

California C. W. Groups Starting Right

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Summary: Tells of the Catholic Worker houses and projects in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Notes the many priests and bishops involved with labor issues and the need for a philosophy of work. (DDLW #327).

It is so happy to be at home again and so hard to tell all that I have seen and heard and have been doing. I'll probably forget half of it now and remember it in future issues. Coming back in the midst of getting out the paper, a stack of mail confronts me, some of which has been following me around the country, but what with countless visitors and writing, I have to let it go until next week, so I beg the indulgence of our correspondents.

Today being the feast of St. Bibiana, I told all assembled at lunch about our Los Angeles headquarters and the group there, and how the work is conducted. St. Bibiana's day reminded me of the last morning I saw George Putnam, when we went to early Mass before catching the train for San Francisco.

Our headquarters was not far from the cathedral, a store and three rooms where George and twenty two others were sleeping on the floor every night. There were some beds against the walls, but in the day the mattresses, supplied by the Maryknoll sisters, were stacked up against the walls.

I don't know what we would have done without the sisters. They helped getting the place started and they continually helped. It was a place to go to for rest and refreshment and all the little Japanese children there are friends of George's. Many a time Catholic workers sat in the kitchen and enjoyed hospitality, and sometimes George had to raid their larder in order to help out with the dinner. Sister Martina had visited us in New York and one of the sisters at the New York house had supplied us with bee equipment for next year.

It is good to remember the fine soup we had at Agatha street. Sometimes someone came in and left just enough money for red beans, and there were always vegetables from the market – they had to get up at five thirty to get them. The Holy Family Sisters sent pomegranites and grapes by the lug, and good rolls, called “snails” out there. Father Sparsa came in occasionally for breakfast, a young Mexican priest who had escaped as a lad from Mexico, and hitchhiked to Los Angeles where he entered the seminary, but he knew what it was to be hungry, and he knew what it was to be treated as a transient, and a Mexican transient at that. He brought his breakfast with him when he came, and often when there was a wedding at his little church two blocks away, he used to beg the rice which was to have been thrown,

and send it over to the Catholic Worker to put in the soup for supper. Coffee it is true often lacked sugar or milk, but the soup was good.

Two Valiant Women

People don't like to have their names mentioned and I don't want to offend, but I wish we had a whole horde like two women out there who help with the work, and were indeed the original Catholic Workers of Los Angeles. They paid the rent on the place, and once every week sent down the supper for about a hundred. We were always hoping that six others would guarantee a supper, and then we were humanly afraid that with such suppers our line would wind in and out of Los Angeles streets, our reputation would spread.

I speak in the past tense of Agatha Street, because of the neighbors there, some of them, thought as they once did here in New York, that we were lowering the tone of the neighborhood. The landlord in Los Angeles, being timorous souls, thereupon asked us to move. So now there is need to find another place.

To San Diego

Yesterday on the bus to San Diego two older men were talking together about the President, and loud enough for everyone in the bus to hear. They called him a yellow coward, with the heart of a louse, a maniac on the verge of total insanity. They talked of their investments and losses. They talked of public utilities. And every other minute they cursed him. At each mention of wages, public works, unions, led to increase bitterness.

"There'll be bloodshed yet," they concluded, and grimly added that they'd like to take part in it. Hate was etched into the bitter lines of their faces and into their voices.

I could not help but compare their attitude with that of the two hundred or so unemployed I talked to the day before in Los Angeles at an open Forum of the Workers' Alliance. I talked of Christ the Worker, of a philosophy of labor, of the farming commune as a solution of unemployment. I told them of Peter, and his social program for the lay apostolate.

The men I talked to wanted work, not a dole. They wanted private property (the idea of homesteads and community fields combined appealed to them). They wanted peace and brotherhood. They were interested in government help but would rather have work, provided it meant something to them – was building for their security and future. They were interested in a constructive program, not in fighting a class war. And when I thought how betrayed they are by their intellectual leadership, my heart wept. It was enough to make one weep, just to hear those two men talking on the bus. I thought of Peter Maurin and how he loves to indoctrinate wherever he goes, talking on street corners and buses and restaurants, wherever he happens to be. But his is a constructive indoctrination, and not a message of hate.

I spent a few days in San Diego, and a full month in Los Angeles, speaking at schools and colleges and at the open forum which Dr. Julia Metcalfe has every Monday night in her circulating library at Gramercy place.

San Francisco

In San Francisco I was invited to speak before the Maritime Council of the Pacific, before the Marine Cooks and Stewards, The Firemen's union, the Machinists union. In addition to the seminary, St. Mary's College, San Francisco University, St. Boniface Hall, and before many other groups, so numerous that I could not cover them all. I shall have to return next winter in order to fill some of the engagements I rashly made in even so far ahead.

It is good to speak to labor groups on the philosophy of labor which Peter Maurin is always talking about. Most union leaders throughout the country, A.F. of L., C.I.O., whatever they are, tend toward Marxism in their philosophy of labor.

They have thought of labor as a commodity, in spite of the Magna Charta of labor, the Clayton laws of 1914, which stated that labor was not a commodity to be bought and sold. But they have treated their labor as a commodity to be bought and sold over a counter. They have not thought of labor as a discipline imposed upon us all (thanks to the Fall), and also as a vocation. They have not thought of the worker as a co-creator with God. (God gave us the materials, and by developing these materials, we also share in creation.)

One of the cheering notes of the trip was meeting priests who had been appointed for labor work in their dioceses. There was Fr. Keating and Fr. O'Dwyer in Los Angeles, who had given a Mission (also many blankets) to the seamen during the 1936-37 strike. Fr. Keating has an open Forum every Sunday night at the Labor Temple under the auspices of the St. Robert Bellarmine Guild for Labor and Industry, of which Fr. Keating and Fr. O'Dwyer are the directors, although Archbishop Cantwell is the president. Both the directors are fraternal members of the central trades and Labor Council, and both C.I.O. and A.F.L. members attend the meetings of the guild.

In San Francisco, Fr. Donahue, who also teaches at the St. Patrick's Seminary at Menlo Park, has been appointed to interest himself in labor. I met Fr. Donahue the day I arrived and he drove me down to see Fr. O'Kelly, the seamen's priest, who has headquarters for seamen at old St Brendan's church. Thereafter Fr. O'Kelly (who always insisted upon calling me Miss O'Day) drove me about himself, giving me several days of his time to see San Francisco and to drive out to see Tom Mooney. (I'm going to have to continue the Mooney story in the January issue instead of this one, due to lack of space and time.)

Industry and Agriculture

One of my pleasantest memories of San Francisco was the dinner I had with Fr. Kelly, Fr. Donahue and Fr. Philipps who had been in a rural parish north of San Francisco for fifteen years and who had organized the apple growers into a cooperative. Both priests spoke at the social action conferences held for priests in the Archdiocese during the summer.

Fr. Paul of St. Boniface's parish is a friend of the Catholic Worker at a big down town church which reminds one of St. Francis of Assisi on 32nd St., New York. One of the features of the church are communal breakfasts after the Tuesday novena Masses and after first Fridays,

held in a big hall where I spoke on several Thursday nights. I spoke in St. Elizabeth's parish in Oakland, also a Franciscan church, to three groups, morning, afternoons and evenings.

Fr. Paul had visited us this summer at Mott street, and our Catholic Worker friends in San Francisco keep in touch with each other through him.

Book Shop

I visited also the Berkeley Book guild which is right at the gates of the university, handy for the thousands of passersby. Meetings are held and Fr. Philipps is giving a course in cooperatives. Mrs. P.W. Alston loaned her library to the store and when she moves to New Orleans as she intends next summer, she wants to loan it to a store down there in order to encourage the starting of a Catholic Book Store in that very Catholic city. Dr. Ann Nicholson and Mrs. Alston are the spirits behind the work.

Library

The very best library I have ever seen about the country is the Paulist library next door to St. Mary's where there is an immense reading room with tables filled with magazines and comfortable chairs and very good lighting. Employed and unemployed frequent the place and spend hours in reading. There wasn't a day passed that I did not drop in while I was in San Francisco. For Minna Berger through Father Killis, was our first Catholic Worker in that city, and every month she displays the paper in the window.

Hospitality

It is scarcely necessary to start a hospice for men what with the St. Vincent de Paul Shelter which has housed 78,652 men in the last year. There are 320 beds and breakfast is also served. Bed and breakfast cost fifteen cents, and if men have not the money, some agency supplies it. There is a day shelter next door, a thing woefully needed in New York, with an open fireplace and tables and benches. Next door there is a handball court and there is a gym downstairs. In the basement of the night shelter there are showers and wash tubs and a barber shop, in addition to storage room for baggage.

In next month's issue I wish to have a longer story about the boys' shelter which is also run by the St. Vincent de Paul.

Altogether I lost count of the number of times I spoke or the number of miles I travelled. I came back through New Orleans and Houma and Montgomery, but since the next issue of the C.W. will be a Southern issue, I shall leave the news I collected about the South until then.

During the trip I spoke at two seminaries in addition to many colleges and Church groups, also to auto workers, steel workers, agricultural workers and unemployed.

Archbishop Mooney, Bishop Schembs, Bishop Buddy and Archbishop Cantwell were gracious enough to see me and were interested in the story of our work. In fact Archbishop Cantwell called us his dear children and promised to visit our Los Angeles headquarters.