

XVII

AN INADEQUATE OUTLET

THE EMPLOYER who exaggerates the importance of collective bargaining in his structure of employee relations is making a mistake which is serious in more ways than one. He is preparing to neglect many of the functions and activities which collective bargaining cannot serve. He is helping to destroy the effectiveness of his own business organization by transferring more and more functions from the area of management to the area of negotiations, where results are determined by bargaining power. He is rejecting opportunities for day-to-day understanding and co-operation, in favor of the inevitable debate, argument, compromise, or surrender which will always be characteristic of most collective bargaining negotiations.

More serious than any of these mistakes, however, is the probability of channeling all the grievances, dissatisfactions, misunderstandings, and personality conflicts among his employees, into the single outlet provided by the collective bargaining machinery.

In his excellent work on *Handling Personality Adjustment in Industry*, Robert M. McMurry has drawn a vivid picture of the accumulation of emotional resentments at the worker or wage-earner level. He has pointed out that, at every other level in the hierarchy of business and industry, the individual has a safe outlet for his emotions, a safe opportunity to inflict his annoyances on his subordinates. It would be difficult to draw the picture more effectively than he has done in the following lines, which are quoted with his permission:

. . . What about the man at the bottom of the pyramid of authority? Authority carries with it opportunity for aggressions on

subordinates. It thus provides an outlet for the relief of hostile tensions which cannot be directed toward the object that is their source (a superior or an associate). They are vented on someone lower in the hierarchy. But the man on the job has no such release. Hence he must swallow his resentments and often his pride as well.

Much of the following material in Dr. McMurry's book deals with methods and mechanisms which provide the needed outlets for employee dissatisfactions and emotional stresses. But every employer should realize the inadequacy of collective bargaining as an outlet or release for these stresses, and the positive dangers which result from employer attitudes which force workers to seek such an outlet through their collective bargaining machinery.

The actual causes of employee discontent in most cases are not found in those subject fields which are conventionally covered by collective bargaining negotiations. Every thoughtful personnel administrator has learned this. The specific protest or demand frequently deals with wages and hours, more frequently with some questionable aspect of working conditions. Arbitrators and conciliators have been baffled, in case after case, by the fact that the actual antagonisms in a labor dispute have little relation to the declared issues of the dispute. They have dealt with thousands of strikes where the specific issue was declared to be wages, overtime, union recognition, seniority, discrimination, or some other reasonably tangible complaint. In a large minority, if not a majority, of those cases, they have found that the real cause of the open warfare was something far less tangible, something which could not be made the specific issue of a dispute or strike because it could not be settled by any specific agreement.

Negotiations have broken down, and have been succeeded by work stoppages, over the refusal of an employer to grant the form of seniority protection demanded by a union. The particular form of seniority clause is sometimes one which has become the standard for the union, and may be

actually impractical in a particular plant. The willingness of several hundred employees to sacrifice weeks of wages is seldom based upon abstract devotion to the principle of seniority, or upon devotion to the ritual represented by the standard words. The willingness to fight for a specific clause or its equivalent usually rests upon an explosive accumulation of discontent over certain specific promotions. These specific promotions in turn may be merely convenient symbols which have been seized upon to express a dissatisfaction which is chiefly inspired by the presence of a new superintendent, who may be the nephew of the president.

In some cases, the employer might be willing to reverse the promotions which are being cited as unfair. He might be willing to promote the discontented individuals who claim to have been unfairly by-passed. This action might represent an outstanding victory for the union in its collective bargaining, without achieving the seniority clause which it had proposed. It might achieve an apparent peace and satisfactory relationship in the departments concerned. But in most cases it would soon be apparent that even the protest over the specific promotions, no matter how sincere and violent, was merely the escape valve for a much deeper and more serious resentment. The smouldering discontent actually may have little to do with promotions, or even with general methods of promotion. It is more likely to be a basic unhappiness over some continuing attitude of management, which can only be identified in terms of a specific act such as the promotion of the wrong man.

The employer in such a situation may have a well-planned system of promotion. It may be one which is actually reasonable and fair. The accumulated discontent may be due to the fact that employees do not know that any plan is being followed, or do not know what the plan is. The worker who wanted and expected a certain promotion, and did not get it, is in no position to find out for himself the reasoning

which led to the selection of someone else for the better job. Usually he is in no mood to explore the matter at the time. When he describes the apparent discrimination at the union meeting, he may do so with complete sincerity, dealing with the incomplete set of facts which he can see. He emphasizes his length of service, his good performance on his present job, the shorter experience and what he believes to be the inferior qualifications of the man who was promoted. The union meeting is the natural place for him to air his grievance. He is almost sure to find sympathetic listeners, men who have had similar experiences, men who likewise have no knowledge of the system, if any, under which promotions are made. Of course, the man who got the job may also be there but the most that he can offer is likely to be his personal opinion that he deserved the promotion. It is unlikely that he has any more knowledge of the actual method of selection than has the senior employee who did not get the promotion.

Theoretically, the action of the group at the union meeting could be to call upon the employer, or the superintendent or the foreman, to ask how come? They might send a committee to invite management to do the explaining which it probably should have done long ago. But such a reaction is very unlikely, in the atmosphere in which such an incident can occur. It is much more natural for the group to seek some means of preventing the apparent discrimination. They have available their union, and the processes of collective bargaining. They are not likely to produce the wise and constructive solution which the employer should have produced. They are more likely to demand a specific prohibition against such discrimination, in the form of the compulsory application of strict seniority on all promotions to nonsupervisory jobs.

The only effective outlet available to the discontented employee in such a case is the airing of his grievance at the union meeting. It seems to be an effective outlet because the enlistment of his fellow union members can result in a spe-

cific demand at the time of the next negotiations. He could, and probably did, relieve his feelings to a certain extent by talking about it at home; but his wife and his twelve-year old daughter can do nothing about it. He may relieve his feelings by talking to his fellow workers, on the job or at lunch time; but as fellow workers they can do nothing about it, except to suggest that he bring it up at the union meeting.

One actual incident traces the unfortunate accumulation of frictional strains, from a minor personal incident to a major collective bargaining issue. In a relatively small working unit, the foreman went to the locker room and located a worker who had completed his shift, had been relieved by his mate, had washed up and changed to street clothes, and was about to leave the plant. The foreman could have said:

"Bill, we've just run into an emergency on a machine. Will you change clothes again and help out for a couple of hours?"

That is what he could have said. It would have been a truthful statement. It would have shown respect for the interest and intelligence of the worker, particularly if the foreman had identified the nature of the emergency. It would have shown consideration for the personal situation of the worker. What he actually did say was this:

"Get back up and help out on a repair job."

As the actual facts of his own situation were revealed later, the worker could have said this:

"Now look, Joe, we are having a big family dinner just an hour from now. There are five guests coming and one of them is my mother-in-law. We fixed up the date two weeks ago because it fitted in with my working schedule for this week. Can't you get someone else to help?"

What the worker actually did say was: "To hell with you. I've finished my shift."

With this wrong start, the collective bargaining machinery began to grind. Bill was given a disciplinary layoff for

insubordination. He protested through the union grievance committee. A series of conferences were held as provided in the labor agreement. A resolution was adopted by the local union challenging the right of management to order any worker to work overtime. More than two days time was devoted to a contract change to clarify the authority of management, in a collective bargaining negotiation which dealt with the wages, hours, and working conditions of a group of employees of which the particular department concerned represented only one percent.

The incident in itself represented a clumsy and inconsiderate personal display of authority by a foreman, and a natural reaction of irritation by an employee. It built up an important issue in an important collective bargaining conference. When the collective bargaining agreement was finally reached, nothing had been accomplished directly toward curing the actual causes of such irritations and strains. The task of making that foreman tactful and considerate, and giving that worker a consciousness of a sympathetic interest in his personal convenience, still had to be accomplished through some means quite outside the processes of collective bargaining.

The frictions between workers and unsympathetic or inept supervisors present one of the most common sources of emotional resentment. There are a few foremen and supervisors who release their own emotional stresses by cursing, abusing, and insulting the workers whom they supervise. The supervisors who do this deliberately or even consciously are very few. The supervisors who are careless, inconsiderate, and untrained as to their daily contact with subordinates, are much more numerous. The fact that he may shout, criticize a worker before an audience, belittle his efforts or his skill, is not necessarily a reflection upon the sincerity or intelligence of the supervisor. It may be his unconscious reaction to a stinging rebuke which has been handed out to him, or an un-

happy domestic situation, or his resentment of inadequate pay for his job, or a feeling that his province has been invaded by some other supervisor. He may have no conscious knowledge of the cause. He may think that the apparent clumsiness or carelessness of the particular employee is the last straw, and that he is at the end of his patience. In these and almost all other cases, it is very likely that he has no knowledge whatever of the psychological effect upon the workers.

Whatever created the stress in the personality of the supervisor, he can relieve that stress to some extent by venting it on a subordinate. He can avoid an emotional explosion by blowing off steam, by "bawling out" some workman for some cause or incident totally unrelated to his own discomfort. To quote from McMurry again, "What about the man at the bottom of the pyramid of authority?"

The employer who makes it necessary or natural for his employees to express their pent-up emotional dissatisfactions through the channel of collective bargaining is himself a good prospect for the services of a psychiatrist. His attitude is not only a serious obstacle to the achievement of the understanding and co-operation which is important to our whole industrial and social structure; it is a bid for regrettable results in his own business life. By his failure to act intelligently in the area which is beyond collective bargaining, he is poisoning the vital process of collective bargaining itself. He is facing the compulsion to pay in cents per hour, in overtime, in restrictions of his management functions, in the surrender of team discipline, and in a dozen other ways, for grievances and dissatisfactions which in themselves have nothing to do with any of these forms of payment.

It is even more serious that he has deprived himself of the opportunity to deal with most of his problems in the only setting where they can be dealt with naturally and effectively. He has built a positive barrier against any future effort which

he might make, to promote understanding in the normal daily human contacts in his establishment.

His attitude of dumping all his employee-relations problems into the hopper of collective bargaining may result from a number of causes. We are discussing in this chapter the obvious fact that he should not rely upon collective bargaining as an outlet for the emotional resentments and personal dissatisfactions of his workers, which are unrelated to wages and hours. The average employer recognizes that collective bargaining with all its trappings is not an adequate outlet for all the dissatisfactions of his employees. Still, a large number of average employers deliberately seal up other outlets. The advice of a psychiatrist might be helpful in pointing out to such an employer that he is actually demonstrating an emotional upset of his own. In too many cases, he is resenting the fact that his employees have placed any part of their reliance upon a union, instead of demonstrating their confidence in the fairness and generosity of the employer. He may be resenting the strength of the union and the power of the union leader. This strength and power may have challenged or even frustrated the previously complete authority of the employer to make his own decisions.

One of the most distressing injuries to the emotional integrity of an employer is to have himself belittled or maligned by a union spokesman, in the presence of some of his own employees. In his reaction to any of these emotional stings, many an employer has injured himself and his business. He has frequently rationalized his new attitude by some thinking which is typified by the expression, "They made their bed, now let them lie in it." If his employees have decided that the union is the agency, and collective bargaining the instrument, for conducting their relations with the employer, he decides that he will force them to rely on that agency and that instrument for the adjustment of every grievance, for the cure of every dissatisfaction.

Just as surely as collective bargaining is an inadequate outlet for all the emotional and mental dissatisfactions of employees, it is also an inadequate outlet for the resentments and dissatisfaction of an employer. The vengeful attitude of narrowing his field of employee relations to the technical boundaries of collective bargaining makes him small in character. It destroys the possibility of teamwork. It magnifies the importance of the union and the union leader, in fields which no intelligent union leader wants to invade. It engenders a spirit among foremen which reflects itself immediately in harsh, unsympathetic, and strictly formal relations with workers. But this is an attitude which inevitably reflects itself next in a resentful attitude of supervisors toward higher management.

The whole vicious circle need never be the result of a vicious attitude, anywhere in the establishment. It is much more likely to be the result of complete failure somewhere to realize that collective bargaining is not enough, particularly that it is not an adequate outlet for emotional stress.

The employer who will stop and think is not likely to want the petty misunderstandings in February to be dumped on the bargaining table at the negotiations in the following November. The intelligent supervisor is not likely to want his chance remarks to the worker who was late one Monday morning in March, to become the basis of a demand for tolerance of tardiness up to fifteen minutes, when the bargaining committees meet in November. And the intelligent worker certainly has no wish to wait until November to squawk about the unjust bawling out which he got from the foreman in June.

The trouble is much more likely to be that manager, foreman, worker, and union officer have overlooked the need for daily, flexible forms of relationship which will relieve the daily irritations before they become stresses and strains. It is likely to be the failure of all these parties to recognize that the great majority of all these daily problems cannot

possibly be solved through the medium of negotiations and contracts. It is likely to be a failure to appreciate the difficulty which is created for the negotiation of proper subjects, by the accumulation of all these petty strains through the absence of any other safety valve, or any other normal and sensible means of adjustment.

In many large establishments, this neglect of the need for natural outlets for worker tensions has gone so far that a radical and abnormal cure has been necessary. It has frequently been necessary to inject into the organization a person called the counselor. He has no line authority, no management responsibility. He is expected to supply a confidential confessional and a sympathetic advisor to the distressed employee. He helps the worried worker to put his worry or problem into words, and thus identify it. He makes it possible for the employee to release his stresses, instead of nursing them until they explode in resentment or insubordination. When job conditions or relations are really involved, the counselor can suggest corrections to management.

The counselor is an emphatic proof that collective bargaining is an inadequate outlet. It is equally emphatic evidence that management must go beyond collective bargaining to provide the adequate outlet. But the experiences of thousands of companies also proves that there is no absolute need for the formal and somewhat artificial separation of the counseling from the rest of the management function. Such companies have found that the full equipment of a work supervisor includes the ability to maintain the necessary outlet for personal emotions.

Just as it is inadequate for a great many other phases of employee-relations adjustments, collective bargaining is inadequate for the release of the emotions, of either managers or workers. Good management goes beyond collective bargaining in this field.