

The Church as Employer: Ideology and Ecclesial Practice during Labour Conflict

OSCAR COLE-ARNAL

Christian denominations within twentieth-century Canadian history, and in the United States, have produced numerous statements on social justice. Indeed, some of these reflect rather radical traditions. As well, one can readily find books which contain the more prominent of these documents, often with thoughtful commentary and analysis. By way of one example, Gregory Baum, Canada's most noted Catholic theologian, has done significant work through his commentaries on social Catholic encyclicals and justice promulgations by Canadian and Québec bishops.¹ These statements provide an invaluable resource for analyzing where particular Christian denominations stand officially in terms of rhetoric and public principles. However, they by no means provide sufficient data on how effectively or passionately these churches put principle into practice.

Of course, there are different ways to get at this issue of comparing stated values and institutional practice, and this paper proposes to look at two case studies in Canadian history (one Protestant and one Roman Catholic) around the question of how well the church acts as an employer in relation to its stated justice values. Although there is no attempt to be exhaustive here, I will suggest that the weight which churches give to their stated principles can be assessed most clearly by how well they practice these convictions.

Case 1: Social Gospel Values and the Toronto Printers' Strike (1921)

Towards the end of the Great War the two major social gospel churches promulgated statements with clear, even radical, social justice dimensions. This was especially true with respect to what has been called "the Methodist statement" of 1918. The church's General Conference had not met since the beginning of the war, and although its radicals, in the persons of the William Ivens and Salem Bland, had suffered employment setbacks, Methodist leftists and left-leaning progressives remained a formidable force within the church. This strength faced a national test at the upcoming General Conference to be held in Hamilton, Ontario. In the Fall of 1918 the committees of Social Service and Evangelism and the Church in Relation to the War and Patriotism met to consider the documentation it would propose to the Conference. The broader body, the General Board of Social Service and Evangelism produced a statement for the Conference which social gospel historian Richard Allen describes as a "programme . . . further to the left than that of any party of consequence before the emergence of the CCF in 1933."²

The statement called for an end to "Special Privilege . . . not based on useful service to the community." Further, it demanded "that forms of industrial organization should be developed which call labour to a voice in the management and a share in the profits . . . All forms of autocratic organization of business should be discouraged." The statement declared that it was "un-Christian to accept profits when labourers do not receive a living wage, or when capital receives disproportionate returns as compared with labour." Government was expected to enact "legislation which shall secure to labour a fair wage adequate to a proper standard of living," and nationalizations of natural resources were advocated.³ These concerns demanded an alliance with the workers' movement in the name of the gospel: "As followers of the Carpenter of Nazareth, we sympathetically seek to understand the problems of life as they confront the claims of labour in Canada, and . . . find in them allies in the struggle, to realize the ends of fair play, humanity and brotherhood [sic]."⁴

However, what came to be called "the resolution of the Methodist General Conference" was not this document but rather the more radical statement drafted by the Army and Navy Board of the church. Capitalism fell under its judgment with the words "the present economic system stands revealed as one of the roots of war." The statement called for a

system based on “the undying ethics of Jesus,” demanding nothing less than a “transference of the whole economic life from a basis of competition and profits to one of co-operation and service.”⁵ In spite of much debate on the Conference floor, the opposition being led by Methodist business leader S.R. Parsons of the Canadian Manufacturers’ Association, the statement passed with only minimal modifications. With the conclusion of the Conference came the challenge as to how the Methodists would embody these words.

One such test emerged with the Toronto Printers’ Strike of 1921. Although the strike by the rather conservative International Typographical Union of America was continent-wide, it had a direct effect on the social gospel Methodists in Toronto through their official firm the Methodist Book and Publishing Company. The union was militating for a forty-four hour week with no drop in pay, a difficult program to achieve in the recession times of 1921. Negotiations deadlocked, and the strike began on 1 June 1921. The Methodist firm was drawn into negotiations led by Dr. S.W. Fallis, the head of the Book and Publishing Department. Given the Methodist commitment to the social gospel, the more religious working class leaders hoped that church publishing firms would support the union demands. In the 3 June 1921 issue of the *Industrial Banner*, Methodist labour chief James Simpson had this to say:

When they [religious publishing firms] enter the commercial world to compete with modern capitalism they must expect to be involved in some rather trying situations, situations which will prove the testing time. They will be called upon to either accept the rules of the competitive capitalist game, which their conferences, synods and assemblies condemn, or project their Christian principles into their business.⁶

However, the employers including Fallis began to utilize strikebreakers to keep the presses rolling. As well, there was a church committee behind Fallis which included only one progressive, W.B. Creighton, the editor of the Methodist *Christian Guardian*. Yet even he was adamant that the necessity of publishing church periodicals took precedence over honouring a work stoppage, a position that provided a contrast with his earlier stand on the Winnipeg Strike. To be sure, Dr. Fallis lived under the pressure of book and subscription orders, and some of the more progres-

sive clergy, who had placed such orders, accused Fallis of unjustly blaming the Printers' Strike as a cover for standard mercenary concerns.⁷ As well, union leader and Methodist James Simpson challenged the church to live up to its 1918 statement:

We wish to remind you that the declaration made by the General Conference in Hamilton, 1918, in which the Church was committed to the principle of co-operation for service instead of competition for profit, and in which industrial democracy was regarded as necessary to enjoy the full benefits of political democracy, warranted the workers generally in believing that our Church would lead the way for a better social and economic order. We, therefore, urge the Toronto Conference to take the necessary steps to remove the stigma which has been placed upon all its members by having the commercial ambitions of the publishing department of the Church subordinated to the higher objectives so clearly set forth at the last General Conference . . . Think of this in the light of the fact that Rev. Mr. Fallis has committed the Church to the Open Shop policy, which denies every elementary right of the workers to a share in the control of industry.⁸

Initially the Rev. Ernest Thomas, one of the architects of the Methodist Statement of 1918, supported Fallis' contention that the issue was survival of the publishing industry and not an assault on the fundamental principles of trade unionism, but as Rev. Fallis became more publicly intransigent and increasingly unwilling to negotiate, Thomas claimed sadly that the employers' campaign constituted a threat "to issues of unionism, collective bargaining and working conditions."⁹ In spite of this shift it became clear that the Department of Evangelism and Social Service (DESS) under the Rev. T.A. Moore, as well as its activist Ernest Thomas, vacillated in trying to maintain a mediating position even in the face of Rev. Fallis' letter in support of the open shop. Indeed, the DESS personnel expressed more suspicion toward the union than toward Dr. Fallis. In fact, Thomas sought to assure his boss T.A. Moore of his moderation: "Fallis now knows that my aim is not an alliance with Unions but an alliance with some bodies of employers which are out to promote industrial harmony in the trade . . . Fallis' strong opposition certainly tended to throw excessive emphasis on our cordiality with organized labor."¹⁰ Ultimately the DESS exonerated the Methodist Publishing House and its directors in a press release which, in part, read as follows:

There is no occasion here to discuss the matter in dispute with the printers. The contention of the publishers in the matter do [sic] not in any way conflict with the principles set forth by the General Conference. The declaration demanded the right to organize and to collective bargaining and to a voice in the determination of conditions of work. All this is granted without debate. Anyone may see, all over the Book Room, notices to the employees signed by the Book Steward not only recognizing the union but urging the men to attend and work through the union.

The present dispute is solely one as to whether a proposed wage and time schedule is practicable, not as regards relation of wages to profits, but as regards the continuance of the industry. In such a matter the church has no voice . . . [T]he church may well assert principles which should be guarded in industrial life for the protection of spiritual interests; but this is entirely different from pronouncing on the technical points involved in a specific dispute over wages so long as those wages are above the line allowing of efficient human life.¹¹

That the forty-four week was not mentioned, that Rev. Fallis undertook to lead the city-wide employers' anti-union campaign and that the DESS asserted a neutrality that its own words belied seemed to have no effect on Mssrs. Thomas and Moore in their judgments on the issue. Class prejudice blinded them to such illusions while their actions undermined the glowing words of the Methodist Statement promulgated less than three years earlier. Under fire the social gospel progressives opted for the status quo by hiding behind pious generalities. The church in Conference closed the debate with a whimper, hiding behind a disclaimer of non-competence in these matters. Only in 1944 was the issue settled when the United Church of Canada in General Council voted a union shop for its publishing house.¹²

Case 2: The Pavillon St-Dominique Strike in Québec (1966-1974)

The Pavillon St-Dominique was a retirement home run by the Dominican Sisters of the Trinity mostly for priests, religious and aging Catholic notables with significant economic resources. Difficulties began in the winter of 1966 with the twenty-seven lay workers employed at the Pavillon along with the sisters. In June of that same year these lay employees sought to form a union under the rubrics of the Commission des

Relations de Travail. Though employer resistance was formidable, the CRT granted accreditation on August 30. In spite of further efforts to have this CRT decision rescinded the accreditation was upheld. From 1967 to 1970 the Pavillon fought a constant fight for union decertification, which fight they won on 17 August 1970.¹³

For the second time the process of certification was taken up by the lay work force. Again these employees were able to organize a majority of workers in favour of unionization, and once again they were certified, this time on 31 March 1971. The union was calling for an end to discriminatory job classification, a curtailment of the practice of assigning to religious tasks entrusted to unionized workers and a specified wage increase. Negotiations went nowhere so the new union called a strike on 19 March 1972.¹⁴

In the midst of this long conflict where had the church stood officially in the matter of labour concerns? Certainly the francophone Québec episcopate, through the social doctrine of the church, had supported confessional unions even before the birth of the Confédération des Travailleurs Catholiques du Canada (CTCC) in 1921 and was inclined to favour its deconfessionalized successor the Confédération des Syndicats Nationaux (CSN) created in 1960. To be sure, episcopal endorsement followed more conservative social Catholic lines until the events of the Quiet revolution and Vatican II, but with this epoch the bishops' support of the unions took decided leftward turns. In general, these more progressive opinions emerged with the Dumont Report, published in 1972 and found further public expression in official statements by the Canadian bishops in general and by the Québec bishops in particular.¹⁵

For example, in its Labour Day message of 1956 the Canadian Catholic bishops had this to say: "Man [sic] has a natural right to form unions; without them he [sic] cannot, in the economic order of our times, obtain justice. The Canadian bishops have consistently encouraged workers to join unions and to participate actively in them." This position was expanded upon in 1961 with these words:

In our nation, even if trade unionism is largely developed, we must still affirm that our society has not fully accepted the trade union and that a far too great number of workers and farmers are still unorganized. This state of affairs hurts the direct action of the trade unions and above all, prohibits them from playing the role which accrues to

them in the face of the complex and considerable problems which our economic society poses.¹⁶

Finally, in 1972, while the Pavillon Dominique strike was in effect, the bishops addressed the issue of workers in Catholic institutions: "The rights of Church personnel, whatever their station, should be reviewed periodically so as to ensure that they receive just salaries, fair working conditions and security on retirement."¹⁷

Much like the social gossippers before them the Catholic establishment vacillated in the face of a union conflict within its own institutional ranks. Much like Rev. Fallis the Dominican religious in charge of the Pavillon Dominique sought to crush the union of its lay workers. Meanwhile Québec City's Archbishop Maurice Cardinal Roy named Father Gérard Dion as mediator on 29 May 1972. When negotiations stalled the Archbishop assigned a committee to the task (4 April 1973). After a brief effort to resolve the dispute the employers refused to meet with the union. In the midst of this a number of trade unionists occupied the office of Cardinal Roy for thirty-three days (November-December, 1973). For his part, the cardinal sought to receive permission from the Congregation of Religious in Rome to move toward a solution. He suggested binding arbitration.¹⁸

In the midst of this conflict Québec's growing number of progressive Catholics spoke out passionately in favour of the union. The Mouvement Mondial des Travailleurs Chrétiens (MMTC) supported the strikers as did Québec's own working class Catholic Action movements. Father Jacques Racine chastised publicly the Pavillon's director for refusing justice to the unionized workers and for manipulating diocesan organisms to escape Cardinal Roy's call for arbitration in good faith. Even more critical of the religious "patronat" were a number of the Québec church's open proponents of liberation theology. Three nuns put it this way in a joint public letter: "In conclusion, the Pavillon St-Dominique conflict shows a division in the midst of a monolithic Catholic bloc. Two churches find themselves face to face: a church of the majority, official, institutional, complicitous with the bosses by its silence and a minority church, marginalized and dismissed, which fights in the struggle for justice with the workers. Such a conflict leads us to offer a critique on our options in the light of the gospel." The Capuchin worker-priest Benoît Fortin promoted similar views. "During the Pavillon St-Dominique conflict, there was a solidarity

of the bosses,” he asserted. “The people of the Church became bosses who protected themselves” even to the point of locking out the union. Sadly, he concludes that “the religious are on the side of the poor in theory, in sermons, in spiritual readings, but they do not wish to anchor their feet among them . . . The world of church people has become powerful, it possesses too much. It witnesses too little of the liberty of God’s children. It has become a conservative force in the service of inertia and of our current capitalist system.”¹⁹

Cardinal Roy, though he seemed inclined to support the strikers, was also irked with Catholic leftist partisans of the union. In his communiqué of 21 March 1974 he spoke of “those Christians” who considered “worker struggles as one of the places where social justice ought to be built.” “For them,” he said, “the present conflict has acquired symbolic value.” Yet the cardinal hastened to add: “The disputing movements and expressions of solidarity, which demonstrate a new social conscience among many Christians, do not always facilitate a road for peaceful negotiations.” Further, Msgr. Roy underscored how difficult and delicate these negotiations were, especially in the face of the militancy of the union alliance of 1972 called the Common Front and “the financial difficulties” experienced by the Dominicans who operated the Pavillon Dominique. Next he expressed that Rome refused to intervene even to the point of giving special powers to the archbishop beyond those already intrinsic to his “episcopal jurisdiction.” Very clearly the refusal of Pavillon Dominique’s leadership to negotiate left Msgr. Roy deeply frustrated. He reaffirmed his inability to resolve the conflict as exceedingly sad, yet he concluded his words with a strong social Catholic endorsement of workers’ movements: “I have affirmed already and repeatedly that trade unionism is a necessity in our modern world. I have even deplored with frequency that trade unionism has not yet attained the entirety of Québec’s wage-earners.”²⁰

Unlike the Methodist Church’s position on the Printers’ Strike with respect to its own publishing firm, the Québec Catholic hierarchy in the person of Maurice Roy took a stronger stand toward the new union at the Pavillon Saint-Dominique. His obvious sympathies, however, did not prevent him from staking out a position between the two contending parties, and he was obviously displeased with those Catholic militants who endorsed the strikers unequivocally. Typical of ecclesiastical leaders, he adopted a mediating position geared more toward institutional peace than

toward a firm position on the side of a handful of vulnerable workers employed by a church body. In this respect the Pavillon Saint-Dominique conflict remains comparable to the issue of the Printers' Strike some fifty years before.

These two brief case studies here described seem to me to offer a research path to church historians that is rarely explored, namely the relationship between official ecclesiastical statements and how they are put into practice, especially in the arena of social issues. In short, how does the church fare in the tension between words and deeds? Perhaps too much credence is given to high-sounding words without serious research into matters of class, institutional survival and the sociopolitical infrastructure of the church politics that promulgates positions while at the same time often ignoring them in the rough and tumble of life. To be sure, this brief study does not claim to be exhaustive or conclusive, but it is my hope that it might be one small part of a research agenda that gives more attention to these matters.

Endnotes

1. For Baum, see *The Priority of Labor: A Commentary on "Laborem exercen . . ."* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982); and Gregory Baum with Duncan Cameron, *Ethics and Economics: Canada's Catholic Bishops on the Economic Crisis* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Co., 1984). For a recent ecumenical sampling, consult John R. Williams, *Canadian Churches & Social Justice* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1984).
2. Richard Allen, *The Social Passion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 72-74.
3. Allen, *Social Passion*, 73-74.
4. Cited in Stewart Crysdale, *The Industrial Struggle and Protestant Ethics in Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1961), 29.
5. Allen, *Social Passion*, 74
6. James Simpson, *Industrial Banner* (3 June 1921): 1; cited in Allen, *Social Passion*, 178.
7. Allen, *Social Passion*, 178-179; United Church of Canada Archives/Victoria University Archives (hereafter UCCA), Department of Evangelism and Social Services (hereafter DESS), Box 7, File 125, letter to S.W. Fallis from A.L.

- Fuller, 3 October 1921.
8. UCCA, DESS, Box 7, File 125, James Simpson to Methodist Toronto Conference, 9 June 1921, 1. See also, UCCA, DESS, Box 7, File 125, *Promise and Performance: The Attitude of the Methodist Church in Solving Labor Problems*, by Toronto Typographical Union, No. 91, 1-4.
 9. Allen, *Social Passion*, 179-181.
 10. UCCC, DESS, Box 7, File 125, Fallis letter, 29 September 1921; and Thomas to Moore, 27 July 1921.
 11. UCCA, DESS, Box 7, File 125, "Methodists and the Printers' Strike," 1-2.
 12. Allen, *Social Passion*, 194. See also UCCA, DESS, Box 7, File 125: Thomas to Moore, 21 July 1921, 1; and Ira D. Scranton to T.A. Moore, 24 November 1921, 1-2.
 13. "Historique du conflit (1966-1974)," *Dossiers "Vie Ouvrière"* (hereafter *DVO*) XXIV, 89 (novembre 1974), 517-518. See also, "Pavillon Saint-Dominique," *Le Travail* (mai 1974), 15.
 14. *DVO* XXIV, 89 (novembre 1974), 518-519.
 15. For general information on these developments in the Québec church, see especially Gregory Baum, "Catholicism and Secularization in Quebec," and "The Dumont Report: Democratizing the Catholic church," in *The Church in Quebec* (Ottawa: Novalis, 1991), 15-47, 49-65. The Dumont Report is a six-volume work under the general title *Commission de l'Étude sur les Laïcs et l'Église* (Montreal: Fides Press, 1972). Dumont wrote his own interpretation of his work (see "L'Église: Histoire, Tradition, Projet," *Communauté Chrétienne* 9, 50-51 [mars-juin 1970]: 127-146). *Prêtres et Laïcs* published a special dossier analyzing the Report (XXI [décembre 1971]: 578-631). For a look at the evolution of Catholic trade unionism in Québec, see the definitive works of Jacques Rouillard, *Histoire de la CSN, 1921-1981* (Montréal: Boréal, 1981), and *Histoire du Syndicalisme Québécois* (Montréal: Boréal, 1989). A thorough examination of the changing church in Québec may be found in Jean Hamelin, *Histoire du catholicisme québécois*, Vol. 2, *The XXe siècle, De 1940 à nos jours* (Montréal: Boréal, 1984), and Paul-André Linteau, et. al., *Histoire du Québec contemporain: Le Québec depuis 1930* (Montréal: Boréal, 1986), 70, 88-92, 290-292, 314-315, 526-529, 589-595.
 16. "Document 3 – Labour Day Message – 1956 . . ." in *Do Justice! The Social Teaching of the Canadian Catholic Bishops*, ed., E.F. Sheridan (Montréal and Toronto: Éditions Pavilnas and Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice,

1987); and “Message de 1961,” in *Messages des Évêques Canadiens à l’occasion de la Fête du Travail, 1956- 1974*, ed. Richard Arès, (Montréal: Bellarmin, 1974), 39.

17. “Document 30 – Social Justice in the Church,” in *Do Justice!*, 228.
18. “Historique du conflit,” 521- 526; “Le cardinal Roy donne son appui moral aux occupants de son bureau,” *Le Devoir*, 30 novembre 1973, 9; “Les occupants des bureaux du cardinal roy sont enfermés et sans téléphone,” *Le Devoir*, 3 décembre 1973, 12; “Le cardinal Roy décide d’intervenir dans le conflit du pavillon Saint Dominique,” *Le Devoir*, 8 décembre 1973, 3; and “Le cardinal Roy rencontre les grévistes et les religieuses,” *Le Devoir*, 12 décembre 1973, 11; “Pavillon . . .” *Le travail*, 15.
19. Marie-Claire Nadeau, “On ne pouvait pas fêter tout seuls,” *DVO XXIV*, 89 (novembre 1974), 545-548; “Solidarité internationale avec les grévistes,” *DVO XXIV*, 89 (novembre 1974), 549-550; “Nos questions comme Religieuses,” *DVO XXIV*, 89 (novembre 1974), 551-555; Roger Poirier, “Une solution originale à un conflit original,” *DVO XXIV*, 89 (novembre 1974), 557-563; Jacques Racine, “Pourquoi je suis intervenu dans le conflit,” *DVO XXIV*, 90 (décembre 1974), 604-606; and Benoît Fortin, “Un événement révélateur pour la vie religieuse,” *DVO XXIV*, 90 (décembre 1974), 607-613.
20. Maurice Cardinal Roy, “Le Pavillon St-Dominique,” *DVO XXIV*, 89 (novembre 1974), 523- 526.

