

Another Victory for Labor . . .

Job Discrimination Outlawed in Ontario

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June 4th, 1951, was F.E.P. Day in Ontario.

On that day Ontario became the first province in Canada, and the first part of the British Commonwealth to have a Fair Employment Practices Act — a law prohibiting job discrimination on racial or religious grounds.

Passage of the F.E.P. law came in response to a long and vigorous campaign led by organized labor of all affiliations, and joined during the past few years by all the major religious groups, women's and youth organizations, professional and service bodies. Early this year more than eighty different provincial organizations backed up the Association for Civil Liberties (which includes labor representatives) in appealing to the Ontario government for immediate action on a Fair Employment Practices Act. The C.C.F. and other opposition parties in the Legislature prepared to reintroduce F.E.P. measures that had met defeat in previous sessions.

The Throne Speech announcement that the government would introduce a bill to ban discrimination in employment was welcomed throughout the province; it was approved editorially even by those newspapers which had formerly opposed all attempts "to legislate decency".

Public attention was drawn to the bill's preamble, which pointed out that "it is contrary to public policy in Ontario to discriminate against men and women in respect of their employment because of race, creed, color, nationality, ancestry or place of origin." It was noted that this principle was "in accord with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as proclaimed by the United Nations."

The F.E.P. Act provides that "no employer or person acting on behalf of an employer shall refuse to employ or to continue to employ any person, or discriminate against any person in regard to employment or any term or condition of employment because of his race, creed, color, nationality, ancestry or place of origin." Trade unions, employment agencies and employers' organizations are similarly forbidden to discriminate with respect to union membership or employment.

Employers are thus asked to select employees and deal with them, not as members or non-members of any race or religion, but as workers with certain qualifications for doing certain jobs and doing them well. In these days, when the basic freedoms of mankind are at stake, no union, community or nation can afford to be split in several directions on racial or religious lines; nor can they afford to sacrifice human resources to petty prejudices and the memory of ancient grievances. A workable F.E.P. law, properly administered can go a long way to protect the living standards of all Canadian workers, and will enhance the value of the democratic ideal we are trying to sell to other peoples.

But in order to achieve its purpose, the law must be intelligently and firmly enforced, and must be accompanied by the combined educational efforts of government, labor, voluntary organizations, and employers themselves.

The government has a big share of the job; it must ensure that every legitimate complaint receives prompt attention; that offenders are shown that the law means what it says, and that all loopholes in the legislation are eliminated as quickly as possible.

The government must also assume a large share of the responsibility for the program of public information and education that is demanded by legislation of this type. By way of illustration we might mention the safety campaigns initiated by the provincial Department of Highways and designed to improve the effectiveness of traffic regulations. Similarly it must be demonstrated clearly that it is not only illegal to discriminate, but that it is good business **not** to discriminate. Government agencies against discrimination in several states in the U.S. have shown the way. Through conferences, literature and radio broadcasts they report how increasing numbers of firms are discovering the economic value of "employment on merit". Ontario can and must provide the same type of educational leadership.

The unions will make their own contributions to the success of the law. Union members must be informed as to the purpose and operation of the F.E.P.A., and must find in their own union a channel for action on complaints of discrimination. The Joint Labor Committee to Combat Racial Intolerance, set up by both Toronto labor councils, stands ready to advise and assist local unions, not only in education programs, but also in individual cases of racial and religious discrimination. Where one or more officers of a local are designated to handle F.E.P. activities, more effective results will be obtained; it is hoped that the next few months will see this practice followed by all unions in the Toronto area. Regular conferences will be held with a view to co-ordinating educational activities and exchanging information.

The coming year will be regarded as a trial period for Ontario's F.E.P. law. Anxious as we must be for its successful operation, and counting on forceful leadership from the Department of Labor, let us not forget our own responsibility. The Fair Employment Practices Act on the statute books is a tribute to labor's pioneering in human relations. It is only a partial victory however, unless it is applied as part of a co-operative and continuous effort to democratize our industrial society. It will prove to be a disastrous defeat for labor if the law is left to collect dust in a corner of Queen's Park.