

A NATIONAL CONFERENCE

SINCE the end of the war the Australian economy has been enfeebled by industrial disorder and discontent. The reconstruction of our economic life to purposes of peace is being carried through with a productive machine which is working—when all factors including strikes and work stoppages are taken into account—at not more than 70 per cent. to 80 per cent. of practicable efficiency. On one or two occasions the machine has threatened almost to stop. *In 1945 the number of working days lost through industrial disputes reached a high peak. This peak will almost certainly be surpassed when the final figures for 1946 are published.*

But the catalogue of failure does not end with statistics of working days lost through strikes and stop-work meetings. Over large parts of industry the performance of the daily task is marred by lack of zest and enthusiasm. There seems to exist an almost universal disinclination for steady work. "Go slow" is often an involuntary response to an attitude of mind; but it is at times deliberately planned and organised. Overtime repeatedly comes under trade union ban and is generally distasteful. Throughout the field of services there is a notable absence of courtesy and good manners and of a desire to please. *There are strong factual grounds for the belief that, in general, production per manhour—a basic test of the economic health of a modern industrial community—is substantially lower than before the war. The wheels of industry are certainly turning, but they seem to be badly in need of a lubricant.*

REACTION FROM THE WAR?

These conditions, which exist also in other countries, are often ascribed to a physical and psychological reaction from long, dreary years of wartime stress and strain. It is hard to believe this explanation has much validity for Australia. *The fundamental cause of the industrial sickness in this country appears to be deep-rooted in the unhappy state of industrial relationships.*

As in the vast majority of human affairs, the industrial problem has both its immediate and long-term aspect. The immediate issue appears to hinge upon the question of wages,

the distressingly high cost of living, and is aggravated by what can only be described as a profound discontent with the workings of Australia's traditional and unique machinery of compulsory arbitration. A solution to this short-term problem is essential and would clear the way for an attack on the long-range work of building a true and durable partnership in industrial relationships. But no settlement of the immediate contentions will long avail, unless the longer-range issues are attacked with boldness and comprehension and a determination to find solutions.

The Post-war

CHANGES IN SOCIAL OUTLOOK

The war has brought about revolutionary and profound changes in the thinking and social outlook of the great mass of ordinary men and women in all countries. These changes are concerned not solely—and perhaps not primarily—with the material conditions of existence and the natural desire for an improvement in these conditions. They have to do with things that are not easily labelled. *They are things of mind and spirit rather than of matter.* They are impalpable rather than palpable.

There is an intense desire for a wider personal self-expression. There is a yearning for broader horizons and for a life that offers not merely a guaranteed minimum of income but a guaranteed maximum of dignity and self-respect. There is an urge towards a higher social status and all that this means—the elimination of privileges where unnecessary and unjustified, the desire for better educational opportunity and an equal start in the race of life, the democratisation of institutions, and the control of those institutions. *In industry, this takes the form of a claim not merely for security, but for status; it concerns not merely rewards and ownership, but interest and intelligent participation.* These are the potent forces at work, and it is these forces which must be woven into the long-term pattern of industrial relations if lasting stability and order are to replace the present instability and disorder.

It is high time that thought was given to how these profound human aspirations and emotions, which were rapidly

A NATIONAL CONFERENCE

brought to maturity under pressure of a world upheaval of unparalleled magnitude, can be given tangible expression in the post-war constitution of industry.

1945 — EFFORTS TO ACHIEVE A NATIONAL CONFERENCE

Over the last two years a number of efforts have been made to arrange a conference of employers and employees on a nation-wide scale. That these efforts have not been successful attains, in the light of later events, almost to the proportions of a national tragedy. In these attempts to achieve better industrial understanding the I.P.A.—Victoria, has taken a central part, and it is desirable that the history of the negotiations should be briefly recounted here for purposes of record.

The proposal for a national conference emanated in the first instance from the Chairman of the Industrial Committee of the I.P.A. in the form of a press statement. In response to this statement, the President of the Australasian Council of Trade Unions stated his personal agreement with the Institute's proposal, and a few weeks later an emergency committee of the A.C.T.U. issued an official public announcement to the effect that its organisation was prepared to confer with employers with the object of achieving peace and harmony in industry.

Negotiations were then undertaken by the Institute with representative employer bodies throughout Australia. The objective of these negotiations was to obtain the agreement of these organisations to appoint delegates to attend a national conference with the trade unions. A deadlock being reached in the negotiations, a meeting was convened by the Institute and was attended by representatives of leading employer bodies. As a result of this meeting it was generally understood that an endeavour would be made to implement a national conference of employer and employee organisations of the type suggested by the I.P.A.

Eventually the proposal for a nation-wide conference collapsed because of the opposition of a group of employers in a State other than Victoria. These negotiations absorbed a period of many months.

Toward the end of 1945 the matter was taken up by the Commonwealth Government, which invited employer and employee organisations to appoint delegates to a conference similar to that which had been urged by the I.P.A., with the exception that the Government itself was to be a party to the conference. Arrangements for the holding of the discussions at Canberra were concluded when an outbreak of industrial strife in New South Wales caused the Commonwealth Government to postpone the enterprise indefinitely.

In recent weeks the President of the A.C.T.U. in statements to the press has revived the proposal for a national conference. The attitude of the Commonwealth Government and of certain groups of employers to this latest development is apparently somewhat lukewarm. The I.P.A.—Victoria, has not wavered in its belief that much good could eventuate from a conference thoroughly organised on sound principles.

CLEARING OF THE AIR

The atmosphere surrounding industrial relations is thick and congested. The best way, in fact the only way, that the air can be cleared is by a general exchange of views on the future between the parties to industry. A host of new problems, both psychological and material, has been thrown up by the war. The economic status and rewards of women; industrial incentive and discipline under conditions of full employment; new developments in personnel policy; the extent to which employee participation and interest in industry can be made effective; the methods of wage determination; these and many other questions call for consideration on a national basis between employers and employees.

A further attempt to arrange a national conference should be made without delay. And this time no amount of actual or potential industrial disturbance should be regarded as sufficient reason for postponement or abandonment.

See over
Add

A NATIONAL CONFERENCE

NATURE OF CONFERENCE

Obviously it would be impossible for a conference such as this to reach solutions of the many detailed technicalities to which relations in industry give rise. *But it is not too much to hope that it could attain a wide basis of agreement on the general principles that should govern industrial policy over the next decade at least.* And even supposing that this broad measure of agreement proves to be unattainable, such a conference should serve to expose where the fundamental disagreements and difficulties lie.

To be successful, careful preparations by all parties would be essential. The interval of time between the convening of the conference and the date fixed for the discussions should be sufficient, therefore, to allow these necessary preparations to be made. *If the participants were to approach the conference table not in the spirit of gaining something on the cheap or of getting something for nothing, but in an earnest constructive desire to serve the common well-being, there is reason to hope that Australia could enter upon a new era of industrial relationships.*

