

WORKS COMMITTEES IN THE U. P.

(*A Note By A Research Scholar*)

Here is an interim note on the working of a new experiment in industrial relations by a provincial government. It comes from a research scholar who is studying it at first hand. We propose to publish off and on results of such investigations into our economic problems.—Editor.

WORKS Committees have been functioning in W the United Provinces for well over six months. The enthusiasm displayed by the workers it the time of their formation has steadily gone down and now threatens to give place to an attitude of apathy and indifference. The Works Committees have also been a cause of much heart-burning and bitterness among the workers themselves and instead of promoting harmony in industrial relations, have led to internal frictions. It may be, therefore eminently worthwhile to take stock of the situation so that determined and honest efforts may be made to remove its causes, before such bitterness manifests itself in open hostility on a large scale. Already stray incidents of an unpleasant nature and, in some cases, of outbreaks of violence are being reported. The alleged attempt of workers to take forcible possession of the office of the Works Committee of a mill at Kanpur should serve as an eye-opener.

Let us first make our minds clear on the objects of forming such joint committees. It is now generally recognised that avoidance of stoppages in industrial establishments arising from industrial disputes is a negative aspect of industrial relations. It is also recognised that excessive dependence on external authority induces a kind of litigious spirit. The positive side of industrial relations lies, therefore, in constructive co-operation and collaboration. This can be secured at the factory level, at least to some extent, through discussions and consultations in the Works Committees. From the very nature of their constitution, however, the Works Committees, formed in our province, have not been able to introduce this much-needed positive element into our industrial relations. For, right from their inception, these Committees have been associated with and have been a part of the machinery for the settlement of industrial disputes. They have remained, therefore, at best, merely post offices for passing on the workers' grievances to the Conciliation Boards,

Another impediment that stands in the way of a Successful operation of Works Committees is the

right given to the I.N.T.U.C, to nominate the workers' representatives on these bodies. No doubt, the success of the Works Committees depends a good deal upon the measure of co-operation that these Committees are able to secure from the factory unions. Nothing will retard their growth more than the suspicion in the minds of the workers that the Works Committees are being put up in opposition to the trade unions or that they will weaken and run counter to trade union policy. Therefore, no factory union should have the right to nominate the workers' representatives on (the Works Committee unless it can claim a substantial majority of the workers in the factory as its members. A mere majority should not be enough. Where there are two or more rival trade unions, or where the factory trade union is weak, the better policy would be to elect workers on the Committee by general voting. The I.N.T.U.C. can legitimately claim the right to nominate the workers' representatives in factories where it commands an overwhelming or substantial majority. But to concede this right to the I.N.T.U.C. in each and every case, irrespective of the genuine support it may command from the factory workers, is not only to encourage favouritism of which is undesirable in itself—it is also the surest way of striking at the very root of the basic principles of labour co-operation. If workers' representatives are chosen in such arbitrary manner, the majority of the workers necessarily go unrepresented and the trade union which represents only a minority of workers in the factory concerned secures the nomination of the full quota of workers representatives. This is what has been happening, not infrequently. In order to capture the Works Committees, some workers hurriedly get together to form a union, get the union registered and affiliated to I.N.T.U.C; their nominees gain all the seats set apart for the workers on such Committees. The workers cannot be blamed if they gain the impression that the purpose behind the Works Committees is to bring them into the fold of the I.N.T.U.C. No genuine spirit of co-operation can be fostered in such an atmosphere.

Yet, this spirit of constructive cooperation is

now necessary more than ever before, if only to strengthen the drive for increased production. If the Works Committees are constituted and run on proper lines, they may very well assume the role of Joint Production Committees, which contributed such a lot to stepping up production in Britain during the later years of the war by creating more harmonious relations and a better atmosphere in the factories. Is it not surprising, therefore, that the Government 'order' outlining the objects of the Works Committees should make no mention at all of the necessity of increased production? This is only indirectly alluded to, in so far as the means for raising efficiency and suggestions for improvement in methods and organisations of work are included in the matters to be dealt with by these Committees. Would it not have been better if the Government had placed before the Works Committees the very laudable object of increasing production? And that would have served another useful purpose. More important matters in that case, would have come within the scope of these Committees. The apathy shown by the workers is due, to a not inconsiderable extent, to the belief that Works Committees can exercise very little power and that, the matters they deal with are of not much importance. Workers are thus only reminded of their insignificant and subsidiary position in the whole show. The Balfour Committee on Industry and Trade, while pleading for a wider scope to be given to the Works Council expressed the opinion that the essential requisites for its successful working "are not the perfection of its proper constitution, still less its observance of uniform rules, but the existence of a sufficiently wide field of questions within its competence to provide material for regular meetings. . . . Perfunctory meetings at irregular intervals, with unattractive agenda and slender practical results, will quickly lead to failure." This is exactly what is happening in a number of cases. With the passing of time, as the initial problems are being disposed of, the workers' enthusiasm and interest inevitably dwindles and it is now not uncommon to find that Works Committees meet,—for they have to meet every fortnight compulsorily,—with nothing on the agenda at all. It is not contended that all the questions that could be placed before the Works Committees have already been exhausted. There are many things yet that can be and would be referred to them.

What is emphasised here is that had a wider scope been given to these Committees, it would have afforded a greater number and variety of questions to be discussed and that, by itself, would have im-

parted a sense of importance and pride to the workers. This would have saved the Works Committees from degenerating into the lifeless bodies which they are tending to, today.

If any good is to result from the formation of the Works Committees, it is necessary that the employers should reconcile themselves to the idea that the workers are co-partners in a common adventure. To this they have not been able to bring themselves round yet; the very idea is shocking and repugnant to them. If that is not so, how is, it that in most of the Works Committees it is only the workers who put forward their grievances while the employers' representatives either promise to remove or to look into them or politely refuse to do anything at all! The employers' initiative in finding abuses is as rare as their willingness to carry out their promises to remove them. This reduces the Works Committee to a grievance-body, and thus deflates the claim of Works Committees on behalf of co-partnership.

The structure of the Works Committees has also come under much criticism. There is no provision in the Order, under which they have been formed, for securing adequate representation of various levels of managerial, supervisory and skilled staff. The Works Committees are generally crowded with the lower grade workers, nominated by the trade unions, and the top-most officials nominated by the management. This arouses the jealousy of the supervisory staff who feel that the Works Committees will be utilised by the workers against them. These apprehensions have not been without foundation. The workers have found in the Works Committees an opportunity of ventilating their grievances by bringing to the notice of the high officials the misdoings of the supervisory staff and they have taken full advantage of it. This is unfortunate, because dissatisfaction of the supervisory staff, who are expected to give effect to the recommendations of the Works Committees, creates an atmosphere unsuited for peaceful co-operation and the drive for increased production is very adversely affected. It is of the utmost importance, therefore, that the supervisory staff received its full share of representatives on the Works Committees. Under the present circumstances, when the workers are mostly illiterate, this is all the more necessary if the Works Committees are really to contribute to improving efficiency, checking waste and increasing production. Elsewhere, this representation is secured through a system of sectional and departmental sub-committees for specific problems. This gives an assurance to all classes of workers, and particularly

to the supervisory staff, that their importance is realised by the management. It may easily be tried in this province.

Thus, Works Committees in our Province have failed to achieve the object for which they were formed. For this failure the Government are primarily responsible. For they not only blundered on the fundamentals by prescribing an extremely defective constitution for the Works Committees, by giving the I.N.T.U.-C. the right to nominate the workers' representatives, they threw to the winds the basic principles of labour representation and of industrial democracy as well. The Works Committee, it is claimed, represents industrial democracy

at work at the factory level. Can our Works Committee claim to do the same? They certainly can not.

This does' not mean that the Works Committees should be withdrawn by another government, order. It only means that they should be democratised in the direction of genuine production-committees of the type adopted in the U.K. factories during the latter part of the War. The fact that the recommendation for them came from the Soviet Trade Union Delegation did not prevent the U.K. employers from adopting them. It should not stand in the way of our employers, either nor in that of our Government!

The Tripartite Labour Machinery

By "ALMAZ"

DURING the third week of last month, two important labour meetings were held in New Delhi. The first was the seventh session of the Labour Ministers' Conference which met on 17th and 18th January last, and the second was the eleventh session of the Standing Labour Committee held on the two subsequent days. A number of important problems affecting labour were discussed at these two sessions and some decisions were reached. But before we go into these problems, it would be worthwhile to examine what the Ministers' Conference and the Standing Committee are supposed to do for handling problems of labour.

"Labour" under the Government of India Act, 1935 became a concurrent subject, i.e. it came within the spheres both of the Central and Provincial Governments. This dual responsibility created the need for joint consultation between the Centre and the Provinces and consequently led to the institution of the machinery now known as the Labour Ministers' Conference, wherein Labour Ministers or their representatives from the Central and Provincial Governments (and at a later stage from the Indian States) have taken part to discuss urgent labour problems and to formulate a co-ordinated labour policy.

The Second World War brought labour problems to the forefront and along with it, the realisation that no satisfactory solution of these problems could

be secured solely on a Governmental level, indicating the need, thereby, for consultation and agreement among the representatives of employers, employees and the State. The International Labour Organisation had already created in 1919 a machinery for tripartite collaboration in the form of International Labour Conferences to which each member' state has been sending a delegation of four, —two representing the Government and one each the organised employers and workers. India has been one of the most active and important members of the I.L.O.; but she realised the value of the employer-employee-State collaboration rather late,—only in 1942, when a machinery was set up "for the formation of uniformity of labour legislation, the determination of procedure for the settlement of industrial disputes, and consultations on all matters of industrial interest affecting the country as a whole". This machinery consists of two parts; (a) a Plenary Conference meeting annually "to advise the Government of India on any matters referred to it. for advice, taking into account suggestions made; by the Provincial Governments', States and the Chamber of Princes and representative organisations of employers and employees", (b) a Standing Labour Committee meeting as often as necessary "to advise Government on any matters referred to it by Government". The representation given to the various interests on these two organisations is as follows: