hours, records, material issues, and similar details.

Regardless of past or present union relationships, the average industrial and commercial employer does not depend upon either a union or an employment agency to do his recruiting. In the great majority of cases he has developed other methods of locating his new workers. No matter what process of recruiting he uses, it brings him into his first contact with the prospective new worker.

At the same time, one additional person has come into contact with the employee-relations practices of a particular employer. Whether the employer completes the hiring or not, whether the person who is interviewed takes the job or not, that first contact is important. Properly handled, it adds to the prestige and reputation of the employer. It improves his ability to recruit other workers, and in many instances, reacts favorably upon his relations with persons already on his payroll, sometimes an old employee whose younger brother is the new applicant. Badly handled, it starts the circulation of reports and rumors that the "Window Widget Works" is no good, that the employment office won't give a man a chance, that you can't get a job there unless you can get past the snippy, nosy, young squirt in the employment office.

During the depths of the depression, a large department store closed its employment office. It had no jobs to fill, and it concluded that maintaining an office to say "No" to a hundred applicants every day was an unnecessary expense. The

manager of the store saw a dramatized demonstration of some eighty wrong ways to handle an applicant or a new employee, in the interviewing process. He saw the reverse possibilities of eighty right things to do in such an interview. He immediately reopened his employment office and charged the cost to advertising. He remarked to an associate that he could think of no other equal opportunity which his store would have to win the friendship and respect of a hundred people every day. He still had no jobs for them, but he believed his representative could tell the applicants that bad news in such a way as to make friends of them, friends who would remember that store and its treatment in the better days when they had money to spend.

This was a worth-while investment toward making friends and potential customers of people who currently had no jobs and no money. It should be obvious that any investment necessary to make a friend of a new employee or prospective employee is a good investment. Unfortunately, the literature of employee relations, dealing with the particular subject of recruitment and selection of new employees, is rather scarce. There is a need for a broad exchange of experience in this task. There is a need for that experience to be interpreted and supplemented by the application of sound psychology. The employers and establishments which have done an adequate job in this particular function are probably almost as scarce as the printed material dealing with the function. It is a more important part of good industrial relations than most employers have recognized. Because it is the first exposure of the new employee to the industrial relations program of the company or the establishment, it is sure to color his entire future relationship with the new employer.

In the future studies of this function, we shall expect to find a discussion of the physical arrangements for the interviewing of a new employee or an applicant. There will be studies of the special training needed by the interviewer in

this field. There will be an exploration of the use of job descriptions, including certain aspects of temperament and attitude which have been almost completely overlooked until recent years. There will be advice on preparing specifications to indicate whether the vacancy needs a man who works best by himself, or as a member of a group; a man who works best doing what he is told, or one who can make his own decisions promptly on new situations or new variations of old situations. The studies will pay more attention to the different types of intelligence required by different occupations—attention at least equal to that given to special physical requirements.

All these and a great many other necessary preparations must be made before the applicant is interviewed, or even before he is invited to come in for the interview. The employment office of the future will be inadequate unless it is fully and currently informed on all local problems such as housing and transportation. The interviewer will need skill and intelligence in presenting the customs and requirements of the particular establishment, the nature and purpose of the pre-employment tests which are used, the value of physical examinations to protect the applicant himself against unnecessary hazards, the safety, smoking, and other rules which he must observe.

The good job at the employment office will include the assurance that the applicant knows something about the establishment and the company, its purposes, its standing, and its policies which will have a direct bearing on his relationships within the plant. It will include a discussion of union relationships in such a way as to demonstrate a sincere respect for the employees as individuals, and for the agencies which they have chosen to represent them. If there is a union relationship which involves the existence of shop stewards or shop committees, the induction procedure should include the introduction of the new employee to a responsible represen-

tative of the union, as well as to the foreman or straw boss with whom he will be directly working.

Considerable space might be devoted to the mechanical steps which are necessary, whether the employment job is well done or poorly done. The fact that these steps are obviously necessary does not guarantee that they are always taken. Some large establishments have a printed check list of things to be done by the interviewer when a new employee is being examined, tested, hired, and inducted. The number of items appearing on such a check list is likely to be shocking to the average employment officer who does his job in a haphazard way. In general, the list represents things which positively should be done in order to give the new employee a proper initiation into the employee-relations program of the company. They should be done to give the rejected applicant a proper impression of the company.

There is a combination of complex and delicate tasks in this process. It includes the locating, interesting, and interviewing of the prospective employees. It includes the use of various tests ranging from the simple application blank and checking of references, through tests of mental maturity, interest, temperament, and physical condition. It includes the task of making the employer and the job acceptable to the applicant who has been found acceptable to the employer. For the man who is hired, it includes a number of steps suggested in the following chapter.

Particularly to the large employer, this process is so important that it cannot possibly be overemphasized. In general, he should have been carrying on almost all of this process, when and if he worked under an absolute closed-shop contract. Without a closed-shop contract today, and with or without a union contract of any kind, the wise employer will make whatever investment is necessary to do this job, and do it well. It is the first step in building good employee relations with each new employee. It will prove its value, and

the value of the whole employee-relations program, by holding down the turnover which is so highly concentrated among new employees.

It is the phase of employee relations which is first in time as far as the new employee is concerned, and almost first in importance.

It is a phase of employee relations which lies outside the scope of collective bargaining, a phase which cannot be incorporated into the union contract, a phase for which the employer must take full responsibility, with or without a collective bargaining relationship.