

Human Rights in the Labour Movement

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The Trade Union Movement in Canada is firmly committed to the policy of assuring equal rights to all Canadians in all walks of life. Labour sincerely believes that everyone in our land should have equal opportunity regardless of race, colour or creed. Human rights must be a matter of grave concern to organized labour, because, discrimination is morally wrong and if allowed to thrive, brings injustice and leads to strife. Unions must always be concerned, because, prejudice and discrimination are real barriers to the economic advances of all workers. If we are to protect the gains we have made and are to forge ahead to greater prosperity we must be continually on the alert to guard against anything which could destroy the unity and solidarity which have made our unions great.

Labour's fight against the evils of bigotry and intolerance began in earnest in 1946, when the two former congresses, together with the Provincial Federations and Local Labour Councils, established committees to carry out this programme. The Toronto Labour Council has been wholeheartedly in support of this policy, and much of the council's work in the field of human rights has been carried out by the council's special committee The Toronto and District Labour Committee for Human Rights. This committee has since its inception been providing educational services to all affiliated locals in the Toronto area. These have included arranging Fair Practises Institutes, showing films, providing speakers and distributing literature on how to deal with the problems of prejudice and discrimination in the plant and the community.

As a result of the work of these committees together with representations made by the congresses, federations and other community groups, many gains have been made. The efforts of organized labour played an important part in the enactment of the Ontario Fair Employment Practises Act in 1951, and the Canada Fair Employment Practises Act in 1953. These laws made it illegal for employers to discriminate against prospective employees, and also outlawed asking a job applicant his race, creed, or national origin either in a job application form or in an employment interview. Passage of the laws also assured the acceptance of the principle that legislation can play a vital role in assuring equal rights to all Canadians regardless of where they came from, what colour their skin is, or what church they go to. The efforts of the Labour Movement also played a vital role in the enactment of the Ontario Fair Accommodations Act in 1954. This act outlaws discrimination in accommodations and services in any places to which the public was customarily admitted. Hotels, beverage rooms, restaurants, barber shops, etc., come within the scope of this act.

Certainly, we can say that in past years we have made progress, but as we look back and consider the gains we have made, we cannot afford to become complacent. Discrimination in Ontario in the employment field is still being practised although less blatantly because of the existing legislation.

A recent survey by the Toronto committee involved a qualified applicant applying for an office placement with private and government employment agencies and with

private firms. The results of the research, when one considers that the Ontario Fair Employment Practises Act has been in effect for more than six years are, to say the least, interesting and worthy of serious consideration. In the course of a week the applicant visited some forty establishments. Four office placement agencies were investigated. In three out of the four, the applicant was told that the employer is usually informed as to the racial extraction or race and religion of the applicant, regardless of the applicant's qualifications. In other fields the survey revealed that five out of sixteen insurance companies, two out of four head offices of banks, and three out of thirteen offices of business firms carried in their application forms questions which are deemed illegal under Federal and Provincial Fair Employment Practises laws. It is quite possible that those firms that had illegal questions on their application forms were not practising discrimination in their hiring policies, or that those whose forms were in compliance with the acts did have some form of discrimination in their policies. In all of the cases where the firms were found to have illegal questions on their application forms, the Toronto committee filed complaints with the proper government authorities, and have since been informed that as a result of these complaints the illegal questions have now been removed.

The Ontario Fair Accommodations Practises Act, which was given a great deal of prominence in the Dresden case, which the Toronto and Windsor committees with the co-operation of the National Unity Association fought to a successful conclusion after almost two years of court battles, has also been found to have weaknesses which must be strengthened. The Toronto committee only a few months ago and after Judge Thomas of Bracebridge had ruled in a test case "Unfortunately the wording of the act was found not to cover apartment houses" conducted a survey in the rental housing field in the Toronto area. In many instances the committee was told frankly that owners of apartment houses and multiple dwellings did not rent to minority groups because of either the colour of their skin, their race or national origin.

Our Canadian immigration policy is another matter to which labour must look with a view to having some changes made. Human rights are constantly being violated by Immigration Act regulations and immigrations officials. The records show many instances where talented and qualified prospective citizens have either been deported or denied admittance simply because they happened to be born in the wrong part of the world.

Yes, we have made some progress, and much still remains to be done. We must continue to press for a governmental educational programme, to acquaint the public of their rights under existing legislation. We must continue to fight to ensure that all Canadians have equal opportunity in obtaining jobs, promotions, decent houses in which to live. It is the duty of the Labour Movement to spearhead the campaigns to obtain effective protection for the basic human rights of all citizens in the community. Only by doing this will we be able to ensure that all of our people will have equal rights and regardless of their race, colour or creed be able to walk on the face of this earth with true human dignity.