

# C. W. States Stand on Strikes

Dorothy Day

*The Catholic Worker*, Jul 1936, pp. 1, 2

*Summary: Articulates their position on strikes while eschewing Communist class war tactics and violent means. Supports strikers because of their god-given dignity and the unity of the Mystical Body—"We are members one of another." They aim to change the social order, accept sacrifice and failure, to build the Kingdom of Heaven. (DDLW #940).*

Let us be honest. Let us say that fundamentally, the stand we are taking is not on the ground of wages and hours and conditions of labor, but on the fundamental truth that men should be treated not as chattels, but as human beings, as "temples of the Holy Ghost." When Christ took on our human nature – when He became Man, "He dignified and ennobled human nature." He said, "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you." When men are striking, they are following an impulse, often blind, often uninformed, but a good impulse – one could even say an inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They are trying to uphold their rights to be treated not as slaves, but as men. They are fighting for a share in the management for their right to be considered partners in the enterprise in which they are engaged. They are fighting against the idea of their labor as a commodity, to be bought and sold.

## Camden Strike

Let us concede that the conditions at the Victor RCA plant down in Camden, where a strike started last month, and which is said to involve 13,000 men, are not bad conditions, and that the wages and hours are not bad. There probably is a company union which is supposed to take care of such conditions and complaints, but they perpetuate the enslavement of the worker.

Let us concede that the conditions of the seamen are not so atrocious as *The Daily Worker* contends. (It is no use talking about the steward's department on passenger ships which has unbearable hours and conditions of labor.) Let us get down to the fundamental point that the seamen are striking for – the right to be considered partners, sharers in responsibility – the right to be treated as men and not as chattels.

## Change the Social Order

Is it not a cause worth fighting for? Is it not a cause which demands all the courage, the integrity, of the men involved? **Let us be frank and make this our issue.**

Let us be honest and confess that it is the social order which we wish to change. The workers are never going to be satisfied, not matter how much pay they get – no matter what their hours are.

This, of course, is the contention of the ship owners, of the employers and industrialists the world over. They know that strikes are going to go on, no matter what concessions are made along these lines. They, too, will not face the fundamental issues involved.

## **Seamen's Strike**

During the seamen's strike in the spring and the months after when the men were staying at the Catholic Worker House on Mott street – there were about fifty who came and found jobs and went away to have their places taken by others – we had an opportunity to talk to many of them. There was many a round table discussion over the preparation of vegetables and the washing of dishes and the mailing out of the paper (for the men joined in our work while they were with us). They have written to us after they left, and they have returned to see us when they came back into port.

One night we were talking with a Communist, a young fellow from Iowa, born of a Catholic father and a Methodist mother. It was hard to talk to him – we were both convinced we were right, we were both animated by truth, but he refused to concede the spiritual. Philosophically we differed. But a great many truths came out in these arguments.

## **Communist Arguments**

He used to stand in the middle of the kitchen floor, a dish towel in his hands and suspend all operations while he talked. Tennessee, Yank, Ryan and the others went on working, laughing at his earnestness and his inability to co-ordinate work and discussion.

He used to take refuge in anti-clericalism, in attacks on our refusal to face facts, in what he liked to label our sentimentality. Often he would be driven to name-calling because he felt himself defeated in argument and there was no other refuge for him.

But there were many things we agreed on.

## **Fake Tactics**

He was telling us one night how he caused a disturbance on board ship over the constant mess of stew they had been served. Overtime work, crowded quarters, uncomfortable mattresses, the menu, all these were the issues seized upon as a chance for disturbance, a miniature strike. He had been spending his days at sea figuring out ways to forward the revolution, and on this occasion it was stew.

We asked him whether he really thought that a cause worth fighting for to the shedding of blood. We asked him whether the other seamen who were fundamentally sane, did not object

to these obstructionist tactics of the Communist. If they did not hinder their own cause by this tactic?

He maintained that if they would not join in it was because they were cowardly and selfish.

We maintained that it was because they knew it was not the cause for which they were fighting.

## **Recognition of Sacrifice**

We pointed out that there on Mott street they were sleeping six in an apartment, between blankets, no sheets, that the food was insufficient and the washing facilities most primitive. They had no showers, no hot water to wash out their clothes, (and they were always washing out their clothes. A cleaner lot of men would be hard to find.) They had to walk ten blocks to get to a public bath.

We pointed out the fact that if the men were running the ship themselves, they would put up with any sacrifice, do without food, submit to crowded quarters, take a minimum of pay, if only they were recognized as men, masters of their own destinies.

And that is why we are working towards a workers republic, he said triumphantly.

## **Functional Classes**

We made him admit that some men were capable of leadership and others weren't, that some men were trained to hold certain positions and had to hold them. We brought out Tawney's ideas of functional classes as opposed to acquisitive classes.

But the worker had no chance of improving himself so that he had a chance to become an officer, he claimed. Or if he had, he was still in the position of being a flunkey, a hireling of the masters. There were always the masters. There was always the profit system, the idea of labor being sold as a commodity, whether it was the labor of the captain or the crew.

It was, we conceded, the whole social system which was out of joint. And it was to reconstruct the social order, that we were throwing ourselves in with the workers, whether in factories, or shipyards or on the sea.

## **Co-operative Ideal**

\*\*\*\*The co-operative movement is a good one because it offers an opportunity to rebuild within the shell of the old with a new philosophy, which is a philosophy so old that it seems like new. And in the co-operative movement there is a chance for a real united front and for a peaceful and ethical accomplishment of our aims. But where there is no chance at co-operative enterprise right now, in factories, on ships, what then?

## **The Pope Says**

The popes have hit the nail on the head.

“No man may outrage with impunity that human dignity which God Himself treats with reverence.”

“Religion teaches the rich man and the employer that their work people are not their slaves; that they must respect in every man his dignity as a man and as a Christian; that labor is an honorable employment; and that it is shameful and inhuman to treat men like chattels to make money by, or to look upon them merely as so much muscle or physical power.”

## **“Enlightened Self Interest”**

These are fundamental principles which the A.F. of L. has neglected to bring out. They have based their appeal on enlightened self interest, a phrase reeking with selfishness and containing a warning and a threat. A warning to the workers of the world that they are working for themselves alone, and not as members one of another. One can see how it has worked out in this country. What percentage of the workers are organized? A fraction only of the laboring men of the country. And how has the highly organized worker cared for his poorer brother? There has grown up an aristocracy of labor, so that it has been an irksome fact that bricklayers and printers receive more than farmers or editors in the necessary goods of this world – in goods which we should strive for in order that we may have those God-given means to develop to the full and achieve the Kingdom of Heaven.

## **Recognition of Last End**

We are not losing sight of the fact that our end is spiritual. We are not losing sight of the fact that these better conditions of labor are means to an end. But the labor movement has lost sight of this fact. The leaders have forgotten such a thing as the philosophy of labor. They have not given to the worker a philosophy of labor, and they have betrayed him.

And the inarticulate rank and file throughout the world is rising up in rebellion, and are being labeled Communist for so doing – for refusing to accept the authority of such leaders, which they very rightly do not consider their authority. They know better than their leaders what it is they are looking for. But they allow themselves to be misled and deceived.

## **Positive Not Negative**

We have so positive a program that we need all our energy, we have to bend all our forces, material and spiritual, to this end, to promulgate it. Let us uphold our positive program of changing the social order.

But let us too, examine the Communist means to the end which they claim they are working for, a true brotherhood of man. We, none of us, can have any objection to the ideal of

the brotherhood of man. We do not talk about a classless society, because we acknowledge functional classes as opposed to acquisitive classes.

We agree with this end, but we do not agree on the means to attain it.

## **Brotherhood of Man**

The Communist says that all men are our brothers except the capitalist, so we will kill him off. They do not actually believe in the dignity of man as a human being, because they try to set off one or another class of men and say “they are not our brothers and never will be. So let us liquidate them,” and then to point their argument, they say with scorn, “Do you ever think to convert J.P. Morgan or Rockefeller or Charlie Schwab?”

They are protesting against man’s brutality to man, and at the same time they perpetuate it. It is like having one more war to end all wars. We disagree with this technique of class war, without which the Communist says the brotherhood of man cannot be achieved.

Nothing will be achieved until the worker rises up in arms and forcibly takes the position that is his, the Communist says. Your movement which trusts to powerful means, radical though it may seem, is doomed to failure.

## **Victorious Failure**

We admit that we may seem to fail, but we recall to our readers the ostensible failure of Christ when he died upon the Cross, forsaken by all his followers. Out of this failure a new world sprang up. We recall to our readers the folly of the cross which St. Paul talks about.

When we participate in strikes, when we go out on picket lines and distribute leaflets, when we speak at strike meetings – we are there because we are reaching the workers when they are massed together for action. We are taking advantage of a situation. We may not agree that to strike was the wise thing to do at that particular time. We believe that the work of organization must be thorough before any strike action occurs, unless indeed the strike is a spontaneous one which is the outcome of unbearable conditions.

## **We Oppose Violence**

We oppose all use of violence as un-Christian. We do not believe in persuading scabs with clubs. They are workers, too, and the reason there are scabs is because the work of organization has been neglected.

We oppose the misuse of private property while we uphold the right of private property. The Holy Father says that “as many as possible of the workers should become owners,” and how else in many cases except by developing the cooperative ideal?

## –We Repeat Our Stand–

We repeat for the benefit of our readers, this assurance; while we are upholding cooperatives as part of the Christian social order, we are upholding at the same time, unions as organizations of workers wherein they can be indoctrinated and taught to rebuild the social order. While we stress the back-to-the-land movement so that the worker may be “deproletarianized,” we are not going to leave the city to the Communist.

Month by month, in every struggle, in every strike, on every picket line, we shall do our best to join with the worker in his struggle for recognition as a man and not as a chattel. We reiterate the slogan of the old I.W.W.’s , “An injury to one is an injury to all.” St. Paul says when the health of one member of the Mystical Body suffers, the health of the whole body is lowered.

We are all members, one of another, in the Mystical Body of Christ, so let us work together for Christian solidarity.