Labor’s Responsibilities

Address

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YOUR UNION (WOODWORKERS’ UNION), together with your sister organizations, has done an excellent job in rebuilding a trade union structure out of the ruins you found at the time of the collapse of the Nazi regime. Your energy and patience combined have made it possible for German labor to develop into a force which is able to make a constructive contribution to the development of a German democratic state within a free Europe and a free world.

The work of the trade unions in the Free Trade Union International and in such international undertakings as the Schuman Plan is highly important both in terms of short-run needs and long-range plans for fuller cooperation of all free peoples in the world.

In the economic field, I believe the trade unions have a tremendous task ahead. With the economic improvement, especially since currency reform (in June 1948), the well-being of the wage earners has not improved in proportion to that of other segments of the population. Organized labor has the right and the responsibility to insist upon an improved standard of living for the wage earners.

AN INCREASE IN WAGES does not necessarily mean an increase in prices. If industry and commerce operate efficiently, it can result in an increased demand in consumer and semi-durable goods and improved productivity.

Moreover, to the interested observer it appears that many German manufacturers and merchants, in the interest of the economy as a whole, might well cut down on their rates of profits to absorb wage increases and not charge them to the consumer.

With still almost 1,500,000 unemployed, the German economy cannot afford to maintain one segment of the population in comparative luxury. It is the right and the responsibility of the unions to press for a fair distribution of the national income.

The trade unions also have a great responsibility in the political field. You are committed to a policy of political neutrality, a policy on which I fully agree with you. This should not prevent you, however, from using your power to combat elements and organizations whose main goal it is to destroy the democratic state. The resurgence of an extreme right wing party in the recent election in Lower Saxony is a real warning. Labor, through its press, must do its share to keep the workers apprised of the issues involved in the fight for democracy. Fortunately, the extremists on the left have received a significant setback in recent state elections. That does not mean, however, that the agents of the Kremlin are giving up the fight. In fact, labor must be aware that, as a result of such political reverses, the Communist agents will intensify their activities in the unions. They will parade as good trade unionists interested only in the welfare of the workers. Yet, as we all know, their only interest is to capture control of the trade unions to use them as political institutions of their masters in the Kremlin.

IF THERE ARE ANY MEMBERS within your organization or in the labor movement who do not agree with this statement, ask them to inquire about the workers’ rights and working conditions in eastern Germany or in any of the other colonies of the Soviet Union.

Behind the Iron Curtain there are no labor unions. There labor has no right to organize for the purpose of protecting and improving its standards of living. What you have in the Soviet Union and its colonies under the guise of trade unions is what you had in Nazi Germany — political organizations created and controlled by the state for the purpose of keeping labor from using its economic strength for its own good.

Communists in the ranks of any trade union always claim to be good trade unionists; yet they know that we know Moscow’s orders to the leadership of the German Communist movements require them to follow a program which leads to destruction of the unions as effective, independent, economic organizations, and undermines the political life in the Federal Republic, thus making it ripe for forceful seizure.

In the “white book,” published by the German Federation of Trade Unions, you will find documentary evidence to prove that Communists must be ready and willing to make all kinds of sacrifices of law, truth and secrecy to get into the trade unions and, at any price, to perform Communist work in them, and that the lie used by Communists as a conscious weapon is no lie but an actual necessity.

IN A DEMOCRACY, the members of a union have the democratic right to prevent their union from becoming a haven for the members of a movement whose ultimate aim is to destroy democracy. Expelling Communists from the labor movement is not violating the political neutrality of the German Federation of Trade Unions.

I appeal to every trade union in Western Germany to take inventory within your union with a view toward cleansing your unions of Communism.

By protecting and improving the economic status of the wage earners,
you will perform an important function in combating the destructive and slanderous propaganda of the Communists and neo-Fascists.

However, there is another field in which organized labor can make an important contribution toward protecting and strengthening the democratic state. I am talking about the educational system. Unfortunately, the German educational system is still predominantly a class system, carefully designed to keep the sons and daughters of the workers from securing the necessary education which will permit them to compete on equal terms, at least education-wise, with those of other economic groups.

While I agree that some valuable work has been done to improve teacher training, to improve the school curriculum, and in some states to provide free education beyond the grammar school level, none of these improvements has essentially changed the rigid class character of the German school system.

The result is that, with few exceptions, training for political, economic and cultural leadership is still limited to a small segment of the population. To bring about a change in this deplorable condition requires a fundamental change in the entire educational structure. Toward this end, organized labor may well provide the leadership seeking the support of all progressive elements.

Free-Enterprise Principle Surveyed

ABOUT HALF THE WEST GERMAN public say they favor the principle of freedom of the individual to engage in a trade or business (Gewerberechtigkeit), while only one-third of those questioned expressed opposition to this principle, according to a survey of 1,000 West Germans and Berliners made by the HICOG Reactions Analysis Staff. Almost half of those questioned, however, felt that a man who wished to set up a radio shop should be required to obtain permission from members of the trade.

US policy in Germany has been to encourage the development of Gewerberechtigkeit, but under a draft law now pending in the German Parliament approval by a council of tradesmen would be required before an individual can enter a trade or business.

Restrictive licensing is a surviving remnant of the medieval guild system. It was abolished by the Germans during the 19th century but was revived by the Nazis. It is now prohibited in the US Zone of Germany, but is still prevalent in the remainder of West Germany.

In the survey, two lines of inquiry were followed. The first was designed to measure the extent of acceptance of the term "Gewerberechtigkeit," when presented without any further description. Measured this way, 47 percent in West Germany favored it, 32 percent were against, 13 percent had no opinion, and the remaining eight percent had never heard of the term.

The second line of inquiry dealt with a specific illustrative situation. The public was asked to decide whether or not a specific entrepreneur — a man who wished to establish a radio shop — should be able to set up a business without first receiving permission from members of the trade. In response to this question, 47 percent said they thought the man should be allowed to open a shop without permission, 43 percent thought permission should be required, and 10 percent had no opinion.

Almost all of the people questioned who felt that the man who wished to open a radio shop should be free to do so without first securing the permission of those already engaged in the trade would grant the same freedom to persons wishing to enter most other trades.

In effect, then, four in 10 Western Germans support freedom of enterprise in practice.

The few who voiced the opinion that this freedom should not apply to all trades indicated by their comments that entry into certain businesses, particularly those that bear directly on the public welfare, should require proof of ability.

The argument that a man's technical ability should first be established to the satisfaction of those already engaged in the trade was the principal reason given in explanation of the views of those who felt that a man wishing to open a radio shop should first be required to secure the permission of members of the radio trade. The argument that unrestricted competition was wasteful was less frequently mentioned.

MRS. MYRA WOODRUFF (second from left in foreground), of the Department of Education, State of New York, and Dr. Magnus Jensen (left, foreground), Norwegian educator, were guest speakers at the June monthly meeting of US Sector vocational school principals at the Little Wannsee Guest House in Berlin. With the visiting educators are Ellen Schuetz (third from left, foreground), director of Home Economics at West Berlin's Lette-Verein, Dr. Harry B. Wyman (right, foreground), chief of HICOG Berlin Element's General Education Section, and some of the 30 principals who participated in the meeting. Discussion centered on vocational school problems. (PRB BE-HICOG photo by Schubert)

* See Information Bulletin for April 1951, page 5.

INFORMATION BULLETIN

JULY 1951