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GIDEON D. ROBERTSON:
Conservative Minister of Labor 1917-1921.

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P R E F A C E

Gideon Decker Robertson is generally remembered (if at all) as Arthur Meighen's lieutenant, and hence a minor villain in the drama of the Winnipeg General Strike. Few ask his origins or his beliefs; few question whether he accomplished anything of value in his career as a union and a government executive. The result is a prejudiced view of Robertson based solely on the man at his worst, in his suppression of the Winnipeg Strike.

This thesis is not designed to prove that Robertson was a hero; he was not. But it does seek to show that he was not an enemy of the workers, or a helpless pawn of the government. He was, rather, a strong proponent of the dominant union philosophy of his time - craft international unionism. He was also a fine mediator who believed unceasingly in the ability of reasonable men to reach just solutions to labour problems through discussion and conciliation.

Robertson used his mediation skills to improve the relationship between government and labour; more particularly, he was the symbol of the cooperative spirit that characterized relations between the Conservative government and the international craft union movement between 1918 and 1921. The union movement grew tremendously during, and just after, World War I. Consequently, the government was forced to recognize the existence of a pressure group of increased importance in Canadian society. Since the international

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craft unions, through their Canadian agent, the Trades and Labour Congress, represented the vast majority of organized workers in Canada, and since these unions were prepared to work within the existing social and economic system, it was with these unions that the Conservative government sought a rapport. The international craft movement for its part, was prepared to improve its relations with government. Head-on opposition over conscription in 1917 had been to no avail; cooperation might prove a better means to achieve its ends. Both groups were to achieve benefits from their new understanding. This thesis studies Robertson's career in the light of the growing cooperation between the Conservatives and the international craft unions, and his role as agent of both.

The first half of the thesis is roughly chronological. The introduction sketches the background of federal government relations with the labour movement up to 1917. Chapter I outlines Robertson's rise through labour ranks; Chapter II studies the important years 1917-18, from the conflict over conscription to the movement for reconciliation between government and labour. Chapter III traces Robertson's rise to Minister of Labour.

The second half of the thesis is topical rather than chronological. Chapters IV and V deal with Robertson's legislative and executive actions as Minister of Labour. Chapters VI and VII display his bias in favour of the

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international craft movement and against the other Canadian labour movements of the period - the One Big Union and the Catholic and national dual union movements.

The aim of the thesis is then two-fold. It seeks to provide a fuller understanding of Robertson's role in Canadian labour history, derived not only from his actions in the Winnipeg General Strike but also from a study of his beliefs and activities as a member of the Conservative government and the international union movement. The thesis also aims to show the growing cooperation between the Conservative government and the international craft unions, a growing rapport which Robertson's rise to the Cabinet both symbolized and aided.

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Between 1917 and 1921, the Canadian labour movement was fragmented. It was divided between international and national-dual unions; craft and industrial unions; Catholic and secular unions. Because of its fragmentation and because, in spite of its growth during World War I, it was still relatively small, its influence on Canadian society and government was limited. Though governments since Macdonald's time had courted it, pursuing its votes through timely handouts, labour had derived little benefit from the courtship.

The rise of the Conservative party to power in 1911 foretold little improvement in the relations of government and labour. Indeed, given the record of Conservative hostility toward international unionism - by far the largest part of the Canadian labour movement - there was no cause to predict anything other than continued and mutual distrust between government and unions. But the Conservatives were not really hostile to labour interests; their platform contained grounds for a rapport with labour - grounds that were to provide, after 1917, for a new and improved relationship between the Conservative government and the labour

movement, and more especially the international labour movement. 1.

The international unions and their Canadian central body, the Trades and Labour Congress, were to be the prime object of the government's policy of better relations with labour, since they enrolled by far the largest number of organized workers in Canada, and were, moreover, prepared to work within the existing economic system. In general, the craft internationals accepted the complementary role of management and labour. They believed that owner, manager, and worker were all necessary to the production of desired goods and rejected the theory of unceasing class conflict, of constant struggle by a dispossessed proletariat to destroy capitalist ownership of the factors of production.

1. The term "Conservative government", as used in this thesis, includes the Union government of the war years, which, with its strong complement of Conservative cabinet ministers and a Prime Minister of the same party, remained essentially a Conservative administration. An "international" union is one containing both American and Canadian workers, but with the majority of its membership, and its headquarters, in the United States.

A craft union is one organizing workers of one particular skill or trade. Most international craft unions - with the important exception of the large Railway Brotherhoods - were affiliated with the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC), which was, therefore, the principal spokesman for the craft international movement in Canada.

Instead, the international craft unions accepted, as their rôle, the improvement of wages and working conditions for their members through collective bargaining with management, or, if necessary, through strike action. They did not, then, seek the overthrow of the capitalist system, but rather the equitable distribution of the system's benefits.

But while the preponderant majority of organized workers in Canada belonged to the craft-international movement, it was by no means the only form of labour organization in the country. The One Big Union (OBU), organized in 1919, presented the greatest contrast, and perhaps the greatest threat, to the craft international unions. In contrast to the craft unions, the OBU sought to organize all workers, regardless of skill, into a single industrial union. Unlike the internationals, with their predominantly American membership and American headquarters, the OBU was a Canadian - largely Western Canadian - organization. Finally, it endorsed the principle that the interests of workers and owners were opposed, not complementary.

In view of the differences in both philosophy and organization between the international craft unions and the OBU, relations between the two were bound to be strained. Moreover, there was an historic reason for international dislike of the One Big Union: the American Federation of Labour, the central organization of the craft unions in the United States, had come to dominate the American labour scene only after a hard struggle with the

Knights of Labour. Since the OBU, like the Knights of Labour, endorsed the industrial principle, the international craft unions looked on the One Big Union as a reincarnation of an old enemy, to be once again opposed and suppressed.

But the OBU was not the only Canadian rival to the international craft unions. Quebec's Catholic unions and the national dual unions of the Canadian Federation of Labour rejected the international affiliation. The Quebec Catholic unions, church-supported, and French in language, feared ties to internationals as a threat to the religion, language, and culture of French-Canadians. The national dual unions of the CFL also opposed the international connection. These unions were national in that their headquarters and membership were Canadian; they were dual in that an international union already existed to organize the type of membership that the Canadian union enrolled. Therefore, in their rejection of international affiliation, both the Catholic unions, and the dual unions of the CFL challenged the hegemony of the international craft unions in Canada.

In spite of these divisions, by World War I organized labour in Canada was becoming an increasingly important force. By appointing Gideon Decker Robertson

first to the Senate and then to the Cabinet, the Borden government recognized this growing power. ^{2.}

Robertson's appointment was a Conservative attempt to restore the rapport between organized labour, (and especially the international unions) and the Conservative party which had last existed under Macdonald after his passage of the Trade Union Act of 1872, which legalized strikes. From the 1880's on, labour had tended increasingly to move toward the Liberal party, initially under the impetus of Premier Mowat's favourable legislation, such as the 1884 regulation of working conditions, contained in the Ontario Factories Act. While officially, the Trades and Labour Congress followed the lead of the American Federation of Labour in siding fully with no political party, in fact, "every Congress president between 1898 and 1909 was decidedly Liberal. So were most of the vice-presidents between 1898 and 1911." ^{3.} Moreover, the Liberals were able to woo high officials of the Congress into running for federal office either as Liberals, in the case of Ralph Smith, or as Liberal-Labour candidates, such as Alphonse Verville. ^{4.}

2. In 1911, when the Conservatives came to office, membership in all trade unions was 133, 132. (Labour Organization in Canada, 1911, p. 10). In 1919, Robertson's first year as Minister of Labour, membership stood at 378,000, a level it would not surpass until 1937. (ibid., 1969, p.vii).
3. W. D. Atkinson, Organized Labour and the Laurier Administration, unpublished M.A. thesis, Carleton University, 1957, p. 169.
4. Both men had served as president of the TLC.

But though it won the support of individual leaders, the Laurier government was never able to make of the Congress a full ally:

The Smith-Laurier alliance constituted the outstanding attempt of the Liberal government to co-opt the leaders of organized labour. But to control the labour movement by paying court to its leaders was to seize a grass-snake lizard by the tail. Smith came over. The Congress remained behind. 5

In view of the dearth of Liberal legislation favourable to labour, ⁶ the TLC's reluctance to endorse the Liberal party was understandable. Laurier's Cabinet colleagues were generally unsympathetic to labour, ⁷ and Laurier approached the labour movement with a policy of timely handouts:

He seems to have regarded the new movement as an uncanny super-organic being. He watched it hungrily eat the legislation he fed it. Incredulously - almost hypnotically - he watched it grow. 8

5. Atkinson, op. cit., P. 170

6. Atkinson states Laurier's legislative record as "an Alien Labour Act of doubtful efficacy, a Union Label Bill repeatedly thrown out by the Senate." (ibid., P. 173) Though the Liberals also passed the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act of 1907, which proved of benefit to labour (see Chapter 1, p. 24-33), it was designed not primarily to please labour, but to reduce the frequent dislocation of public services during industrial disputes.

7. ibid., P. 171

8. ibid., P. 175

Among the Liberal cabinet ministers, William Mulock seems to have been the most active in seeking good labour relations. Probably this was due, first, to a desire to make political capital, and, second, to the urgings of the young Mackenzie King, who worked under him in the new Department of Labour. It was Mulock, for example, who, following a report from King, ended the granting of post office contracts which were filled by sweatshop labour.⁹ In general, however, organized labour received little of value from the Liberal party during Laurier's administration since it represented but a small segment of Canadian society, and lacked the financial resources and consequent political power of the Canadian Manufacturers Association, labour's natural opponent in lobbying the government.

While labour as a whole was largely ignored in government circles, the international unions were under an additional handicap owing to their foreign connections. Both Laurier and Mulock would have preferred national to international unions.¹⁰ Conservatives were, if anything, more opposed to the international connection than the Liberals. Borden felt that there were "difficulties and

9. R. M. Dawson, William Lyon Mackenzie King, p. 68

10. R. A. Babcock, The A F of L in Canada, 1896-1908, p. 174

disadvantages" - unspecified - ^{11.} in having international labour organization in Canada.

Indeed, the outstanding Conservative initiative in labour matters during Laurier's tenure was one which struck at the very heart of international unionism. In 1903, Senator J. A. Lougheed, destined three years later to become Conservative leader in the Senate, sponsored a bill providing for two years imprisonment for any American citizen entering Canada to assist striking workers. ^{12.} Since one of the great benefits of the international connection to Canadian workers lay in the expertise American officials could offer in organizational and strike activities, such a bill was both extremely hostile and dangerous to the movement. In the face of strong TLC opposition, and a personal visit to Ottawa by Samuel Gompers, head of the American Federation of Labour, the Laurier government chose not to back the Lougheed legislation, and the bill died in the Senate. ^{13.} In view of the opposition of Conservative

11. In his Memoirs, Borden claimed that he had "dealt with the difficulties and disadvantages of international labour organizations" in a speech of January 9, 1907, (Robert Laird Borden: His Memoirs, vol. 1, p. 180). However, perusal of the speech does not support his contention. While he mentioned the internationals at some length, he did not, as he claimed in the Memoirs list their disadvantages. On the contrary, the speech seems rather to underline the willingness of internationals to maintain industrial peace. However, according to his Memoirs, he seems to have felt that the international connection was not desirable.

12. Babcock, op.cit., p. 2-3.

13. ibid., p. 253

leaders in both the House and the Senate, the international union movement had little reason to expect benefits from a Conservative government.

Yet aside from the obvious Conservative distaste for international affiliations, there were, potentially, bases of agreement between the Conservatives and organized labour. Borden, though leary of the international connection was not opposed to union organization:

I can see no objection to both capital and labour organizing for their own protection
Let labour be organized to the utmost possible extent..... 14.

Moreover, he wished to see a distribution of income from which labour received its fair share:

It seems to me that our policy in Canada should be to accomplish the following.....
to so frame our fiscal policy that labour in Canada shall be paid a fair living wage....
We do not desire to reduce our labouring population....to that hard fierce struggle for existence which prevails in many countries. 15.

In addition, the Conservative party either proposed or had already effected changes desired by labour. The Conservative administration of James Whitney in Ontario (1905-14) showed a strong predilection for social reform. Ontario's advanced Workmen's Compensation Act of 1914 was favourable to labour, as was Whitney's establishment of the

14. Robert Borden, Hansard, Jan. 9, 1907, p. 1165.

15. ibid., April 17, 1903, p. 1494-5.

government-owned Ontario Hydro system which provided cheap power and thus benefited the average worker. Similarly, Borden's Halifax speech of 1907 outlined a set of proposed reforms, many of which were in accord with labour desires: Senate reform, closer scrutiny of immigrants, more effective control of public utilities. In promising such initiatives, it is unlikely that Borden specifically sought to curry favour with labour elements; more likely, he saw such reforms as desirable for the whole country. Nevertheless, such ideals could be favourably received and supported by workers. There were, therefore, extensive grounds for agreement between Conservatives and organized labour.

However, from its election in 1911 until the conscription crisis of 1917, the Borden government expended little conscious effort to win friends in the labour movement, possibly because of the expressed Conservative distaste for the internationals which dominated Canadian labour organization, or simply because the government did not view the relatively new and still weak labour movement as an important voice to be heard in policy discussions.

Only with the growth of the labour movement toward the end of the war, the conscription crisis of 1917, and the TLC purge of its more radical elements in 1918, did the Conservative government and the international union movement edge closer together for mutual benefit. The symbol and agent of this cooperative spirit which characterized the years 1918 to 1921 was Gideon Robertson.

C H A P T E R 1

STEPS TO POWER

In 1916, Gideon Decker Robertson was a vice-president of the Order of Railroad Telegraphers, numerically a rather unimportant union, and, indeed, one not even affiliated with the TLC. Yet, a year later, he was labour's representative in the Senate, and was on his way to becoming the first Minister of Labour chosen from worker ranks. Obviously, this is a significant rise to power in a short time, but it is not inexplicable. By his championing of the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act, even in the face of TLC opposition, and through his personal mediation skill, Robertson became a prominent figure in the Canadian labour movement, and, more important, in the eyes of the Borden government.

There is little in his early life to suggest such a rise to prominence. Gideon Robertson was born August 26, 1874, to Gavin E. Robertson and his wife Loretta (Goring) Robertson, on a farm in Welland County, in Southern Ontario. His paternal grandfather, an immigrant and a lawyer trained in Harwick, Scotland, had been prominent among the early settlers of the Niagara district.¹ Robertson grew

1. The Railroad Telegrapher. (hereafter cited as RT) Feb., 1917,

up on the family farm, and attended public and secondary schools in Welland. He left school at the age of seventeen, and received no further formal education, although he was later granted an honorary LL.D by Queen's University. ^{2.} After learning the telegraphy trade, he was employed from 1892 to 1908, as a telegrapher on the Canadian Pacific Railway. In 1896, he married Mary B. Hay, who was to bear him four sons and two daughters.

In the year prior to his marriage, the Order of Railroad Telegraphers organized a CPR branch of its union which, within one year, had enrolled a thousand members. The union's attraction for CPR telegraphers stemmed from dissatisfaction with wage cuts introduced on the line in 1895, and a feeling that workers required a union to restore wage levels and protect worker interest in future. Immediately after its initial organization drive, the ORT began negotiation for the restoration of wage levels. After months of fruitless talks with management, international headquarters dispatched vice-president T.M. Pierson to expedite a settlement. Instead, after the CPR attempted to compel its dispatchers to withdraw from the union, Pierson called a strike on September 28, 1896. Strike action ended in victory for the union on October 11. All strikers were reinstated and the ORT was recognized as bargaining agent for CPR telegraphers.

2. Ross Hamilton, ed., Prominent Men of Canada, "G. D. Robertson," p. 213.

The CPR strike not only strengthened the ORT's foothold in Canada, but also restored the morale of the entire international organization, which had had little previous success in strike actions. In fact, up to 1895, it had fought a hard battle for survival, which conditioned its particular union philosophy, and by extension, the philosophy which it bequeathed to Robertson. In 1896, the ORT was a relatively new union. The earliest telegrapher organizations, the National Telegraphic Union, and The Telegraphers Protective League, founded about the time of the American Civil War, had been short-lived. The first strong organization in the field was the Brotherhood of Telegraphers, established as District 45 of the Knights of Labour in 1882. Within a year the K. of L. had organized 18,000 out of a possible 22,000 telegraphers.³ However as the Brotherhood had spent most of its dues resources in recruiting, it had no strike fund to support its members, and collapsed during its first serious strike in the summer of 1883.

This collapse made a profound impression on A.D. Thurston, who took care, in establishing the Order of Railway Telegraphers of North America, to avoid another such

3. A. M. McIsaac, The Order of Railroad Telegraphers, p. 3.

failure of aggressive "strike-unionism". At the founding convention, held in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in June, 1886, a no-strike clause was written into the constitution. Instead, the union was to seek better pay and working conditions through restriction of the labour supply, primarily through the forbidding of indiscriminate teaching of telegraphy by telegraphers to other rail workers. The union thus made no commitment to the organization of all workers or to the general raising of the standard of living for all workers. It contented itself with the much narrower goal of the betterment of a few skilled workers, in the traditional craft union style. This very cautious approach did not, however, prove successful, and consequently after initial organizing success, the new union's strength declined. Finally at the 1891 convention, the constitution was altered and the organization became a "protective" (that is, a "striking") union. As a result, membership nearly doubled between 1891 and 1893.⁴ But Thurston cautioned that this action in no way altered the unions conciliatory attitude toward the railroads:

No labour organization has ever been organized with a more friendly feeling toward employers than was the O.R.T.... Adopting a protective (i.e.-Strike) policy does not of necessity mean that we shall become any the less conservative. ⁵

4. ibid., p. 7

5. A.D. Thurston, quoted in R.T., August 1916, p. 1175-6.

The union was therefore, in its president's words, dedicated to the idea of the complementary role of business and labour, not to the radical ideal of class conflict or worker control of the factors of production.

The ORT's conservative tendencies were reinforced by its battle with the American Railway Union founded in June, 1893, by Eugene V. Debs. This union was an aggressive organization based on the industrial principle, aiming at the uniting of all rail workers in a single organization. It raided the ORT, and this, plus a series of unsuccessful ORT strikes, reduced the latter organization to 5,000 members by 1895. Debs' ARU disappeared in the aftermath of the Pullman Strike of 1894 and the ORT henceforth displayed a distrust of the industrial principle, based partly on the ARU's failure, and partly, no doubt, on the bitter memory of the industrial union's depredations in its ranks. A. M. McIsaac, the biographer of the Railroad Telegraphers, suggests that "as a result of their experience with the ARU, the leaders of the Order emphasized still further the importance of strict union discipline and the impracticality of industrial unionism in the railroad service.....".⁶ At the TLC convention of 1912, David Campbell, the Order's Canadian vice-president and Robertson's

6. McIsaac, op. cit., p. 11

immediate predecessor, reiterated this belief:

The American Railway Union (was) an organization which embodied all employees of a railroad and whose mushroom growth and sudden collapse should be a sufficient lesson to teach ordinary men who are willing to be taught by experience that it was an impossibility to harmonize all the interest of several classes into one organization. The industrial union ... and its policies and methods comprehend an army of workers on one side arrayed against an army of employers on the other... It seems difficult to imagine how men will continue to dream and to advocate theories that end only in failure. The trade or craft union has not... been the result of philosophical speculation... It has been evolved by a process of unending experience with the practical side of a great question. 7.

But the ORT, though opposed to the industrial principle, was not a true craft union, as its membership included workers other than telegraphers and, indeed, did not include all telegraphers. Among telegraphers, the ORT distinguished between commercial workers, such as those employed by Western Union, and railroad telegraphers, to which group it confined its organization. Its membership was concerned with either "train-order" work, connected with the dispatch and movement of trains, or "message work", that is, telegrams sent between offices, plus the odd commercial dispatch in areas where telegraph companies lacked their own offices.

7. David Campbell, quoted in R.T., February 1912, p. 219.

While it encouraged commercial operators to form their own union, (the Commercial Telegraphers' Union of America) the ORT organized many rail groups whose work did not require the use of telegraph at all. ORT president H.B. Perham listed membership as being variously "telegraphers, rail dispatchers, station agents, line repairers, levermen, interlockers, train directors, telephoners, block operators, and staffmen." ⁸. In fact, such inclusions were unavoidable, as these various functions were mostly concerned with telegraphic work in one way or another, or represented the fact that many telegraphers in small stations performed several functions (such as station agent) in addition to their telegraphic responsibilities.

Therefore, while hardly a classic example of a craft union, the ORT accepted the principle of craft organization, and more closely resembled that type than it did an industrial union. And, as already noted, it believed in the friendly cooperation of workers and employers; each was essential to the efficient operation of a business enterprise. According to ORT philosophy, then, a union's function was to act as a social conscience, prodding business through negotiation, or as a last resort through strike

8. R.T., June, 1916, p. 820

action, toward equitable distribution of the fruits of joint employer-worker effort. It was, therefore, dedicated to the complementary role of business and labour. Finally, as it organized workers in both the United States and Canada, it was an international union.

Within this Order Robertson rose to power. It is logical to assume that he accepted the craft, international, and "cooperative" union philosophy because "mobility within the union structure requires that the aspirant take over the norms and orientations dominant in the organization...." ⁹. In fact, in view of his later statements and actions as Minister of Labour in supporting ORT-type unionism, ¹⁰. it is impossible to assume otherwise.

While practising telegraphy, Robertson began to take an active role in local union activities. He was impressive and active enough that by 1907 he was chairman of the adjustment committee of the ORT in negotiations with the CPR. In 1908, in recognition of his loyalty and abilities, he was elected the Order's General Chairman for the CPR. 'This posting marks the end of his career as a telegrapher; henceforth, he was a full-time union official,

9. S. M. Lipset, Political Man, "The Political Process in Trade Unions", p. 397.

10. See Chapters VI and VII.

and a highly efficient one. Upon his election, Division 7 (as the CPR line was officially called by the ORT) was \$3,000.00 in debt. When Robertson left six years later to become an ORT vice-president, the deficit had become a surplus of \$24,000.00 and the membership had more than doubled. This made Division 7 the largest and wealthiest division in the ORT. ^{11.} As the order organized its divisions by rail line rather than by geographical area, Robertson's work necessarily required much travel, especially since his responsibilities were tied to such a vast rail network as the CPR. One of his innovations upon leaving the job was, therefore, to divide Division 7 into Eastern and Western sections. As general chairman, he presided over a committee charged with internal administration, such as the passing of local ORT by-laws, review of disputes involving union law and discipline, and collective bargaining with the CPR. He provided assistance to ORT locals in adjusting purely local grievances and was the link between his own system and the international vice-president for Canada.

11. R.T., Feb. 1917, p. 152

Robertson's effective work as general chairman of Division 7 made him a logical candidate for the Canadian vice-presidency of the union. When David Campbell, who had held the post for thirteen years, retired from the Order in 1914 to practise labour law, Robertson was named to complete his term in office. He held the appointive position of Deputy President, with the near certainty of election to the post of third vice-president at the next convention, given the structure of the ORT: the third vice-president was invariably the head of the Canadian section of the union. While technically elected by the entire Grand Division (the name given to the biennial convention which elected international officers,) he was in fact, chosen by a preliminary caucus of the Canadian delegates to the convention and then approved by the delegates at large. Considering that Robertson, in being previously appointed Deputy-President, already had the blessing of the union hierarchy; that he had performed capably as general chairman; and that he had made Division 7 the largest single unit in the ORT, his selection was assured. He became, officially, third vice-president in May, 1915.

In the ORT, vice-presidents (of whom there were five) had little power to determine executive policy, being largely regional representatives of the President. Their function was mainly the coordination of ORT activities

on the various railroads in their region, a necessity in a union in which each division negotiated separately its own contract with the railroad for which its members worked. When the local division was unable to reach a contract settlement, the vice-president was assigned by the international to continue negotiations. He also served as liaison between the general committee of each division and the international headquarters. He was, then, more a trouble-shooter than a formulator of policy.

Theoretically, the power of the Canadian vice-president was considerably larger, as he was permitted to exercise all the powers of the president save that of disbursing the strike funds.¹² These extra powers therefore included the right to suspend existing charters for gross violation of contract or union law, and the right to grant charters. In fact, however, there is no record of Robertson's ever using any other than the normal vice-presidential powers. More likely, the Canadian vice-president derived greater prestige, but exercised little extra power through his position as head of the Canadian ORT.

12. McIsaac, op. cit., p. 88. The extra authority was designed to placate Canadian nationalism.

Robertson appears to have been an effective vice-president, winning during the early war years, salary increase averaging some \$200.00 annually for those affected; provision for augmented pay for Sundays and overtime; and a 26-day month. (Previously telegraphers were expected to be on call at all times.)¹³. Thus, by 1917, at the age of 43, Robertson had reached what appeared to be the apex of his career: the successful Canadian vice-president of a union with a strong tendency to constantly reelect its officers.

However, in the years after his election to the vice-presidency, Robertson had become interested in arbitration under the Industrial Disputes Investigation (IDI) Act, an interest that led eventually to a career in government. This act, passed March 22, 1907, and principally the work of the then Deputy-Minister of Labour, Mackenzie King, was built on a variety of previous Canadian and foreign legislation. It was a sequel to, and enlargement of, the Conciliation Act of 1900, which encouraged either party to a dispute to request conciliation or arbitration by an impartial third party. By such action, and by focusing public opinion on the dispute, the government sought to hasten settlement. The Railway Disputes Act of 1903, another

13. R.T., Feb., 1918, p. 134-5

predecessor of the IDI Act, required railway disputes to be submitted to compulsory investigation. Its sponsor, William Mulock, suggested to Parliament that if compulsory investigation on the railways proved satisfactory, the principle might be extended to other industries. ¹⁴.

Essentially, the IDI Act was the extension of the compulsory investigation formula to all industries directly affecting the public good.

The immediate cause for the introduction of the IDI Act was the Lethbridge coal strike of March, 1906, which threatened death, through freezing, of many Westerners dependent on coal for heat. Mackenzie King, in mediating this dispute, came to believe that both sides had so concentrated on their narrow, personal interests that they had threatened the public good by denying to the population they served a necessity of life. To King, such a situation was intolerable, since he held that "in any civilized community, private rights should cease when they become public wrongs." ¹⁵. Of course, compulsory arbitration, which would forbid strikes, and through which both sides would be compelled to accept an arbitrator's judgment, would insure that the public interest was paramount. But

14. R. M. Dawson, William Lyon Mackenzie King, 1874-1923, p. 135

15. ibid., p. 134

King opposed this policy:

Most men who consider and advise (compulsory arbitration) see only the seeming immediate effect upon stoppage of strikes; they fail to see that a strike may, after all, bring greater good than its prevention. 16.

Therefore, in drawing up the IDI Act, he turned to the principle of compulsory investigation, which required the submission of a dispute to conciliation, but did not forbid strikes. He sought thus to guard the interests of the public without denying labour its surest weapon.

The Industrial Disputes Investigation Act thus adopted the principle of the Railway Disputes Act, but extended it beyond railways to include street railways, steamships, telegraph, telephone, gas, electric, light, water, and power companies -- in brief, all sectors of the economy, under federal jurisdiction,¹⁷ in which a work stoppage would have an immediate impact on the public. The only important new provision of the 1907 legislation was that of a "cooling-off" period; that is, the time between application for conciliation, and the tabling of the conciliation board's report, during which period a strike or lockout was illegal. 18.

16., ibid., p. 106

17. The Act did not, therefore, cover municipal workers, such as firemen or water-works employees, though their services were of direct effect on the public.

18. For this idea, King was evidently indebted to two Americans, C. F. Adams and E. P. Wheeler; see Dawson, op. cit., p. 138-40.

The government wished to insure widespread use of the conciliation machinery. Therefore, the Act provided that, for a board to be granted in any industry covered by the legislation, only one party to the dispute need apply. ^{19.} Moreover, the Minister of Labour could appoint a board even in an industry not covered by the Act if both sides to the dispute agreed to conciliation.

Neither side could wreck negotiations by a boycott. The Minister normally appointed to a board a representative of each side, preferably at the recommendation of the disputants, but at his own discretion if either side refused to nominate a candidate. The management and worker representatives could jointly recommend a chairman, but, failing agreement, the Minister could also fill that post. Finally, the board could operate with only the chairman and one member present, providing the other member had been informed of an impending meeting.

To prevent irresponsible applications, the Act laid careful rules as to who might apply. Company officials had to indicate that their application was authorized by the owner, or by a group with sufficient responsibility to order such action. Union officials or other worker representatives could apply only after a majority vote of those affected proved worker desire for

19. All information regarding terms of the IDI Act is taken from a copy of the Act printed in R.T., Dec. 1916, pp 1804-13.

conciliation. No group of fewer than ten employees would be granted a board. Finally, any group making application had to declare that a strike or lockout was imminent if a conciliation board were not established.

To assist in investigation, the board was granted considerable powers. It could investigate books, and places of work. It could enforce the attendance of witnesses; jail them for insult to, or disruption of the proceedings; and levy substantial fines.²⁰

The board submitted its report to the Minister of Labour, who subsequently published it in the Labour Gazette, thus fulfilling one of the act's aims in bringing the facts of industrial disputes to public attention. However, there was no obligation upon board members to reach unanimous agreement or recommendations, and minority reports, if submitted, were also published. Even if the board's decision was unanimous, neither side was obliged to accept it, and strikes or lockouts were legal after the tabling of a board's report. Thus, the right to strike or lock out was unimpaired, simply postponed.

The IDI Act was highly effective: between March 1907, and March 1917 - the years when Robertson was most involved in conciliation work - the Department of Labour received 227 applications and set up 189 boards

20. For illegal strikes, \$10.00 - \$50.00 per capita; for lockouts, up to \$1000.00 per day.

(plus, in two cases, Royal Commissions). In only 21 cases did a board not stop or prevent a threatened strike or lockout; and eleven of these failures were in the mining industry,^{21.} whose unions had consistently opposed the legislation. Since the IDI Act did not forbid strikes or lockouts, such figures indicate either a general satisfaction of both workers and management with board recommendations; or else a sufficient lack of faith in the justice of their cause to strike or lockout after the case was publicized in the Labour Gazette. The Act, therefore, achieved its dual purpose: a reduction of disruption in public industries, with the insurance to both worker and manager of an impartial settlement.

In spite of the Act's impressive record of success, the attitude of the TLC toward it was ambivalent. The Congress endorsed it in principle in 1907. In 1908, however, the miners raised objections to it, and the convention called for amendments providing higher pay for participants in board actions; stronger enforcement of normal working conditions's during investigations (i.e. - prevention of firings and lay-offs); and greater speed in commission establishment, investigation, and completion of reports.^{22.} In 1910, the executive noted that desired amendments had been passed,^{23.} but declined to either

21. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, May 1917, p. 352

22. H. A. Logan, Trade Unions in Canada, p. 451

23. ibid., p. 452

approve or reject the Act. ^{24.} However, the 1911 convention demanded its repeal, thus beginning a period of TLC hostility to it.

Antipathy to the Act stemmed from many sources. The basic objection -- one which influenced the powerful Samuel Gompers against it -- was that it interfered with the right to strike, a valid objection, since the act did delay strikes, though it did not forbid them. Other opponents held that the delay of strikes during investigation worked against worker interests, and that such legislation, passed by a capitalist government could not be trusted. These charges would seem to be value judgments rather than factual analyses. Other objections were more practical: to qualify for a board, workers had first to take a vote indicating the imminence of a strike; such a requirement was difficult to fulfil if membership was spread as in the rail unions. Some claimed that bosses on occasion locked out workers ostensibly for reasons not connected with labour disputes (for example, under the guise of lay-offs during stock-taking), and did so with impunity. Still another objection was that the levying of fines by conciliation boards was inequitable, as it demanded lump sums of employers but a per capita fine on workers, which, in the case

24. TLC Report, 1910, p. 15

of a large work force, could be much greater. Finally, some critics charged that boards were seldom granted to weak organizations, and, certainly, as the law was formulated, a board could not be granted to fewer than ten employees.

There were, however, two other sources of opposition to the Act which had nothing to do with its stipulations. The first stemmed from the particular economic conditions created by the First World War. With inflation rampant, workers needed large salary increases, and in conditions of full employment, they were in an ideal strike position: high demand, necessitating uninterrupted full production, made employers anxious to placate worker demands in order to avoid strikes. The strike threat was, therefore, a highly useful weapon at the time, and, logically, few workers would wish to permit any infringement on it, even a delaying tactic, as provided by the Act's "cooling-off" period. It is quite possible, therefore, that while much of the TLC's animosity toward the Act reflected dislike of some of its stipulations, a considerable amount of the opposition is attributable also to economic conditions of the period.

Finally, the Western unions within the TLC were determined foes of the legislation.²⁵ Western opposition probably stemmed from the growing radicalism of union activity in that region, one form of which was an

25. Logan, op.cit., p. 159-60

increasing interest in the value of a general strike, and a decreasing taste for "cooperation" between management and labour. Such views clashed with the basic aim of the Act, which sought to avoid strike action through negotiation. The purge of radicals at the 1918 TLC convention removed this source of opposition. That fact, plus the downswing in the economy, at the end of the war, rather than any amendments to the Act, made the TLC see the legislation in a different light. Consequently, in 1919, the TLC not only again endorsed the Act, but requested its extension to other industries.

While the TLC vacillated in its view of the Act, the ORT did not. It strongly and consistently, supported it, not only by word but also by unequivocal action. Within the Congress, the Telegraphers opposed demands for the Act's repeal, and in 1913, with the TLC unrepentant in its hostility toward the legislation, the ORT withdrew from the Congress in protest. In his justification of this drastic action before his union's Grand Division, David Campbell said that:

the legislative policy and spirit which has been developed within the Congress during recent years is such that it does not seem consistent for us to continue our affiliation any longer. 26.

26. Campbell's report to the Grand Division, quoted in the Labour Gazette, August, 1913, p. 116. The ORT returned to the fold in 1921, after the TLC had again changed its mind, and endorsed the Act. (TLC Report, 1921, p. 8)

The Canadian ORT leaders continued, during their self-imposed exile from the Congress, to stand by King's legislation. In December, 1916, both Robertson and Campbell published, in the ORT's official newspaper, letters defending the Act against Gompers' condemnation of it as an infringement on labour's freedom of action. Robertson admitted that, at first, the Canadian ORT had opposed the legislation:

Prior to, and for some time after it was passed, we were much opposed to it, believing it would curtail our liberty of free action... and enable employers to prepare for emergencies during the period of investigation. 27.

But after some personal experience with its workings, Robertson changed his mind. Indeed, his first contact with it was apparently a pioneering effort:

It so happened that it fell to the lot of the undersigned to make application for the first Board of Conciliation after the law was passed. 28.

This conciliation board recommended unanimously a 14% pay raise, "about double what the employer was willing to concede, but which he accepted and adopted,"²⁹. and no doubt the results of this first board were instrumental in changing Robertson's mind. But the advantages of the Act lay not only in the areas of better pay and working conditions; according to Robertson, it insured also impartial publicity

27. Robertson to L. W. Quick, editor, R.T., Dec. 1916, p. 1803

28. ibid., p. 1803

29. ibid., p. 1803

for grievances:

Prior to its enactment, it was impossible to get our grievances fairly related to the public, as the subsidized press was prone to distort facts and give to the public only the employers' version. 30.

Robertson obviously thought the Labour Gazette less likely to distort facts than the regular press. Even if no board were actually established, he thought that the knowledge that a commission could be set up and would bring impartial publicity to the dispute made employers more amenable to compromise. As a result, said Robertson:

Soon (the employers)...began to go much farther to reach an amicable settlement with committees and thus avoid a public investigation... 31.

Moreover, in Robertson's view the Act was "the salvation of our men on small lines where they were numerically too few to successfully press their case." 32. Now, ten or more such employees could obtain government investigation, which "has had the effect of procuring many concessions for them they could never have obtained for themselves otherwise," 33. (although for this last claim, Robertson offered no proof.)

While admitting that there was a great deal of opposition to the Act among Canadian labour organizations, Robertson dismissed such detractors as belonging to

30. ibid., p. 1803.

31. ibid., p. 1803

32. ibid., p. 1803.

33. ibid., p. 1803

"organizations who do not at present come under its scope or operation" and who consequently were in no position to really know its efficacy.³⁴ He concluded with an observation that the workman with an honest grievance had nothing to fear from the conciliation procedures:

So long as the demands of labour are within the bounds of reason, workmen need have no fear of having their grievances investigated before the bar of public opinion. 35

Such a sentiment was of course, premised on the belief that government boards would be truly impartial. It was this trust in the good faith and impartial intentions of government that separated Robertson from the many critics of the IDI Act and which, incidentally, made him a plausible candidate for a seat in government.

Campbell's letter in the same issue reiterated Robertson's support for the legislation. Moreover, the publication of the views of its leading Canadian executives in the Order's newspaper would indicate that International President Perham, though a sixth vice-president of the American Federation of Labour, also supported the act in spite of Gompers' opposition.

Robertson and Campbell did not limit their support to words. In 1916-17, Campbell served as worker

34. ibid., p. 1804. In this statement, Robertson was not completely accurate, as the miners opposed the IDI Act, and were subject to it.

35. ibid., p. 1804

representative on six boards, and Robertson, in addition to his regular vice-presidential duties, served on three. 36. In August of 1916, Robertson was selected as worker representative on two conciliation boards, the first dealing with a dispute between the Canadian Northern and its Maintenance of Way workers; the second, between the same union and the Grand Trunk. In November of that year, he was part of the Maritime board in a dispute between the engineers, firemen, conductors and trainmen and the Fredricton and Grand Lake, and New Brunswick Coal Railways. Through the medium of conciliation, he had moved beyond the confines of his own union and was becoming a figure of importance in the entire rail union movement. That the federal government itself had recognized his abilities and his support of this important labour legislation is evident in his next assignment, perhaps the most important single step to his political career.

On Sunday, October 22, 1916, Robertson began, at the request of the federal Department of Labour, his mediation of a long-simmering dispute between the CPR and the Order of Railway Conductors and Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen, as sole arbitrator, rather than as simply

36. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, May 1917, pp. 360-64. Their loyalty was rewarded financially, since board members received \$20.00 a day while travelling or taking part in board hearings. (R.T., Dec. 1916, p. 1811).

a member of a conciliation board. The dispute had begun in September, 1913 when the trainmen refused to accept a new schedule of agreement proffered by management. In April, 1914, the Minister of Labour, Tom Crothers, established a conciliation board. Its members could not, however, agree on what constituted a just settlement and in August a majority report accepted by management, and a minority report, written by the labour representative on the board, were tabled. While legally, the workers might now strike, the union representatives decided, in view of the outbreak of war, to leave the question of a strike and a settlement in abeyance indefinitely so as not to disrupt the transportation system and hamper the Canadian war effort. By October of 1916, however, in view of the rising cost of living and growing disgruntlement in the ranks, labour officials could put off the question of a new improved schedule no longer. Crothers suggested the establishment of a new conciliation board under the IDI Act. The employee representatives, no doubt remembering the nearly year-long delay between the outbreak of the dispute in September, 1913 and the last--and inconclusive--board report of August 1914, declared that they had already met the requirements of the IDI Act, and would strike without awaiting the decision of another Board. Crothers pointed out that he doubted the legality at such a time of a paralyzing strike affecting 7,000 railroad men directly, 50,000 indirectly,^{37.} and

37. Department of Labour, Annual Report, 1916-17, p. 78.

hampering the whole war effort. The stage was set for a serious confrontation between government and labour.

It was at this point that Crothers had recourse to Robertson's ability as a mediator. He was a natural choice for various reasons: he was known as a strong supporter of mediation; he had experience in the field; he represented a rail union, and this was a rail dispute. Though the CPR made application, on October 23, for another conciliation board, it was never needed. In less than a week of negotiations, Robertson had hammered out a mutually acceptable agreement. No doubt, the government's determination to prevent a crippling strike was a strong motivating force for compromise by both labour and management, but the entire episode redounded to Robertson's credit, and proved an important step to a government post.

By his own admission, Borden appointed Robertson to the Senate largely because of this settlement:

Senator Robertson is a fine representative of organized labour who was of great assistance to the government and to the country in settling the threatened strike on the Canadian Pacific Railway... In recognition of this service and of his position and ability as a representative of organized labour, I recommended him, last December for an appointment to the Senate. 38.

38. Borden Papers (hereafter cited as B.P.), Borden to Colonial Secretary Long, April 28, 1917, no. 91689.

Apart from his conciliation services, Robertson had, as Borden hinted, various other points in his favour. He was a ranking member of the railroad unions which, in 1917, represented 28.5% of organized labour in Canada.^{39.} His appointment was, then, a form of government compliment to them. After all, the rail unions had urged Robertson's appointment to the Senate at a conference in March, 1916, between Borden and representatives of the rail organizations.^{40.} At the same time, while placating labour interests, such an appointment was by no means a radical move, as President Wilson of the United States had already shown the way in appointing W. B. Wilson, a former secretary-treasurer of the United Mine Workers, as his Secretary of Labour.^{41.} Moreover, the ORT, and Robertson personally, had taken a pro-government stand on both the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act, as already noted.

Finally, Robertson had supported the war effort, and had backed conscription. Though Robertson himself was too old for service, two of his sons served in the armed forces.^{42.} In 1915, while still serving as deputy-president

39. Dept. of Labour, Labour Organizations in Canada, 1917, p.11.

40. R.T., February 1917, p. 152-3

41. R.T., November, 1915, p. 1641.

42. B.P., Robertson to Borden, August 23, 1917, no. 71833

of the ORT, Robertson wrote an editorial in the Railroad Telegrapher entitled "A Duty We Owe" which warmly approved the war effort, pointed proudly to the enlistment record of the ORT, and encouraged each division to retain enlistees on the membership rolls with their dues fully paid by the union.⁴³ By 1917, he was also an active supporter of conscription:

For many months I have been of the opinion that the Military Service Bill ought to be passed without delay....⁴⁴

Thus, for reasons other than his mediation skill, Robertson was wholly acceptable to the Borden government as a Senate appointee. He would not only represent the working-man, but would also symbolize the government's good will toward the labour movement.

Naturally, Robertson was pleased with the appointment, especially since his acceptance of the post required no severance of his union affiliation. The ORT had endorsed the holding of public office by its members.⁴⁶ In fact, Robertson saw no reason to resign his union post, unless the union membership so desired, since his vice-presidential responsibilities dovetailed nicely with Senate duties and demands on his time:

The Senate is in session usually from thirty to sixty days in each year. During this time your vice-president is expected to be in Ottawa as much as possible looking after the legislative interests of Canadian telegraphers and can

43. G.D. Robertson, R.T., May, 1915, p. 677

44. G. D. Robertson, Senate Debates, Aug. 2, 1917, p. 410

45. R.T., February, 1917, p. 153

certainly do much more effective work having a seat in the Senate than would be possible on the outside. 46.

He entered the Senate January 20, 1917.

The Senate is not an auspicious place to begin a career, being more frequently the grave than the cradle of Canadian politicians. For Robertson, the reverse was true. The following years were to see a growing closeness between the Borden government and the international craft unions - indeed, Robertson's Senate appointment was one of the first signs of this new rapport. Robertson, as a craft unionist, and a Conservative appointee to the Senate, was ideally placed to profit from this new spirit of cooperation. Just as his vice-presidency in the ORT, his reputation as a mediator, and his championing of the IDI Act were necessary preludes to his Senate appointment, so the Senate would serve as a step to the Cabinet.

46. ibid., p. 153

C H A P T E R I I

THE TLC AND THE UNION GOVERNMENT, 1917-18

Robertson's appointment to the Senate in January, 1917, was, obviously, a government token of goodwill toward labour. However, amid the conscription crisis which clouded the summer of 1917, the gesture lost its effect. Labour was strongly opposed to conscription; the Borden government was determined to implement it. Labour's demands for conscription of wealth as well as manpower fell on deaf ears. In the summer of 1917, the gap between government and labour seemed unbridgeable - certainly unbridgeable by the mere appointment of a labour representative to the Senate.

However, within a year, the two drew closer together. The majority of organized labour chose to forget their objections to conscription and to cooperate with the government. By 1918, the government, for its part, had adopted a new attitude toward labour, consulting its opinion on government policy, appointing labour representatives to government committees, and, in general, actively seeking to repair its unfavourable image among organized workers.

Though he personally played little part in it, the reconciliation was highly important to Robertson's career in government. During the period of conflict between labour and government, Robertson was in a most unfavourable position: he could hardly successfully represent labour interests to a government under attack by labour leaders; at the same time, it is unlikely that he would be trusted by labour, if it had continued to harbour its deep antipathy toward the government which had appointed him. If he was to have influence in either camp, the reconciliation between government and labour was an absolute prerequisite.

Robertson's Senate appointment was a first step in the government's program to woo labour, but it was not universally greeted with approval. TLC vice-president James Simpson, for instance, saw little value for the labour movement in such a government appointment:

No member of organized labour appointed to the Senate by either the Liberal or Conservative Government is free to serve the working class as they should be served in the Upper Chamber, and, therefore, in my judgment, the action of the government cannot be regarded as a concession to labour. 1.

1. James Simpson, quoted in Martin Robin, "Independent Labour Politics, 1916-17" CHR, 1966, p. 111.

Moreover, Simpson's view of a Senate seat as a meaningless sop to labour had merit.

The clearest indication of the Borden administrations's lack of real concern for working class opinion was its failure to consult labour leaders about National Service Registration and conscription:

The industrial element of Canada was deeply affected by this call for service, yet organized labour was granted no representation on the National Service Board. Indeed, the leaders of organized labour were not even consulted before the step was taken. 2.

Such was the lack of communication that TLC president James Watters did not even have ready access to copies of the 1916 Order-in-Council creating the Registration Commission.³ Only in December, 1916, after a national tour in which they encountered widespread hostility from labour elements over registration, did Borden and Bennett meet with the TLC executive in Ottawa. In return for its cooperation in the drive, the TLC demanded Borden's commitment that registration would not lead to conscription. Borden, while claiming that National Registration was a means to avoid rather than to facilitate conscription, declined to give such definite assurance. In spite of this less than satisfactory response, President Watters, on January 8, 1917, gave the TLC's official approval to

2. Martin Robin, "Independent Labour Politics, 1916-17" CHR, 1966, p. 103.

3. ibid., p. 104

registration, claiming that "the system of registration put into operation in Great Britain led to conscription; the system of registration in Canada is designed to lead away from conscription." 4.

Watters was wrong. Borden did as the British government had done; shortly after registering the population, he introduced conscription, on May 18, 1917. On May 21, the TLC executive again met the Prime Minister, demanding retraction of conscription, and labour representation in the Cabinet. Vice-president Simpson protested that "no other country has treated organized labour with such scant courtesy." 5. The meeting accomplished nothing: the government was not prepared to drop its conscription policy, and organized labour was in no mood to docilely accept it.

Thereafter, labour began a public campaign against conscription. From June 1-4, 1917, representatives of some eighty unions met and proclaimed their opposition to conscription. However, by July, it became obvious that the Military Service Bill would pass Parliament. 6.

4. ibid., p. 108'

5. ibid., p. 108. Borden, in his own defence, mentioned his appointment of Robertson to the Senate as a first step toward recognition of labour interests.

6. John Witham, "Opposition to Conscription in Ontario, 1917", unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Ottawa, 1970.

Consequently, labour altered its stand somewhat, accepting conscription if it were absolutely necessary, but demanding at the same time "conscription of wealth", that is, a government take-over of principal industries, at least for the duration of the war. Since there was no indication that government was prepared to take such a radical step as conscription of wealth, the labour movement had now to decide how best to voice its opposition to conscription of manpower alone.

On this question, labour solidarity split. In July, James Watters, president of the TLC, argued that unless the government conscripted wealth as well as manpower, labour should consider the possibility of a general strike, an attitude strongly supported by Western unions.⁷ Ontario labour leaders, however, while in favour of the conscription of wealth, at least until war's end, opposed a general strike of protest, and preferred political action through the fielding of labour candidates in the upcoming elections.

The TLC convention of September 1917, endorsed the Ontario plan. Since the Military Service Act was already in force in September, the executive was loath to challenge the law directly through a general strike. It

7. ibid., p. 47-8

proposed instead that a national labour party be established through which workers could voice their disapproval of the conscription plan as formulated.⁸ The executive stand was carried 134 - 101,⁹ the sizeable minority vote revealing the extent of the split in the TLC.

Political action proved a failure. Though twenty-seven candidates were nominated, none was elected. In the aftermath of the election, the TLC was faced with a dilemma: its political protest against conscription had failed; it could now either continue its opposition perhaps through the direct action of a general strike; or it could accept conscription, make peace with the Union government, and hope that Borden would grant labour greater recognition in future.

Borden was, in fact, affected by the turmoil over conscription, and had taken steps even before the December 1917 election to improve his relations with labour. In October, he appointed Robertson Minister without Portfolio.¹⁰

8. ibid., p. 52

9. ibid., p. 55

10. See Chapter III for details on the background of the appointment.

Such timing indicates not only Borden's fulfilment of the TLC's May demand for labour representation in the Cabinet ^{11.} but also, obviously, his hope of garnering labour votes by the gesture. However, after the election, Borden continued to improve his relations with the labour movement. In January, 1918, he convened a government-labour conference to obtain organized labour's prior approval for a second registration drive.

The wartime demand for labour necessitated a survey of available manpower. As early as the fall of 1916, war industries had been complaining of the lack of available manpower:

The labour situation at the steelworks is an extremely difficult one at the present time. Scarcely a night passes but that some of the operating departments are handicapped through scarcity of men and the situation seems to be steadily growing worse. We have exhausted every known source of supply. ^{12.}

As a stop-gap measure, the Minister of Finance, Sir William White, suggested that Borden muster mechanics out of the armed forces for use as weapons-and-steel-producers. ^{13.}

11. See Chapter II, page 43.

12. B.P., General-Manager D. H. McDougall to President Mark Workman, Dominion Steel Corporation, Sept. 2, 1916, No. 118826.

13. B.P., White to Borden, Aug. 25, 1916, No. 118811

Importation of skilled workers was another solution, but organized labour objected to this, contending that sufficient Canadian labour was available to meet all needs. To prove or disprove this allegation, Crothers suggested that a system of compulsory national service registration be inaugurated and that a meeting be held with labour organizations to discuss the shortage. ^{14.} The entire project was shelved for a year, but it surfaced again in January, 1918, with the calling of the government-labour conference to discuss registration and other matters of concern to labour.

The first meeting, convened January 16, was quickly adjourned, since most labour representatives were from Ontario and Quebec, and a wider representation was desired. The meeting reconvened January 29, with delegates more broadly representative geographically. Borden, Robertson, Crothers and Rowell were among the cabinet ministers addressing the delegates, proof of the importance of the conference in the Union government's eyes. Primarily, the government sought to win approval from labour for its registration drive, and in this aim it succeeded.

But if Borden wished to use the conference for his own purposes, so too did labour. While agreeing to an inventory of manpower, the delegates also passed a resolution:

14. B.P., Report of the Sub-Committee on Labour Shortage, Sept. 15, 1916, No. 118838.

that this conference urges the government to obtain a complete inventory of the wealth of this country simultaneously with any inventory of labour power. 15.

This resolution is symbolic of the use to which labour put the Conference. It became, for the union representatives, a public forum from which to express their attitudes on labour questions with which the government might, in the future, deal. Thus, the January conference placed on record labour's perennial denunciation of the importation of Asiatic labour; a request for the elimination of private employment agencies; opposition to compulsory mobilization of labour (as distinct from the government's plan of compulsory enrolment) and objection to female substitution in normally male work unless men were unavailable. The delegates strongly demanded representation on war committees, and on post-war Reconstruction committees affecting labour interests.

But the new cooperation between unionists and government was to be a tacit agreement on individual items, not a full alliance. The delegates made clear their unwillingness to (fully) endorse the program of the Union government:

15. B.P., "Resolution of Labour War Conference", Jan. 30, 1918, No. 54089.

The acceptance of any position in the Union government which would carry with it the necessity of subscribing to the platform of this or any other political government was not deemed advisable...organized labour as a body could not tie itself to subscribe to any political party. 16.

This point of view led to delegate refusal of the government's offer to appoint an under-secretary of Labour from labour ranks, who would have to hold a Commons seat. 17. However, the delegates permitted a loophole for union men generally, and for Robertson in particular, since he had now joined the Cabinet, by which they might hold government posts, and still remain members in good standing of the union movement:

It was made plain that this decision did not prevent any member of organized labour from accepting such a position as an individual. 18.

At the time, both parties had reason to be satisfied with the January Conference. The Borden government obtained labour support for its registration program, thus

16. B.P., J.C. Watters and Tom Moore, "To Organized Labour in Canada", p. 1. No. 54102.

17. ibid., p. 1

18. ibid. p.1

fulfilling its aim in calling the conference. Labour obtained the government's assurance that while registration would be compulsory, any service resulting from it would be voluntary. A more important gain was the government's promise of worker representation on committees affecting labour interests. Finally, symbolically, the government had given official recognition to the labour movement by consulting it on a matter of national policy of immediate concern to workers, in signal contrast to its action in the National Service Registration. In its communique after the conference, the TLC concluded that the government's attitude was "now one of cooperation with the organized labour movement." 19.

To further the rapprochement, Borden assigned Robertson as head of the Cabinet sub-committee on labour, and chairman of the 1918 Registration drive. In the same year, labour representatives were appointed to such committees as the War Trade Board, and the Canadian Railway War Board. 20. In another attempt at reconciliation, the Department of Labour issued a statement in support of the right to organize:

19. ibid., p. 1

20. Dept. of Labour, Labour Organizations in Canada, 1918, p. 14.

(The Minister of Labour) maintains that every man must be at perfect liberty to associate himself with his fellow workers in any legitimate labour organization without thereby subjecting himself to penalties or discriminations of any character. He expresses the hope that employers may accept his attitude in this regard. 21.

The government won further favour, at least with the international unions, by inviting Samuel Gompers, head of the American Federation of Labour, the most prestigious union leader in North America, to address Parliament.

Gompers' address was Robertson's idea. The AFL leader had been invited to Ottawa originally to speak to the city's Canadian Club. In February, Borden had welcomed his forthcoming visit but had made no offer to have Gompers address Parliament. 22. However, on April 23, Robertson suggested to Rowell, president of the Privy Council, that Gompers speak to Parliament. 23. He felt that such an address by a prestigious labour leader, active in the American war effort, would have a beneficial effect on labour circles and on public opinion generally. Robertson therefore asked Rowell to bring the suggestion before Council that day. The government agreed, and the following Friday, April 26, Gompers spoke to Parliament in a war address contrasting the authoritarianism of the Central Powers with the libertarian idealism of the Allies. Robertson was so impressed by the event that, following the address, he suggested to Borden that a copy be sent to "each lodge and division of every labour organization in Canada." 24.

21. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, Aug. 1918, p. 558

22. B.P., Borden to Gompers, Feb. 2, 1918, No. 54033

23. B.P., Robertson to Rowell, April 23, 1918. No. 54176

24. B.P., Robertson to Borden, May 3, 1918. No. 54177.

For the government, Gompers' speech was a useful symbol of the administration's newly found interest in, and esteem for labour leaders; moreover, since Gompers was so active in his support of the war, he served Borden's ends by preaching the government's sentiments to Canadian labour. From labour's point of view, Gompers' speech served to assert labour's loyalty against its critics. ²⁵. Finally, from the international point of view, it was a coup to have the head of the AFL address Canadian workers of all union philosophies, including national and Catholic, from the most prestigious platform in the country. Labour opponents of the war, of the government, or of international affiliation, might greet Gompers' speech with chagrin; but the address, arranged by Robertson, was a good example--and merely the first one--of the mutual benefit to be derived by the government and by a certain segment of organized labour from Robertson's active participation in the Union Government.

By the spring of 1918, then, the government had soothed much of the TLC's animosity. Even a series of Orders-in-Council of the summer and fall which impinged on labour's freedom of action and directly affected unionists of Central European background, ²⁶. did little to dispel the new spirit of goodwill.

25. Robertson, on various occasions, found it necessary to defend labour against charges of disloyalty, (Senate Debates, May 16, 1917, p. 409-10), and to point out the contribution to the war effort made by the workers. (ibid., April 2, 1919, p.195.)

26. The Orders-in-Council, issued between July and October, required the registration of "enemy" aliens (including, since the October Revolution, Russians and Ukrainians); forbade publication in fourteen languages, thus hampering union organization and communication; banned various left-wing organizations; and, worst of all from a union viewpoint, abolished strikes and lockouts for the duration of the war in essential industries.

There remained, however, within the Congress, a still-powerful core of anti-government and radical sentiment, especially among Western unionists.

The 1918 Convention in Quebec city was the battleground between that element which wished to continue the entente with the government, and a radical minority determined to break the truce. However, the majority beat back the anti-government, radical, Western elements on all fronts, including policy and executive membership. A Vancouver resolution expressing distrust of the government and disaffection with labour leaders accepting posts from it, was rejected. The Convention's statement on conscription was a pale shadow of past brave words. Whereas the 1915 convention had registered its "unchangeable opposition to all that savours of conscription,"^{27.} the 1918 executive report stated that "after the pronouncement at the polls on December 17, 1917, conscription has ceased to be a live issue in Canada."^{28.} While Vancouver and several other delegations opposed the intervention of Canadian troops in Siberia, the Congress as a whole "declined to pass judgment."^{29.}

27. Dept. of Labour, Labour Organization in Canada, 1915, p. 24-5.

28. TLC Report, 1918, p.33.

29. Dept. of Labour, Labour Organization in Canada, 1918, p.14

The Convention's purge of the executive was as important to future rapport with the government as the rejection of radical and anti-government policy. Watters, whom Robertson had accused of radical beliefs,^{30.} was replaced as president by Tom Moore, a personal friend of Gompers. Vice-President Simpson, a Socialist,^{31.} and the critic who had decried the government's "scant courtesy" to labour, was not reelected. However, Patrick Draper, whom Borden had described as "most loyal and helpful in every way"^{32.} retained his post.

The Convention's deposition of Simpson and Watters, crowning the conservative policy resolutions adopted, could hardly fail to impress the Union Government as a move by the TLC toward future cooperation rather than renewed confrontation. While the Quebec convention split the TLC, (driving dissatisfied Western unionists toward the Calgary convention, and ultimately, to the One Big Union) it also laid the basis of understanding between the majority of TLC affiliates, now demonstrably more conservative, and the Borden government.

30. B.P., Robertson to Borden, August 23, 1917, No. 71833. Robertson blamed labour opposition to government policies on "certain radical elements in the labour world, headed by the president of the Dominion Trades Congress."

31. Martin Robin, Radical Politics and Canadian Labour, p.94

32. ibid., p. 163

The years 1917-18 were, then, of great importance to future relations between the Borden government and the majority of organized labour. With the introduction of conscription in May 1917, relations between government and labour had reached their nadir. But as early as its September 1917 convention, the TLC was moderating its stand, choosing political action rather than the more radical general strike as its protest against conscription. At the 1918 convention, the victory of those seeking rapprochement with the government was complete, and the TLC was thereafter prepared to cooperate with the Union government.

The government, for its part, had also mellowed in the year following the conscription crisis. It had indicated its willingness, in future, to heed labour's voice, and had demonstrated its good intentions by various gestures: the January conference, labour seats on government committees, and, not least, the appointment of Robertson to the Senate, and then to the Cabinet.

The improved relations between government and labour increased the probability that Robertson could be an effective representative of labour in the government. Robertson certainly supported trade unionism, but he also supported the government's war policy. Had the labour movement remained hostile after the conscription crisis, Robertson's intervention for the government in labour disputes - which was to be one of his prime functions - would have been suspect; and as a spokesman for a hostile constituency, his words would have carried little weight in government circles. After the 1918 reconciliation of government and labour, he could at least hope to serve the interests of both groups.

C H A P T E R I I I

MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO

Robertson was appointed Minister without Portfolio on October 23, 1917. Certainly the improved relations between labour and the Union government were a factor in his appointment, but he was by no means labour's unanimous choice for the Cabinet position. Nevertheless, he had many factors in his favour, and, moreover, the skill he displayed as a mediator in 1918 labour disputes fully justified Borden's confidence in him.

Robertson was not the TLC's choice for a Cabinet post, probably because his old union, the ORT, was not a Congress affiliate. Instead, TLC Secretary-Treasurer P.M. Draper suggested J. G. O'Donoghue, counsel to the Congress, as that body's preference.¹ In spite of the fact that the TLC represented the majority of Canada's organized workers, Borden rejected O'Donoghue. Perhaps he preferred to appoint a man less closely identified with the dominant Canadian labour body, and hence less obviously captive to its interests. Moreover, since O'Donoghue held a seat in neither the Senate nor the House, his appointment would have necessitated either the appointment of a second labour representative to the Senate, or else a by-election with no certainty that O'Donoghue would be elected.

1. B.P., Draper to Borden, Sept. 29, 1917, No. 71848-9.

But Robertson did not win the post simply by process of elimination; he had varied and strong points in his favour. Though obviously not the choice of the TLC, Robertson commanded strong support among rail workers. ^{2.}

Robertson was a Senator, and this fact also helped his cause, for among the groups pressing for Cabinet representation were the members of the Upper House. In a letter to Borden, the Senate's Conservative leaders suggested that:

the best interests of the Senate and the country would be served by two or more members of the Senate holding portfolios as Ministers of the Crown. ^{3.}

While Robertson's name was not mentioned in the letter as a possible appointee, his presence in the Senate offered Borden a chance to fulfil simultaneously the desires of both Senate and Labour for Cabinet representation.

2. While considering the labour appointment, Borden received two letters favouring Robertson from David Campbell, Robertson's former ORT associate and, in 1917, a labour lawyer representing several rail unions; one signed by provincial representatives of the Telegraphers; and one from James Murdock, vice-president of the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen. No doubt this support helped Robertson's cause.

(B.P., letters to Borden between October 3, and October 20, 1917, Nos. 71851, 71856, 71860, and 71894.)

3. B.P., Senate Conservative leaders to Borden, May 30, 1917, No. 13771.

Finally, as Robertson had no evident political affiliations,⁴ he would appear more purely a labour representative. The announcement of his appointment, by the Governor-General, to the Colonial Office, stated that "in politics, he represents independent Labour."⁵ Robertson personally reiterated this view to ORT members:

Your third vice-president was...invited to serve as the representative of labour interest. ⁶

Considering Robertson's advantages, it was logical that Borden should ignore TLC wishes in his selection, even though that body was by far the most influential in the Canadian labour movement.

In addition to his appointment as Minister without Portfolio, Robertson became a member of the Cabinet's Reconstruction and Development Committee, and chairman of the Cabinet's sub-committee on labour conditions. Lest the TLC be unhappy at the rejection of its candidate, the government press release announcing Robertson's appointment also promised a speedy selection of a prominent TLC representative as Parliamentary Secretary to the Department of Labour and member of the Cabinet sub-committee on labour. ⁷

4. Ferns and Ostry, in The Age of Mackenzie King, refer to Robertson as a "Liberal Unionist" but offer no proof of such a party affiliation. While the evidence available offers no definite indication of party preference, after serving under three Conservative Prime Ministers--Borden, Meighen, and later Bennett--Robertson certainly became identified with the Conservative party.
5. B.P., Governor-General Lord Devonshire to Colonial Secretary Long, October 23, 1917, No. 40155.
6. R.T., Feb. 1918, p. 134.
7. B.P., Government Press Release, Oct. 23, 1917, No. 15213.

In making his appointment to the Cabinet, Borden struck a middle course: labour had its Cabinet representative; business could not justly complain of excessive or radical labour influence on government, considering Robertson's conservative union background; and Robertson, though now a leading candidate to succeed Crothers, could be evaluated in this lesser role before Borden chose a new Minister of Labour.

Robertson passed the evaluation process, again using the technique which had helped win the Senate seat: his skill as a mediator. During 1918, he was called on to intervene in various labour disputes and consistently provided solutions beneficial to both the workers and to a government greatly concerned with maintaining industrial peace during the war.

In February, Robertson intervened in failing negotiations between the CPR and six rail unions. Being an experienced conciliator, government representative, a former CPR employee, and a union man, he had broad acceptance among both employers and employees in the dispute; sufficient trust, in fact, that the union representatives agreed to accept a lower wage offer than they had demanded, provided Robertson was accepted as sole arbitrator on eighteen employment regulations in dispute, and provided also that his judgment was binding. 8. Management agreed, and the strike threat disappeared with apparent satisfaction on all sides. On February 17, mutual agreement was reached on the eighteen demands in question and no arbitration award was

8. B.P., Robertson to Borden, Feb. 5, 1918, No. 132837.

necessary. Borden was sufficiently relieved at this outcome to write a letter of appreciation to Robertson for his efforts. ⁹.

By May, labour troubles were again endangering the war effort. A civic dispute in Winnipeg had produced a sympathy strike of CPR storemen, carmen, and freight handlers, which threatened to disrupt East-West communications. On the West Coast, a shipbuilding strike imperilled the building program of the Imperial Munitions Board, which was constructing twenty-seven ships in British Columbia. A prolonged strike in either case would interfere with the war effort. Sir Joseph Flavelle, chairman of the Munitions Board suggested that Borden dispatch Robertson to the coast as mediator. ¹⁰. On May 19, Borden agreed to send him, and enlarged his duties, including in them a visit to Winnipeg to judge the situation there as well.

The Winnipeg labour dispute was much more complex than the CPR dispute of February, involving as it did three distinct labour groups. Since November, 1917, the Civic Employees Federation had been demanding salary equalization for members doing equivalent work in various city departments. Though department heads recommended equalization in an April 1918 report, Winnipeg Board of Control failed to act on their recommendation. ¹¹. On May 13, the Federation and city officials agreed to submit their differences to a Conciliation Board.

9. B.P., Borden to Robertson, Feb. 20, 1918, No. 132843

10. B.P., Flavelle to Borden, May 16, 1918, No. 133296

11. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, July, 1918, p. 504.

At the same time, various other groups of civic employees not affiliated with the Federation - firemen, water-works employees, electricians and teamsters - were also negotiating new contracts. On May 2, having reached no agreement, and not desiring a Conciliation Board, this latter group (with the exception of firemen) struck. The strikers reached tentative agreement on wages and union recognition on May 13, but city council would finalize the settlement only on condition that civic employees give up the right to strike. This demand was refused, as only the strike had led the city to negotiate in earnest. On May 14, the firemen also struck.

To this point, the dispute was purely local, but after May 14, other trade unions, including the staff of transport shops and freight sheds, struck in sympathy, disrupting national transportation. The federal government desired a rapid settlement to end the disruption of rail service, and, therefore, had to take a hand in ending the strike of civic employees, which had provoked the sympathy strike. Labour Minister Crothers appointed Robertson's associate David Campbell as special mediator between strikers and the city.¹² Then, Borden dispatched Robertson to the West.

Upon arrival, Robertson concentrated on solving the civic dispute, and on May 24, agreement was reached on a new contract. Robertson's settlement was undeniably a victory for the

12. Department of Labour, Labour Gazette, July, 1918, p. 526.

strikers: wage increases varied from 12% for electricians up to 17% for water-works employees. All strikers were reinstated, and the city withdrew its resolution denying civic employees the right to strike.¹³ In addition, both parties agreed to form a permanent grievance committee to settle disagreements before they led to polarization and stalemate such as had caused the civic strike. With this dispute settled, the sympathetic strike which it had provoked also ended, and normal transcontinental communications resumed before the end of May.

Robertson took no part in resolving the remaining dispute between the Federation of Civic Employees and the city, which had gone to conciliation. In retrospect, this was unfortunate. The Board of Conciliation finally reported on June 21, almost a full month after the other civic dispute had been settled, and even then, the Board was forced to admit that a final settlement had not been reached,¹⁴ since city council refused to accept the Board's recommendation. This outcome was an undesirable precedent: by May 25, 1918, striking civic employees had achieved a satisfactory settlement through the support of a sympathetic strike, yet, by contrast, the non-striking Federation of Civic Employees, working through the traditional means of negotiation and conciliation, and avoiding a strike, still had no redress of grievances in late June. This was a lesson which was not to be

13. ibid., p. 527

14. ibid., p. 503

lost on the Winnipeg workers a year hence. In this dress rehearsal for 1919, the general strike had apparently proved its effectiveness over traditional trade union techniques.

Unwittingly, Robertson -- the champion of the IDI Act and the conciliation principle -- through his mediation in the dispute had helped achieve the victory of the syndicalist principle.

With the resolution of the Winnipeg sympathetic strike in sight, Robertson moved on to British Columbia. The problem in the British Columbia shipyards was the basic one common to most labour disputes of 1918, the demand for higher wages in the face of galloping inflation. The Imperial Munitions Board, which was building the ships for the war effort, had agreed to adopt, in Canada, a pay scale equal to the one current in the American shipyards on the Pacific, and did apply the wage settlement arrived at by American shipbuilders. However, shortly thereafter the United States Labour Adjustment Board added 10% to this settlement. Canadian workers demanded this raise also. The Canadian shipbuilding management refused, claiming that they had agreed only to meet the original settlement, and had done so. The workers set a strike date for March 1, but agreed to a Royal Commission to investigate the rival claims. The Commission's report agreed to the justice of the workers' claim for the 10% increment, but the employer representative dissented. The situation remained unresolved, and a strike became a certainty. On May 1, a number of machinists stopped work. The shipyards at Victoria and Vancouver continued to function until May 23, when their workers also struck.

Robertson negotiated for nine days to achieve a settlement. The Department of Labour already recognized that even the 10% raise in question would be a temporary measure (though Robertson agreed that there should be wage parity along the Canadian and American coast),¹⁵ and that some more permanent arrangement was necessary to avoid further dislocations.¹⁶ With this in mind, Robertson drew up a settlement providing for a quarterly adjustment of wages equal to cost of living increases as shown in the monthly statistics issued by the Department of Labour. He also secured an adjuster to carry out the quarterly alterations and to mediate other disputes arising. The agreement was to last for the duration of the war, and, during its life, strikes and lockouts were banned. This settlement, called, in fact, the "Robertson Agreement", was accepted by both sides. With negotiations completed, Robertson returned to Ottawa, his Western mediation a success, and his reputation enhanced. He had achieved his conciliation ideal: industrial peace, with contracts acceptable to the workers.

Apart from such examples of direct intervention, Robertson was also actively involved, in 1918, as an advisor to Borden, in the settlement of other serious labour disputes. In August, Robertson was primarily responsible for ending a seaman's strike which sealed off Vancouver Island. In spite of the fact

15. B.P., Robertson to Borden, May 6, 1918, No. 133292-3

16. B.P., Crothers to Borden, May 7, 1918, No. 133295

that 98% of shipmasters, navigation officers, and pilots in British Columbia had joined the Canadian Merchant Service Guild by 1918, ¹⁷. owners of ships supplying the Island refused to recognize it as bargaining agent. The companies also were unwilling to accept a Conciliation Board to investigate the dispute. Accordingly, the government appointed a Royal Commission which recommended recognition of the Guild. Again, the companies refused. ¹⁸. The men in turn refused to discuss the other, less important issues involved, in view of the companies' intransigence.

On August 21, having negotiated unsuccessfully since April, the Guild struck. Telegrams poured into Ottawa from British Columbia demanding restoration of shipping service, the only link with the mainland, and protesting the interrupted delivery of mail, food, and supplies for war industries. In view of these harmful effects, the federal government decided to intervene in the dispute, with Robertson as principal agent in negotiations. He first met with representatives of the CPR and Grand Trunk, owners of prominent shipping companies which had refused the Royal Commission's recommendation. He evidently used strong pressure, for after the meeting, he was able to inform Borden that the companies had had a sudden and remarkable change of attitude:

17. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, Oct. 1918, p. 810.

18. B.P., Jas. M. McVety (labour representative on the Royal Commission) to Robertson, Aug. 24, 1918, No. 136149-50.

Representatives of the CPR and Grand Trunk...
Saturday indicated willingness to accept
Commissions (sic) decision. 19.

In Borden's name, ^{20.} Robertson then wired R. A. Batchelor,
president of the Merchant Service Guild, requesting a return to
work and stating that the companies were now willing to accord
recognition equal to that granted to the Imperial Merchant
Seaman's Guild by British shipowners. ^{21.} Borden, in turn,
backed Robertson's actions by dispatching a near-imperative
"request" to each company in the dispute demanding that they
"get in touch with the Guild, and arrange to have work resumed
upon this basis." ^{22.}

Robertson's work, fully backed by the government's
authority, had therefore succeeded in securing Guild recognition--
an additional proof of Robertson's usefulness to labour, and of
the government's continued willingness to accommodate the union
movement.

However, Robertson's 1918 negotiations were not,
from the worker viewpoint, an unbroken skein of success. He
accomplished little or nothing for Nova Scotia steel, coal and
shipbuilding workers in the last important 1918 dispute in which

19. B.P., Robertson memorandum to Borden, undated. No. 136137.

20. B.P., Robertson to Borden, Aug. 24, 1918, No. 136153.

21. B.P., Robertson to Batchelor, Aug. 24, 1918, No. 136151-2.

22. B.P., Borden to J. T. Bulger (representative of Labour Department
in Vancouver, informing him of text sent to each company)
August 26, 1918, No. 136170.

he played a part. The scope of the problem was extensive, involving the Dominion Iron and Steel Company, and the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company as well as various smaller businesses. Generally speaking, the workers desired union recognition and better wages. The federal government feared that a strike would affect the war effort by halting steel production and wartime shipbuilding on the East Coast, and, consequently, desired a rapid settlement of grievances.

Robertson felt that both sides were being obdurate, especially in the case of Dominion Steel. He had met with D. H. McDougall, general-manager of Dominion Steel, and found him unwilling to talk to worker representatives; on the other hand, he thought that the workers were placing "too much stress on formal recognition" of their union. He had urged the men "not to press that particular point upon the employer" but to settle for a meeting with Dominion Steel executives.²³ He then suggested that Borden strongly urge McDougall to meet with such a non-union committee of workers, and if no agreement were reached, to accept a Conciliation Board.²⁴ Borden did so, but the talks failed. However, both parties agreed to a Royal Commission. Between May 18 and May 22, the Commission tabled separate reports on each dispute. None provided much solace for the workers. All reports avoided the question of union recognition, merely recommending that

23. B.P., Robertson to Borden, Apr. 15, 1918, No. 54168.

24. B.P., Robertson to (Borden's private secretary) Yates, April 16, 1918, No. 54170.

management meet worker representatives when grievances arose. Moreover, while suggesting substantial wage increases for common labourers (since that group was hardest hit by inflation) the Commission suggested no raises for other workers.²⁵ After the tabling of the Commission reports, the government took no further action.

Robertson's assistance in resolving the dispute appears, then, to have achieved little benefit for the workers. Moreover, his statement to Borden that workers had overstressed union recognition seems a betrayal of a very basic union demand. However, while there is little one can say in defence of his expressed attitude on union recognition, one cannot blame Robertson for the apparently poor settlement recommended by the Commission. First, in the two years preceding the dispute, management had increased wages significantly.²⁶ Therefore, the Commission quite possibly made a sound decision in denying raises for other than unskilled workers. Moreover, Robertson was not, after all, a member of the Royal Commission which made the final decision. If blame is to be levied at all, it might better be attributed to J. B. McLachlan, secretary-treasurer of the Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia, and labour representative on the Commission, who signed the Commission reports, indicating consent to their content.

25. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, July 1918, p. 520

26. Dominion Steel had raised wages 70% for lowest paid workers and 55% for the rest between January 1916 and November 1917 (B.P., Pres. Mark Workman to Crothers, March 30, 1918, No. 54135-6) Union correspondence in the Borden Papers does not deny this fact.

Finally, in judging Robertson's success in achieving contracts beneficial to labour, the unsatisfactory outcome of the Nova Scotia negotiations must be balanced against the highly satisfactory results for labour produced by Robertson's intervention in the CPR negotiations and in the Winnipeg and Vancouver strikes. It then becomes obvious that, on the whole, Robertson's 1918 mediations benefited labour. Yet his work was of at least equal benefit to the Conservative government, ending or avoiding five disputes potentially disruptive of communications and of the war effort. Consequently, when the war ended, and Labour Minister Crothers announced his retirement, Robertson was the obvious choice to succeed him. Considering the evidence, it would be unfair to say that Robertson's succession to the post was due solely to Borden's desire to cement his good relations with labour. It is obvious, in view of his capable mediation work of 1918, that Robertson had considerably advanced his own cause. Moreover, the evidence indicates that he improved his prestige in the government without "selling out" the constituency that he represented; his labour settlements benefited worker as well as government. On November 7, 1918, Gideon Robertson was appointed Minister of Labour, the first to rise to that position from labour's ranks.

C H A P T E R I V

LABOUR LEGISLATION 1919-21

One measure of the effectiveness of a Minister of Labour is his record of legislative and executive accomplishments while in office. By this standard, Robertson's two year tenure yielded a quite limited return to the Canadian labour movement. He did effect beneficial changes in the fields of technical education, immigration policy and unemployment relief. However, in spite of Robertson's presence in the Cabinet, the government remained unwilling to enforce other important labour demands such as the right to organize and to bargain collectively, or the eight-hour day. Moreover, in spite of its studies of wide-ranging social welfare programs, the Conservative government introduced no legislation in this field. Nevertheless, Robertson's effectiveness within the Cabinet should not be too lightly dismissed, as he did produce significant benefits for labour.

He did, for example, fulfil the TLC's demands for a Technical Education Act. In 1912, the Congress passed a resolution^{1.} in favour of technical education and industrial training, and continued to press for such legislation. In 1918, while again endorsing such a measure, the TLC executive report deplored the "repeated refusals of the government to take any steps to grant financial

1. R.T., Aug. 1912, p. 1145.

assistance to the provincial governments to extend the system of industrial training and technical education." ². However, within eight months of Robertson's appointment, the government met the TLC's demands. With Robertson "very largely the originator of this bill", ³. Parliament passed the Dominion Technical Education Act, providing a federal fund of \$10 million to be granted to the provinces over a ten year period. Each province was to receive \$10 thousand annually while the rest of the year's appropriation would be distributed on the basis of population. To improve further the legislation's effectiveness, Robertson called a conference of provincial Ministers of Education in October, 1920 to discuss the construction of a central, bilingual teacher's college to train instructors for technical education. ⁴. The federal government was prepared to pay the full cost of construction of, and equipment for, such a college.

However, the passage of the Technical Education Act does not necessarily indicate an increased federal willingness to heed the demands of the TLC. After all, the federal legislation was passed only after an October 1918 meeting between the Labour Committee of the Canadian Manufacturers Association and the TLC

2. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, Oct. 1918, p. 835.

3. Sir James Lougheed, Senate Debates, June 3, 1919, p. 852

4. Meighen Papers (hereafter cited as M.P., Acland (deputy-minister of Labour) to Meighen, Oct. 2, 1920, series 2, No. 28779. (All Meighen papers used are from series 2).

which jointly requested such an act. ^{5.} Therefore, though no doubt TLC pressure was a factor in its passage, the influence of manufacturing interests was also present. With the agreement of both business and labour, the legislation presented no political dangers, and the government, accordingly, passed it. Since the bill passed relatively soon after Robertson became Minister of Labour, it may also represent the government's attempt to boost his prestige in labour circles as a man of action, an immediately beneficial influence for labour in the government.

During Robertson's tenure, the government also met TLC demands with regard to immigration, and while this department was not Robertson's responsibility, he used his influence to help effect the desired changes. The TLC had long objected to the importation of Oriental workers, who, willing to work for pitifully low wages, undercut the market for organized labourers. On these grounds, the TLC consistently sought their exclusion, suggesting, for example, the introduction of a quota system which would maintain the ratio of Orientals to whites in the whole population at one to one thousand. ^{6.}

While the ostensible purpose of thus limiting oriental immigration was to avoid the depression of wages in the labour market, it is difficult not to sense also a strong undertone of racism in the advocacy of their exclusion. In its 1914 convention

5. G. D. Robertson, Senate Debates, July 3, 1919, p. 852

6. Department of Labour, Labour Gazette, Feb. 1920, p. 107

for example, the TLC had urged on the government legislation which would forbid Asiatics to employ white female labour⁷. -- not all female labour, just white females. The implication is unavoidable that such a measure was designed to prevent miscegenation.

Robertson's support of the TLC's policy of Oriental exclusion or limitation leaves no doubt of his personal racism. The Labour Minister did allude in the Senate to "the inferior standard of living which they invariably follow" as a reason that it was "not desirable that we should consider for one moment the importation of Asiatic labour"⁸. -- the traditional economic reason for exclusion. But Robertson also objected that:

their moral standard is not high enough to justify us in permitting them to mingle with our people - our wives and daughters. 9.

The government was agreeable to closer scrutiny of Asiatics before permitting entry. In 1919, an amendment to the Immigration Act permitted the Governor-in-Council to "prohibit or limit in number...the landing...of immigrants...deemed unsuitable having regard to the climatic, industrial, social, educational, labour, or other conditions...or...owing to their peculiar customs, habits, modes of life...and because of their probable inability to become readily assimilated."¹⁰ Such a sweeping amendment would obviously provide the means to exclude Asiatics - as well as

7. R.T., October 1914, p. 1648.

8. G. D. Robertson, Senate Debates, Aug. 16, 1917, p. 633

9. ibid., p. 633

10. Department of Labour, Labour Gazette, Sept. 1919, p. 1115.

any other group not deemed desirable. A further amendment of 1921 provided that Chinese immigrants had to establish their identity to the satisfaction of an immigration controller. ^{11.} While such restrictions did not absolutely exclude Oriental immigration, the controls were so sweeping that the distinction is minimal.

In 1921, the TLC also requested abolition of all European immigration, except for farm workers, for at least two years, in view of the shortage of industrial work. Robertson supported the Congress; in fact, he was about as strongly opposed to certain European immigrants as he was toward Orientals, and took exception to "opposing political interests who are seeking to flood the country with the scum of Central Europe as was done between 1900 and 1911." ^{12.} He stated that "the Federal Departments of Immigration and Labour (looked) to the prevention of unemployment... by restricting undesirable immigration." ^{13.} With both the TLC and Robertson so strongly in favour of limitations, and, no doubt, in view of the growing unemployment, the government, by Order-in-Council of November 30, 1920, raised immigration standards by requiring immigrants of the labouring class from both the United States and Europe to have \$250.00 and a ticket to their Canadian

11. Dept. of Labour, Labour Legislation in 1921, p. 10

12. M.P., A Robertson draft of a Meighen policy letter on immigration, undated, No. 18647. (In his edited version, Meighen replaced "scum" with "undesirable immigrants.")

13. ibid., No. 18647.

destination before entry. In view of such evidence, the TLC could not have wished more consistent support from Robertson, and, indeed, from the Conservative government, as a whole, on immigration policy.

In addition to his direct responsibility for the Technical Education Act, and his indirect support for the amendment of immigration law, Robertson introduced an important innovation in unemployment policy. While he continued the tradition of federally sponsored public works designed to minimize unemployment, he also committed the federal government, for the first time, to share the cost of relief payments to the unemployed, an expense previously incurred by municipal and provincial governments alone. This action made greater financial resources available at a time that they were badly needed. With the end of the war, and consequent termination of war-time demand, unemployment had become a major problem, taxing the resources of local authorities to cope with it. In April, 1921, a month when employment figures were usually on the upswing, there were still approximately 200,000 more unemployed than in January 1920, the heart of the previous winter. 14.

In December, 1920, Robertson revealed the government's policy to relieve the situation in a letter to Walter Rollo, the Ontario Labour Minister. Robertson emphasized that "in normal times, these problems are dealt with wholly locally," but that "the Government of Canada, under present circumstances, feels justified in cooperating (since) the numbers of unemployed...are

14. G. D. Robertson, Senate Debates, May 4, 1921, p. 409.

increased by reason of the general contraction in industrial activity following upon a period of abnormal prices during the war".¹⁵ The federal government proposed to initiate public works: it would complete two ships being built in public shipyards, continue construction on the Welland canal through the winter, and place a contract for engines in Toronto. In addition, to avoid increasing the stock of surplus labour, the Immigration Department would permit entry to only such immigrants for whom work was available.

But Robertson's plan, for the first time in federal history, envisaged another commitment of greater dimension; his letter to Rollo officially promised that the federal government would pay one-third of any relief payments expended by a municipality, the other two-thirds to be paid by the municipality and/or the province.¹⁶ Payment to individuals was contingent on the worker's bearing a certificate from a federal employment agency stating that no job was available for him. This new initiative was made public by publishing the Rollo letter in the Labour Gazette.¹⁷

Robertson committed the federal government to unemployment relief for three reasons. First, as he hinted in his letter to Rollo, the government felt responsibility for the unemployment situation since it had resulted, in large part, from the end of the government's heavy wartime expenditures. A second reason was likely Robertson's fear of the unrest which might result from large-scale unemployment. He believed that "unemployment and

15. M.P., Robertson to Rollo, Dec. 14, 1920, No. 29701

16. ibid., No. 29701

17. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, Jan. 1921, p. 46-7

the fear of unemployment are the most prolific sources of industrial unrest in the world." ¹⁸. Finally, as in the case of the Technical Education Act, there was substantial agreement between labour and business leaders that the federal government should help relieve the situation. Robertson had formulated the plan only after conversations with both labour leaders and members of the Canadian Manufacturers Association. ¹⁹. Since both labour and business agreed to the plan, it was not fraught with political dangers.

However, Robertson wished the plan to be both temporary, and as inexpensive as possible. The federal commitment to unemployment relief was designed to respond only to the unusual circumstances caused by the war, and was to end officially March 31, 1921. ²⁰. Moreover, the federal government would pay 1/3, solely of benefits distributed; it refused to share the cost of investigating cases or of disbursing relief. ²¹. But even allowing for the limitations on cost and duration of the plan,

Robertson's policy marks a noteworthy innovation in the federal

18. G. D. Robertson, Senate Debates, Feb. 24, 1921, p. 103

19. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, January, 1921

20. M.P., Ed. Parnell, Mayor of Winnipeg, to Meighen, March 15, 15, 1921, No. 29765. However, Robertson admitted to Meighen's private secretary that "the determination of whether further relief should be granted or not remains with the municipal authorities...We are prepared to share with them the expense as heretofore." (M.P., Robertson to George Buskard, March 25, 1921, No. 29775.)

21. M.P., Robertson to Buskard, Jan. 14, 1921, No. 29739.

government's unemployment policy.

Robertson was not loath to point out the generosity of his policy. In a letter to TLC president Moore which he drafted for Meighen, he stated:

The federal government's unemployment aid policy is unprecedented, and unequalled in any other country in the world. In no other nation made up of a number of States or Provinces have the federal authorities been more thoughtful or more generous in dealing with the unemployment problem. 22.

In case anyone had missed this message of the government's concern for labour, Robertson repeated the sentiment in his address to the 1921 TLC convention, stressing that "no previous federal government recognized any responsibility, or contributed toward the relief of unemployed workers." 23. Unfortunately, the unemployment relief policy was the last important gain which Robertson won for Canadian labour. 24.

22. M.P., Robertson draft of a proposed letter from Meighen to Moore, undated, No. 18646.

23. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, Robertson's address to the 1921 TLC convention, Sept. 1921, P. 1128.

24. His other endeavours were of minor significance, beneficial only to small groups of workers. For example, the Federal Workmen's Compensation Act of 1918 was amended in 1919 to allow workers on the Intercolonial Railroad to choose between coverage under its provisions or to retain their own plan. (Dept. of Labour, Labour Legislation in 1919, p.8.) The Employment Offices Coordination Act of 1920 amended an earlier counterpart to permit the federal government to deal directly with municipalities to set up government employment offices in provinces - especially the Maritimes - which had not used available federal funds to do so.

Although his plan for federal assistance in unemployment relief would seem a logical first step toward the ultimate goal of a wide-ranging social welfare program, in fact, Robertson introduced no legislation in the areas of sickness and unemployment²⁵. insurance, or old age pension. Yet he favoured such legislation. Flowing logically from his belief that unemployment distress bred social disturbance, he argued that "something ought to be done to enable the honest, willing worker to insure himself, or be insured, against unemployment."²⁶.

The government indicated several times that it was preparing to act in the field of social welfare. Meighen,²⁷.

25. In fact, Robertson's long term solution to unemployment was naive; he proposed a return to the land, and economic isolation:

It does seem to me that we are not properly balanced; that a larger proportion of our population ought to be engaged in agriculture in a country such as this, which is naturally an agricultural country. (M.P., Robertson memorandum, undated, No. 18422).

I submit that if all the articles which we can produce in Canada and which we purchased in the United States had been supplied by our own home manufacturers, our unemployed would have been largely absorbed. (G. D. Robertson, Senate Debates, June 2, 1921, p. 734.)

26. G. D. Robertson, Senate Debates, Feb. 24, 1921, p. 103.
27. Meighen had succeeded Borden as Prime Minister on July 10, 1920.

in an April 1921 letter to TLC President Moore, stated that Robertson would soon call a conference of employers and workers to discuss the pension and insurance questions. ^{28.} Moreover, in an address to the 1921 TLC convention, Robertson stated that the Department of Labour was investigating the question of old age pensions and unemployment insurance. ^{29.}

However, the conference which Meighen had promised was not called before the 1921 election which turned the Conservatives out of office. Had Robertson made progress toward legislation in these fields, his reputation as an effective force for labour within the government would have been assured. But the wheels of government ground too slowly and social welfare legislation was left to enhance the reputation of other ministers in other governments.

One can only speculate on the reasons for the government's slowness in introducing such legislation. Time may have been a factor; Robertson developed his original plan of unemployment assistance in December 1920, one year before the government's defeat. A single year may have been too short a time in which to fully study such ambitious schemes which, in effect, would lay the basis for the welfare state; too short a time to produce legislation which would affect every citizen, if not through

28. TLC Report, Meighen to Moore, April 29, 1921, p. 25.

29. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, 1921, p. 1128

sickness and unemployment insurance, then certainly through old age pensions. In view of such wide implications, and since opinions on financing such schemes would differ, ^{30.} a series of conferences between federal and provincial government, business, labour, and other interested parties, would be mandatory.

However, while a full year may well be insufficient time to thoroughly study such a long-range, expensive undertaking, it is certainly time enough if a government is in earnest, to call a conference of interested groups. Yet, as mentioned, no conference on the whole question of social welfare took place before the government's December defeat, a fact which invites the conclusion that the government was not seriously interested in dealing with the matter.

Other reforms desirable to labour went similarly unfulfilled. Though it had dropped its blanket opposition to the IDI Act, the TLC still sought certain amendments which it found impossible to achieve. The Congress wished to make the Act applicable to any industry, public or private, upon application of either side to a dispute and to further extend it to cover civic disputes. Meighen rejected the extension of the Act to industry in general, and stated that the federal government was loath to expand the legislation to cover civic employees, as some

30. Robertson believed, for example, that "a substantial number of labour men wanted unemployment insurance premiums paid solely by industry." (M.P., Robertson to Meighen, May 26, 1921, No. 18609).

31. provinces had already legislated in that area. The TLC also sought the elimination of clauses forbidding strike action pending the conciliation board report. Meighen, in reply to this request, quoted a Labour Department memorandum (which would obviously have Robertson's consent) indicating that the principal aim of the Act was to insure continuous service in industries affecting the public good, and that since conciliation worked best where no disruption of service had yet occurred, no strike could be countenanced before the issue of a board's report.
32.

The Conservatives also withstood TLC demands to enforce nationally an eight-hour day,^{33.} which ideal had been given added impetus by its endorsement in the Treaty of Versailles. The post war Labour Conference in Washington in October-November of 1919 had also voted 90 to 2 in favour of a resolution introduced by TLC Secretary-Treasurer P.M. Draper advocating this principle.^{34.} Significantly, one of the two dissenting votes was cast by the representative of Canadian manufacturers.^{35.} This source of opposition may have played a part in the government's unwillingness to enforce the eight hour day. Officially, however, its excuse was that the matter fell

31. TLC Report, 1921, Meighen to Moore, p. 26

32. ibid., p. 26

33. TLC Report, 1920, p. 15. The executive report demanded federal legislation of an eight-hour day, the right to collective bargaining for civil servants, and the right of "Dominion Police" to organize.

34. B.P., N.W. Rowell to Borden, Dec. 1, 1919, No. 61248.

35. ibid., No. 61248.

primarily within provincial jurisdiction. Robertson agreed with this contention, though he stated that, if the provinces should fail to act, Ottawa was competent to legislate under federal treaty-making powers, since the eight-hour day stipulation had been part of the peace treaty. ^{36.} He suggested a conference of representatives from management, labour, dominion and provincial governments, which would first reach general agreement on the desirability and method of implementation. The provinces would then introduce the legislation they thought within their jurisdiction,^{37.} and, finally, the federal government would supplement provincial legislation where desirable. This plan became the government's approach to the question, though there were rumblings among some labour groups -- notably the Toronto Metal Trades council, and the Montreal Trades and Labour Council -- against what seemed simply an avoidance of action.

The TLC also demanded that the federal government recognize the right of civil servants to organize, and to bargain collectively. ^{38.} While the government had encouraged employers in the private sector to heed this call, ^{39.} the federal government

36. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, March, 1920, p. 208-9.

37. B.P., Robertson to Borden, June 30, 1919, No. 61162.

38. TLC Report, 1920, p. 15.

39. see Chapter II, p. 51.

was itself unwilling to do so, claiming that, though the right to organize and bargain collectively applied to industrial workers, "the principle could not be applied to government employees, who were obviously in a different category." 40.

It is clear then that the simple presence in the Cabinet of a labour representative did not mean a great increase in the Conservative government's willingness to legislate in labour's interest. But the lack of beneficial legislation is hardly surprising. Robertson's tenure of office was only two years - hardly time to effect many changes in labour policy. Moreover, organized labour, in spite of its wartime growth, was still relatively weak amount organized pressure groups, 41. and had, therefore, relatively little influence on government policy.

Labour could, therefore, expect little success in achieving its goals, unless it had the support of other pressure groups, or unless conditions necessitated immediate action. Where there was joint labour and business agreement as in the Technical Education Act, or where the government was compelled to act to alleviate widespread distress, as in unemployment relief,

40. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, April 1920, p. 372

41. See page 143, Footnote 3.

Robertson was able to effect change beneficial to labour. Conversely, when this accord or this pressing necessity was absent - in the questions of the eight-hour day, or a social welfare program - the government refused to act, no doubt sensing political danger. Given the limitations imposed by these political realities, Robertson's securing of a Technical Education Act, changes in immigration policy, and federal assistance to unemployment relief, constitute quite a respectable record.

C H A P T E R V

THE INDUSTRIAL COUNCIL MOVEMENT

As Minister of Labour, Robertson did not confine his interests to short-term reforms such as Technical Education or temporary unemployment relief. He was also deeply concerned with the achievement of lasting industrial peace. He wished to establish a system which would permit workers and owners to resolve their differences without numerous strikes, violence, or government interference. The achievement of this end required, he believed, an increased realization, on both sides, that "the interests of the employer and the workmen are not diametrically opposed... a view that too many employers and too many workmen entertain." ¹.

Robertson sought to strengthen mutual trust through the industrial council system which would give the employer an increased voice in the operation of industry and convince workers of the essential fairness of their employers. The councils, constantly meeting to resolve differences by discussion and compromise, would offset the influence of radical worker movements which argued that there were no grounds for cooperation between the exploiting and labouring classes.

The idea of studying the feasibility of industrial councils came from the sub-committee on Labour of which Robertson was chairman, and Tom Moore, president of the TLC, a member. This

1. G P Robertson. Senate Debates, April 2, 1919, p.195.

sub-committee, responsible to the Cabinet's Reconstruction and Development Committee, was charged with the study of the character and extent of labour and management organization in Canada, and with the investigation of joint industrial councils in Canada, Great Britain and the United States. In March 1919, the Labour sub-committee, in turn, set up a commission to study industrial relations and to report on the possibility of establishing joint councils in Canada. Its chairman was Chief Justice Mathers of Manitoba; commission members included Moore, two businessmen, one Senator, and one member of the Commons.² By the early summer of 1919, the Commission had held seventy sessions in twenty-eight Canadian centres.³

The Mathers Commission tabled its report on June 25, 1919, and concluded from its study that the general principle of Industrial Councils could, with advantage, be adopted in Canada.⁴ Among the types of council studied were John Leitch's "Industrial Democracy" organized along the lines of the American government, with an executive, a Senate and a House. However, this plan favoured management, which had a veto power over council decisions, and which dominated the executive and Senate.⁵ The

2. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, April 1919, p. 432-3

3. TLC Report, 1919, p. 68

4. Report of the Commission on Industrial Relations (hereafter cited as "Mathers Commission Report") Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, supplement to the issue of July, 1919, p. 17

5. Mathers Commission Report, p. 15.

Commission also looked at the Colorado Plan, established by Mackenzie King for John D. Rockefeller. While King's plan offered equal representation for employers and employees on council, it made no special allowance for union organization and was frowned on by trade unionists as a substitute for and avoidance of unions. Both of these plans seemed to offer the illusion of greater worker influence while, in fact insuring management control.

The most impressive plan was that of British Member of Parliament H. H. Whitley which by March 1917 embraced 3½ million workers in the United Kingdom.⁶ The British government endorsed the Whitley councils as the official consultative bodies to the government on the industries they represented. This plan was acceptable to trade unions because it presupposed previous organization of both employers and employees, thus ensuring recognition of unions by a Council.

There were some Canadian precedents for Industrial Councils. The Colorado Plan had been extended into Canada by International Harvester, Massey Harris, and Imperial Oil⁷ and the Toronto Building Trades unions and their employers had already established the equivalent of a Whitley Council.⁸ On the whole, the movement was not very well developed in Canada.

6. Dept. of Labour, Supplement to the Labour Gazette, Feb. 1921, p.279.

7: Mathers Commission Report, p. 15.

8. ibid., p. 15

A council would, according to the Mathers report, establish industrial peace by creating among both workers and employers a better understanding of the other's point of view. The aim of the project was a noble one:

The essential feature of all the proposals is that the human factor in industry is to be regarded as of first importance. 9.

A council would achieve this aim by giving the worker a greater voice in the operation of his industry. In return, the worker would display a greater sense of responsibility, a greater concern for the welfare, not only of himself and his union, but of the whole industry. To achieve such ends, the council would deal with questions of wages, hours, working conditions, discipline, recreation and the provision of housing and libraries. Mathers thought, moreover, that such concerns were not an exhaustive list:

The authority and scope of the Council would grow with experience. The worker in this way would be given an increasing share in...control and responsibility without unduly interfering with the necessary functions of management. 10.

Unfortunately, the Mathers commission did not make clear how worker control could be increased without interfering with management functions. The vagueness of the Commission's report and recommendations seriously weakened the chances for the

9. ibid., p. 17

10. ibid., p. 17

success of the Industrial Council drive. For example, it suggested that employers make clear that a Council was not to be used as a substitute for unions ^{11.} and endorsed the government's Order-in-Council of July 1918 which had stated labour's right to organize and had encouraged company officials to negotiate with union representatives. ^{12.} But it did not categorically endorse the Whitley concept that workers should be organized before participating in a council. The report stated that it was loath to force acceptance of any one council system and doubted that any "particular plan now in operation could be adopted in its entirety." ^{13.} But since the plan did not specifically accept the concept of prior worker organization, the unions were bound to see the Industrial Councils as a means of avoiding unions. One of the few specific suggestions it did make was for the calling of a national conference of managers, workers, and government to discuss the Council idea.

As a consequence of this recommendation, a National Industrial Conference met on September 15, 1919. Robertson served as chairman of the meeting, since Borden was ill. ^{14.} Over 200 delegates were present, including three provincial premiers, Mackenzie King, members of the labour sub-committee, the Civil Service Federation, the TLC, the Railway Adjustment Board, plus

11. Mathers Commission Report, p. 16

12. see chapter II, p. 51.

13. Mathers Commission Report, p. 17.

14. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, Oct. 1919, p. 1173.

75 representatives of industry.¹⁵ The conference passed a unanimous resolution favouring, in principle, the formation of Councils, and recommending that the Federal Department of Labour establish a bureau to assist in their creation. However, while everyone endorsed the theory of Industrial Councils and paid lip service to the concept of industrial peace, there was no agreement on the key practical consideration: the role of unions in a Council. Delegates could not agree on the right or the need of union organization of workers prior to the formation of a council.¹⁶

The lack of accord on this point was fatal to the industrial council plan, for the TLC came to believe that a council would only be a substitute for, rather than a supplement to, a union. While admitting that in principle, "the establishment of joint industrial councils...will be of great value in promoting industrial harmony",¹⁷ President Moore stated succinctly the TLC's objection to the movement:

Briefly, organized labour is opposed to the formation of any council which will oppose, or even ignore the existence of labour organizations and their elected representatives. 18.

He supported his claim that the avoidance of union recognition was the true purpose of councils by pointing out that most councils

15. TLC Report, 1919, p. 69.

16. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, Oct. 1919, p. 1180

17. TLC Report, Moore to Stevenson, 1921, p. 76

18. ibid., p. 77

so far formed in both Canada and the United States were in industries either partially or totally unorganized. ^{19.} TLC opposition to the idea was especially serious since the Congress represented the vast majority of Canadian organized labour.

It is difficult to understand why business delegates originally supported councils, in principle, at the September conference. Some managers no doubt saw them as a substitute for unions. Perhaps others were amenable to granting workers an increased voice in industrial affairs to forestall increasing social unrest; the conference was, after all, held soon after the Winnipeg General Strike. But the general business philosophy of the time made all but certain business opposition to a worker or union voice in industry. As H. C. Pentland points out:

Our cultural heritage is one that has emphasized the authority of the employer (property owner) and the subordination of his employee. ^{20.}

Canadian employers generally accepted that an employer's power of decision-making could be limited by law, or by market conditions. But a true industrial council which would not simply be a means to avoid union recognition would give the worker too a control over decision-making. Since this would curtail management's traditional freedom of action, businessmen were bound to oppose industrial

19. ibid., p. 75-6

20. H.C. Pentland, "A study of the changing social economic and political background of the Canadian system of industrial relations", Task Force on Labour Relations, Ottawa, 1968, p. 35-6.

councils of meaningful power. Therefore, in spite of their initial agreement to the principle of councils in September 1919, it is doubtful if many businessmen truly supported the council movement.

Thus, for varying reasons, the council system attracted very limited support from either business or unions. The proof of the relectance of both the CMA and the TLC to support the council idea became clear in 1921 when Robertson attempted to call a second National Industrial Conference. The TLC agreed only reluctantly to take part, and the CMA flatly refused to participate. ²¹.

In spite of the minimal support he received, Robertson worked hard to promote the council system. He established a departmental bureau to assist parties interested in setting up a council. The Labour Gazette carried on a propaganda and education campaign, publishing articles and reports on the movement. ²². Robertson also tried to establish a joint council in the Post Office department, without success. ²³. Finally, in spite of the poor response of business and labour, Robertson called a conference on February 21-22, 1921, inviting no labour

21. TLC Report, 1921, p. 77 .

22. ibid., see, for example, October 1919, February and March, 1921.

23. The TLC Report, for 1921 stated that "All efforts to have the Dominion government accept the recommendation of the Minister of Labour for the establishment of..councils within the civil service have, up to the present, proved futile."(p.77).

representatives, but only those industrialists who had shown sufficient interest to establish industrial councils in their own plants. In his speeches to this assembly, Robertson reiterated his belief in the value of councils to promote industrial peace and recounted examples of the harmony he had personally seen result from them. However, this conference marked the end of any significant action by Robertson to promote the joint council idea.

The industrial council movement was a failure, and the responsibility for its failure must be widely shared. The federal government permitted its Minister of Labour to encourage councils in the private sphere, but refused to introduce them in the civil service. Its bad example was, therefore, harmful. Neither Robertson nor the Mathers Commission clearly defined the powers, the membership, or the role of unions in a council. The vague generalities surrounding the movement allowed both the CMA and the TLC to approve in theory, and oppose in practice, joint industrial councils. The TLC feared a diminution of union influence in a council; the CMA feared a loss of management control. Since these were the very groups whose support was essential if the industrial council system was to work, their distrust was fatal to the movement.

Robertson's plan for strengthening the cooperative spirit between employers and employees was thus rejected by the very forces he served: the Conservative government and the TLC, the prime representative of international unionism. As a result, his long-term plan to ensure industrial peace collapsed in disarray.

C H A P T E R V I

ROBERTSON AND THE ONE BIG UNION

In 1919 and 1920, the pent-up discontent of Western labour burst forth in the One Big Union movement. Both the Conservative government and the international craft unions opposed this new and radical organization. In the eyes of the government, the OBU threatened not only industrial peace, but also duly constituted authority. To the craft international unions and their central organization, the TLC, it presented a challenge to their traditional ideas of craft organization, their policy of cooperation with business within the capitalist system, and their dominance of the Canadian, especially Western Canadian, labour movement. Therefore, in 1919 and 1920, the government and the TLC cooperated to destroy the OBU's power, first in Winnipeg, and then in the Alberta-British Columbia coalfields.

Since Robertson was Minister of Labour, the disturbances in Winnipeg in 1919, and in the Western coalfields in 1920, came within his jurisdiction. Being both a member of the government and a supporter of craft and international unionism, he shared the desire of each to destroy the OBU. He therefore became the agent of both in attacking that organization.

It was the Winnipeg General Strike which first awakened both the government and the international unions to the growing threat of the OBU. Since the details of the strike are already well known,¹ a brief summary will suffice as background to Robertson's role in it. The Winnipeg General Strike lasted from May 15 to June 25, 1919. However, its immediate cause was a strike, begun May 1, by building and metal trades workers for recognition of the Metal Trades Council as bargaining agent with employers, the largest of whom were the Manitoba Bridge and Iron Works, Dominion Bridge Company, and Vulcan Iron Works. As bargaining agent, the Metal Trades Council would represent workers of various skills, working for various companies--a principle of industrial rather than craft unionism. However, other cities, including Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver, already had Metal Trades Councils,² so that the idea was hardly revolutionary. The original strike aimed then, principally to win collective bargaining. Even the general sympathetic strike beginning May 15, was not unprecedented, since Winnipeg had already experienced a general strike the previous summer.³ However, government, employers and craft union leaders opposed the industrial principle and the general strike, especially since both ideas were espoused by the newly emerging, and radical, One Big Union.

1. Perhaps best explained in D.C. Masters, The Winnipeg General Strike, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1950.
2. David Bercuson, "The Winnipeg General Strike, Collective Bargaining, and the One Big Union Issue", CHR, June, 1970, p. 168-9.
3. See Chapter III p. 60-63.

The groundwork of this organization had been laid at the Calgary conference in March, 1919, by the Western radical unionists defeated at the 1918 TLC convention. The OBU, as one might therefore expect, rejected traditional unionism. Its proponents opposed cooperation with owners; there could be no basis of accord between "those who possess and do not produce, and those who produce and do not possess." ⁴ It wished to establish, in place of craft unions, one huge organization including all workers, skilled and unskilled. Such an organization, embracing all workers under one leadership, would have tremendous political strength: OBU demands could be backed by the threat of a general strike which would paralyze a nation's industrial life. Although the OBU resembled the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in its radical industrial unionism, it was less militant ⁵ and was not affiliated with that American organization. It was a Canadian movement - primarily Western Canadian - and rejected the international affiliation. The OBU therefore opposed the cooperation with owners, craft, and international unionism, all three of which principles were espoused by the vast majority of Canadian unions. A final (and fatal) quality of OBU leadership was its penchant for radical rhetoric, ⁶ a habit which thoroughly frightened government, business, and traditional trade unionists.

4. Constitution of the One Big Union, quoted in Labour Organization in Canada, 1921, p. 33.

5. Masters, op.cit., p. 23

6. ibid., p. 4

Whether or not OBU supporters were as radical as their speeches, Robertson accepted their words at face value. He believed that the OBU was simply an extension of the IWW, an organization generally accepted in Canada as the epitome of revolutionary unionism:

(the OBU) was conceived in Chicago and born in Calgary...It is simply a camouflage for the introduction of the IWW into the country. 7.

This thinking conditioned his reaction to the Winnipeg General Strike; he believed that it was the work of the OBU,⁸ and that its real motives were merely cloaked beneath the claim of the strikers for collective bargaining in the Metal Trades:

The motive behind this strike undoubtedly was the overthrow of constitutional government, but leaders have already temporarily abandoned hope of success and are frantically endeavouring to camouflage the issue by pretending to contend for the recognition of the principle of collective bargaining. 9.

Robertson's fear of revolution masquerading behind the collective bargaining issue was the source of his political opposition to the strike; as a conservative unionist, he also opposed it, because

7. G. D. Robertson, Senate Debates, Mayll, 1920, p. 408.

8. ibid., May 31, 1921, p. 678. In fact, the OBU did not officially exist at the time of the strike, though its ideas were espoused by some of the strike leaders, notably R.B. Russell. (Masters, op.cit., p. 129-30)

9. B.P., Robertson to (Deputy Minister of Labour) Acland, May 27, 1919. No. 61588.

"in responding to the call (to strike) the majority violated and repudiated their obligations to their own trade union and their contract with their employers." ¹⁰.

The Borden government as a whole concurred with the Minister of Labour in seeing in the strike a threat to legitimate government authority. Meighen, speaking for the government,¹¹ opposed the concept of a general strike because it entailed "the violation of solemn contracts" and because "it cannot take place unless it is to be followed by an assumption of governmental power on the part of the leaders of the strike who have no constituted responsible authority."¹².

He obviously also feared that the type of collective bargaining demanded by the Metal Trades Council was a step toward the OBU concept of a single bargaining unit for all workers of all trades.

This fear was behind his refusal to countenance "a combination of all organizations of labour in the Dominion" which could intervene in every dispute and would be "the perfection of Bolshevism."¹³ He believed that "collective bargaining is sound, but a unit must be found towards which the principle of

10. Hansard, June 2, 1919, p. 3047. Quote by A. K. Maclean from a Robertson press statement.

11. Borden was in Europe when the strike began, but returned during it.

12. Arthur Meighen, Hansard, June 2, 1919, p. 3040.

13. ibid., p. 3041.

collective bargaining is to apply, and beyond which it must not go." 14. Obviously, the traditional form of each craft union bargaining solely for workers of its own trade would fit Meighen's limitations on the size of collective bargaining units. Borden completely endorsed Meighen's reasoning:

There is nothing I can usefully add to the very lucid statement which was given in the House the other evening by the Minister of the Interior (Hon. Arthur Meighen)... 15.

The government was, therefore, united in opposition to the strike, which it thought threatened its authority.

The TLC and the internationals affiliated with it, far from being moved by considerations of "worker solidarity", also wished to defeat the strike, which was a threat to their power. This attitude is clearly set out in the 1919 TLC Report of Proceedings. On June 18, 1919, according to the Report, the secretary of the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council wrote to TLC President Moore requesting help for the strikers. In his reply of June 24, Moore outlined various reasons for refusing aid and for opposing the strike action. He had not been allowed to address union members in Winnipeg. Moreover, the local TLC executives had refused to brief him on the local situation. But his basic objection was that:

Winnipeg was determined upon its own line of action which harmonized strongly with the policies laid down in the propaganda of the OBU...the calling of the strike made it very plain that Winnipeg was determined to demonstrate the efficiency of

14. *ibid.*, p. 3041.

15. Sir Robert Borden, Hansard, June 4, 1919, p. 3069.

the principle of massed action, sympathetic strikes and economic dictatorship as superior in achieving results to the policies of the international trade unions, and Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, and the American Federation of Labour, which are and have been a policy of negotiation and the use of the strike weapon as a last resort only. 16.

In addition, the Congress could not support general strikes because they broke contracts. Moore refused to call a national general strike in sympathy with Winnipeg workers as it was not TLC policy to force member unions to strike or not to strike; and also because "the calling of a general strike would be the admission that the policies of the trade union movement up to the present time had been wrong and that the policies adopted by the Winnipeg Strike Committee were correct." 17. He went on to say that, for the moment, TLC aid to Winnipeg organizations would be limited to a request to the government to allow bail for all the arrested and to insure them a fair trial.

Moore, in this official policy letter, ignored the question of collective bargaining rights as a cause of the strike, and promised no aid to Winnipeg strikers until they renewed their TLC allegiance and reaffiliated with their internationals. It would appear, therefore, that the TLC was more interested in restoring its authority over its rebellious Winnipeg members than in aiding the achievement of any legitimate strike

16. Trades and Labour Congress, Report of Proceedings, (hereafter cited as TLC Report,) 1919, Moore to Robinson, p. 43.

17. ibid., p. 44

grievances. Nor was this the attitude of the executive alone. The Convention adopted Moore's report, thus endorsing his policy toward the strike. ^{18.}

There was, then, agreement between both government and TLC that the Winnipeg General Strike was a threat to the authority of each. With the backing of both the Conservative government and the largest Canadian labour body, Robertson assisted wholeheartedly in breaking the strike.

He did so by using the same technique as he had employed in the 1918 Winnipeg general strike: by removing the cause of the initial dispute which had provoked the sympathy strike; that is, by forcing the employers to recognize collective bargaining. On Saturday, June 14, Robertson demanded that the employers accept collective bargaining by individual unions ^{19.}-- though not by the Metal Trades Council. The Vulcan Iron Works was obdurate in its opposition to recognition, but Robertson made it very plain that if Vulcan didn't agree to this course of action, he would take "steps"--unspecified--to force them to agree. ^{20.}

On June 16, a collective bargaining agreement was announced, with Robertson claiming that it was a "complete recognition of collective bargaining as generally interpreted and applied". In actual fact, however, the agreement did not meet worker demands since it did not provide for negotiation through the Metal Trades

18. TLC Report, 1919, p. 158.

19. Bercuson, op.cit., p.174.

20. B.P., Robertson to Borden, June 17, 1919. No. 61992.

Council; it provided only for workers to bargain through their international craft unions. Yet, as Robertson well knew, there were Canadian precedents for one organization, such as a Metal Trades Council, bargaining on behalf of workers of several distinct unions; for example, on the Canadian Railway Board of Adjustment No. 1, six different rail unions negotiated through one board with Canadian railways during World War One. However, Robertson's collective bargaining agreement prevented the Metal Trades Council from exercising similar powers on behalf of metal workers of various trades, no doubt because he distrusted the Council as an agent of the OBU. Though the agreement did not, therefore, meet worker demands, Robertson's strategy worked. The more conservative unionists on strike accepted this traditional type of collective bargaining as fulfilment of the strikers' demand,²¹ and the settlement thereby significantly reduced the strike's strength.

Robertson also received strong support from the executive of the rail unions in curbing and ending the strike-- though not from the average Winnipeg rail worker who sympathized with the strikers. Proof of their sympathy was the fact that by June 14, on the Canadian National lines in Winnipeg, there was no freight yard service, and bare maintenance of passenger service; in addition, trainmen, switchmen, firemen and engineers were out in sympathy.²² However, the executives assisted Robertson fully;

21. Masters, op.cit., p. 101-2.

22. B.P., Robertson to Borden, June 14, 1919, No. 61932.

James Murdock, vice-president of the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen, accompanied Robertson to Winnipeg, ^{23.} and worked thereafter to keep his men from supporting the strike.^{24.} Moreover, officers of the six major rail unions also endorsed Robertson's collective bargaining agreement of June 16, ^{25.} thus lending their prestige to his settlement.

In return for the support offered by the TLC and the rail unions during the strike, the government took pains not to alienate its labour allies. Therefore, it concealed Robertson's role in the arrest of strike leaders, fearing that the knowledge that labour's representative in the Cabinet had acted against workers - even presumably seditious ones - might weaken his prestige in the labour movement. Therefore, while Robertson had the power to authorize the arrests, ^{26.} and, in fact to approve or request "any action contemplated",^{27.} this power was never made public. As A. J. Andrews, Winnipeg agent of the Justice Department remarked concerning the arrest of strike leaders:

23. B.P., Robertson to Acland, June 11, 1919, No. 61891.

24. B.P., Robertson to Borden, June 17, 1919, No. 61991.

25. Bercuson, op.cit., p. 174.

26. B.P., Borden to Robertson, June 13, 1919, No. 61909.

27. B.P., Calder to Robson, June 17, 1919, No. 61984.

Everything I have done has been at the suggestion of Senator Robertson, but because it might weaken his position with labour I have full responsibility for Justice Department. 28.

On a more important level, the Borden government gave serious consideration to TLC objections to the repressive legislation which it had passed at the time of the Winnipeg strike. The TLC especially opposed two amendments to the Immigration Act. which, on June 6, had passed through both Houses of Parliament within one hour. 29. Section 41, subsection 2 provided that anyone who had, at any time since 1910, been a member of an organization since declared illegal was assumed to be still a member 30. and thereby subject to the penalty prescribed for such an association - up to twenty years imprisonment. 31. A second amendment permitted deportation without trial, simply at the discretion of immigration agents, of any resident not born in Canada (thereby including British immigrants) and suspected of seditious activity. The first amendment was an ex post facto law; the second dispensed with the British tradition of a right to a trial; both underlined the haste and hysteria with which Parliament reacted to the Winnipeg situation.

28. B.P., Andrews to Meighen, June 19, 1919, No. 62012

29. TLC Report, 1919, p. 46.

30. B.P., Borden to Robertson, June 13, 1919, No. 61907.

31. Dept. of Labour, Labour Legislation in Canada, 1919, p. 11.

The TLC protested vigorously against both amendments. On June 12, 1919, in an interview with Borden, TLC president Moore expressed his disapproval of subsection 2 on the grounds that it was a retroactive law. Moreover, he stated that he had an understanding with Robertson ^{32.} that no legislation affecting labour, such as this subsection, would be passed while Moore was absent from Ottawa. He then threatened to resign from the Mathers Commission ^{33.} unless this clause was abandoned. ^{34.} Though Meighen wished to retain the subsection, both Borden and Robertson agreed to drop it, ^{35.} and eventually Meighen too was prevailed on to change his original position. On June 13, he wired his agent, A. J. Andrews:

In view of circumstances recently developed, do not rely on sub-clause two. ^{36.}

Obviously, the government had deferred to TLC wishes in suppressing sub-clause two.

The TLC also objected to the deportation amendment. In June 1919, Moore wrote Immigration Minister James A. Calder suggesting the possible adverse affect of the deportation law on British immigration. ^{37.} In addition, the TLC convention of 1919, authorized the executive to request an amendment procuring trial

32. A statement that Robertson denied (B.P., Robertson to Borden, June 14, 1919, No. 61936-7.)

33. See Chapter V for more details on the Mathers Commission.

34. B.P., Borden to Robertson, June 13, 1919, No. 61907.

35. B.P., Borden to Robertson, June 13, 1919, No. 61909; and B.P., Robertson to Borden, June 14, 1919, No. 61936.

36. B.P., Meighen to Andrews, June 13, 1919, No. 61907

37. TLC Report, 1920, p. 25.

before deportation for any supposed subversive immigrant.

In this case also, the government attempted, though belatedly, to meet TLC demands. On April 27, 1920, Robertson introduced in the Senate, Bill 42 which proposed both to repeal sub-section two, and to strike out the possibility of the deportation of naturalized citizens without trial.

The new bill would not abolish deportation of naturalized immigrants; if convicted of sedition, the immigrant could have his naturalization revoked and could still be deported. It simply insured a citizen a trial, precluding peremptory action by the immigration department.

In defence of his proposed amendment, Robertson argued that the sections in question were no longer required since the Winnipeg crisis which had inspired the original acts had passed, and suitable safeguards against sedition had been added to the criminal code. He also argued that the acts were antagonizing "some labour elements" unnecessarily; that sub-section two had an undesirable ex post facto quality; and that it was not consistent with the British spirit of justice to expel an immigrant without trial. He added that even the proposed change would still permit the immediate deportation of an immigrant not yet naturalized. In summing up, Robertson presented an eminently fair case for a change in the regulations:

I am simply requesting you to give earnest consideration to this question: is the Parliament of Canada going to refuse to pass legislation which will entitle a British subject of more than five years residence in this country to a fair trial

before a jury of his peers before he is deported? 38.

In spite of Robertson's arguments, the bill was defeated. On June 9, it reached committee stage; when the Committee rose, discussion stopped for the session, and introduction of the bill in the House was prevented.

It is possible that in introducing the bill in the Senate, where it was least likely to pass, the government may have desired its defeat. It would then have made its gesture to labour by introducing the bill, while simultaneously insuring its defeat. However, there is no concrete evidence to prove that the government desired the bill's defeat. On the contrary, Meighen stated, in 1921 that new legislation was being prepared incorporating the desired changes. ^{39.} Perhaps the situation was as the government claimed: the press of legislation of a higher priority prevented the presentation of Bill X2 in the House. Probably the Conservative government honestly sought the alteration desired by the TLC but was stymied by a Senate either still wary of the forces supposedly behind the Winnipeg Strike or too reactionary to offer minimum British justice to British subjects.

But even allowing for the defeat of this legislation, the events of the Winnipeg General Strike offer a good example of

38. G. D. Robertson, Senate Debates, May 7, 1920, p. 389.

39. TLC Report, 1921, p. 26, However, his administration was defeated before it could introduce a new bill.

the cooperation of the craft international labour movement and the Conservative government: the TLC refused to help the strikers; the rail union executives actively aided the government. In return, the collective bargaining agreement supported international craft union authority, and the government tried to meet TLC demands for changes in the legislation passed during the strike.

Moreover, in 1920 the government further aided the international craft movement by its attack on the OBU. During 1920, Robertson began to fear the spread of the OBU in Canada, especially in "District 18", a mining region straddling the Alberta-British Columbia border, where it had largely replaced the international United Mine Workers of America as representative of the coal miners. But he also feared its spread in the Niagara Peninsula, Toronto, Montreal and the pulp and paper towns of Northern Ontario. 40.

To offset OBU expansion, the Labour Gazette published, as a supplement to its August 1920 issue, a virulent attack on the organization, in a pamphlet entitled, "Information Respecting the Russian Soviet System and its Propaganda in North America". The pamphlet attempted to tie the OBU to Bolshevik activity; it claimed that "scores of documents and incidents" existed proving "the close connection existing between (Ludwig) Martens' Soviet Bureau in New York and OBU leaders in Canada." 41. The pamphlet then quoted various speakers at Montreal and Toronto

40. B.P., Robertson to Borden, April 20, 1920, No. 3940.

41. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, "Information Respecting the Russian Soviet System and its Propaganda in North America", (hereafter cited as "Information") August, 1920, p. 16.

meetings on their desire to introduce a Communist system in Canada. In addition to Communist leanings, the OBU was charged with being tied to the IWW: and, for good measure, with being "in principle, a reproduction of the Knights of Labour,"⁴² that eternal industrial enemy of the craft, international, American Federation of Labour:

Mr. R. B. Russell, Manitoba secretary of the OBU and a member of the executive, was asked in May 1919, why they were attacking the International Trade Union Movement so bitterly. His reply was that the Trade Unions had always stood in the way of the progress of socialism and that they must be destroyed. This was exactly the attitude of the Knights of Labour.⁴³

This quotation indicates that, in addition to attacking the OBU, the pamphlet sought to praise the international unions, which it termed the "legitimate Labour movement", and whose function was to prevent "industrial and economic disaster" by guaranteeing "to the worker a reasonable return for his labour" while steadying him against "the waves of radicalism."⁴⁴ The pamphlet was, therefore, designed to alert the Canadian public to the dangers of the OBU threat while lending support to the

42. ibid., p. 15

43. ibid., p. 17

44. ibid., p. 18. The pamphlet dealt with the anti-Bolshevism of the Quebec Catholic unions in one sentence, and levelled a veiled accusation against the national dual unions of attempting an alliance with the OBU. (p. 17 and 18). There can be no doubt, then, that the international movement was meant to look like the shining knight opposing the OBU dragon, to the complete eclipse of its non-radical labour rivals.

international craft movement as the bulwark in combatting it. Since it was published by the Department of Labour, in the department's official magazine, there is no doubt that Robertson approved the pamphlet's sentiments.

But more important than this propaganda assault was the use of governmental authority to attack by action, and not mere words, the OBU, and to replace it with an international union. In 1920, with the cooperation of the federal government, local coal operators and the International United Mine Workers, Robertson drove the OBU from its hold on the allegiance (and dues) of the Alberta-British Columbia coal miners of District 18. The prime agent in Robertson's campaign was W. H. Armstrong, the Coal Director, who had originally been appointed for very different reasons than an attack on the OBU, and whose position, ironically, Robertson had been trying for some time to abolish.

District 18 had long been troubled by labour discontent. In April, 1917, while the UMW still represented the men, a prolonged strike broke out against the Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company and various other members of the Western Coal Operators' Association. The result was a widespread winter coal shortage which endangered life in the West. Consequently, the federal government appointed the Coal Director who was to exercise strong controls over wages, working conditions and prices for the duration of the war. The system proved effective, and there was little trouble in District 18 in the rest of 1917 and 1918.

From February to June 1919, Robertson sought a new arrangement which would, if possible, remove this federal official now that the war was ended. Robertson preferred to see workers and companies achieve a new contract settlement voluntarily, without interference from government; failing this, he wished to turn the responsibility for the district over to provincial control.^{45.} He saw the continuance of federal control only as a last resort. Neither the United Mine Workers nor the Coal Operators Association felt that private negotiations could achieve a lasting settlement, and neither wanted provincial control as this would provide divided jurisdiction in District 18 which overlapped the Alberta-British Columbia border. Nevertheless, Robertson pressed for an end to the federal directorate, and, in March, 1919, workers and owners reached general agreement in principle on a new contract.^{46.} It thus appeared that, when the old contract expired in April 1919 no disruption would take place and the federal coal director could be dismissed.

However, the rise of the OBU in District 18 led Robertson to re-evaluate the role of the coal director; instead of disappearing as a factor in Western labour relations, Armstrong

45. B.P., Robertson to Lovett (president of North American Collieries Ltd.,) Feb. 26, 1919. No. 139618.

46. B.P., Lovett to Robertson, March 3, 1919. No. 139623.

became a more important force than ever on the scene. The upheaval in Winnipeg in 1919 caused serious tremors in District 18 - so serious, indeed, that the coal miners deserted their UMW affiliations and joined the OBU, which became the dominant union in the Western coalfields. But, in Armstrong, Robertson had the means to fight the One Big Union: the coal director was a federal official, responsible to Robertson. Moreover, as director of coal operations in District 18, Armstrong's executive orders were binding on miners and owners alike.

The OBU was destroyed in District 18 by the judicious application of these orders. On December 1, 1919, Armstrong issued executive order #139, extending a 14% wage increase over gross earnings, including a cost of living bonus, to all UMW workers but not simply to all workers--an obvious attempt to provide help to UMW reorganizing efforts.⁴⁷ On December 16, Robertson arrived in Calgary, ostensibly "to inquire into the causes of the unrest",⁴⁸ in District 18 but actually to draw up a new two-year contract which would destroy the OBU. He met with representative of the coal operators, and UMW organizers from the Indianapolis headquarters, but not with OBU organizers who were also demanding to negotiate a contract for the workers. On December 18, negotiations concluded in agreement. The new contract not only embodied Armstrong's 14% wage increase, but also established

47. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, Jan. 1920, p. 74.

48. ibid., p. 72.

a closed shop for the United Mine Workers Union. The agreement was reinforced by Armstrong's executive order #141 of December 18, which required "that all eligible men operating in and around the mine operated by members of the Association must join the United Mine Workers Association." ⁴⁹. A check-off system was introduced by which union dues for the UMW were automatically deducted from the worker's pay cheque. The closed shop was to take effect "whenever the officials of the United Mine Workers of America appear on the ground (sic) in each locality and cooperate with the operators in arranging details." ⁵⁰.

The OBU fought back on various fronts. It protested the December contract settlement as blatant discrimination. Robertson coolly replied that it was impossible to recognize rival unions as having jurisdiction for the same workers; the UMW was given preference over the OBU because of its reputation for respecting and fulfilling its contracts. ⁵¹. In justifying the granting of wage increases only to UMW members, Robertson stated, rather sanctimoniously, that:

(the UMW) feels that it has no right to request of the employers increased wages or improved working conditions for men who had not authorized the union to represent them. ⁵².

49. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, Jan. 1920, p. 75.

50. ibid., p. 73.

51. ibid., p. 72

52. M.P., Robertson to George Buskard, (Meighen's private secretary) August 4, 1920, No. 18463.

It is, however, transparently obvious that the UMW would accept wage discrimination out of self-interest, rather than deep worry over moral "right". In a much franker statement, Robertson made clear he was prepared to stand by the decision:

If (the worker) chooses to remain a member of the One Big Union--which organization the employers will not, and cannot in my opinion consistently recognize--he must continue to receive the old rates. 53.

With no hope of altering the government's stand, the OBU fought desperately for self-preservation through a series of defensive strikes during late 1919 and early 1920, while Armstrong applied the closed-shop order at one mine after another. On December 29, 1919, OBU supporters struck at Mountain Park Alberta for the abolition of order #141; the UMW sent in organizers and after 26 days, the men abandoned the OBU. On March 9, 1920, Armstrong issued a closed shop order against the OBU at the Bellevue mine in Alberta. After some "strong picketing" (as the Labour Gazette delicately described it), an RCMP patrol was stationed there until the UMW restored its authority. On March 22, the same order was applied to the Canmore, Coleman and Hillcrest mines, precipitating OBU strikes at all three Alberta sites. ⁵⁴. The government's new policy received its strongest opposition at Kimberley, British Columbia, where the men long remained loyal to the OBU, in spite of the advantages offered by reunion with the UMW. But the government

53. ibid., No. 18463

54. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, April 1920, p. 417-19.

was determined, and the introduction of strike breakers ended that conflict on March 1, 1920.

Though strikes against the check-off system continued into the fall of 1920, it was clear by the late spring of that year who had won. In April, Robertson told Borden that he saw promise of completely eradicating the OBU in District 18; he thought that their exclusion from the coalfields would seriously reduce their income, and, consequently, their capacity to spread their ideas.⁵⁵ Robertson's report to the Senate of his victory through alliance with the owners and the international union was carefully understated:

By perhaps unusual action...the Director of Coal operations and the Coal Operators Association and the United Mine Workers organization...each doing their (sic) part, we succeeded in maintaining the supply of coal...Subsequently, in the enforcement of the agreement that had been made in December, some objection was taken by the One Big Union organization and its followers, and local strikes were precipitated here and there..... 56.

A final battle against the OBU was won in the courts, which consistently found against that union, notably in the case of Lynch versus Canmore Coal Company. On March 23, 1920, that company locked out those employees who had not signed the UMW check-off. Rel Lynch, one of the miners affected, charged the company with illegal lockout, since it had acted without previously applying for conciliation as was required in the coal mining industry under

55. B.P., Robertson to Borden, April 20, 1920, No.s 3939-41.

56. G. D. Robertson, Senate Debates, May 11, 1920, P. 409.

the IDI Act. The defence claimed that the company was following the dictates of Armstrong's order No. 141, and that there was no appeal for a conciliation board as there was no dispute in progress.⁵⁷ On April 19, the magistrate dismissed the case.⁵⁸ But while an IDI conciliation board had been waived for employers, the same act was used to hamper the OBU. The Red Deer Valley Coal Operators Association applied for, and received, a court injunction forbidding the OBU to continue a strike against the Rosedeer Mining Company of Alberta since the union hadn't applied for IDI conciliation prior to beginning the strike.⁵⁹

As a result of the organized hostility by the courts and the government, the OBU had been seriously weakened in District 18. By June 1921, UMW organizers in the Alberta coalfields felt secure enough to restore autonomy to locals in the area.⁶⁰ Obviously, the federal government, through Robertson, with the collusion of the coal directors, the companies, and the UMW, had successfully intervened to break the power of the OBU and to reestablish that of the internationals. There is no doubt in this instance, that the TLC-international movement benefited from the good offices of the government.

In fact, there is no clearer proof of the cooperation for mutual benefit of the Conservative government and the international craft union movement than their concerted attacks on the One Big Union. The internationals aided the government's suppression of the

57. Dept. of Labour, Labour Gazette, May 1920, p. 625

58. ibid., November, 1920, p. 1577

59. ibid., November 1920, p. 1577

60. ibid., June 1921, p. 753-4. The international headquarters of the UMW had taken over direct administration of its District 18 operations in July, 1920.

strike both by the TLC's refusal to assist the strikers and by rail union's support for Robertson's collective bargaining agreement. In return, Robertson recognized, in his June 16 agreement, the right of the internationals to bargain for Metal Trades workers along the traditional craft lines. Moreover, the government carefully weighed the TLC's objections to its strike legislation and attempted to remove the causes of disagreement. Nor did government - international cooperation end with the strike. Again pursuing mutual interests, the internationals and the government cooperated in eradicating the OBU in District 18.

Robertson negotiated the collective bargaining agreement in Winnipeg; he introduced the legislation designed to placate the TLC; he engineered the expulsion of the OBU from District 18, and its replacement by an international union. He was then, clearly, the prime agent of the cooperation between the government and the internationals which suppressed the One Big Union.

C H A P T E R V I I

THE CATHOLIC AND NATIONAL DUAL^{1.} UNIONS

Robertson's attack on the One Big Union was not the only instance in which he displayed his preference for the craft international movement; he also attacked the Catholic and the national dual unions. Robertson disliked the clerical influence on Catholic unions and he disapproved of their discrimination against non-Catholics. He thought the national dual unions redundant and ineffectual. While his hostility toward the OBU benefited the government as well as the internationals by removing a radical influence from the Canadian labour movement, Robertson's bias against the Catholic and dual unions was of advantage only to the international movement.

As the Catholic and dual unions were numerically weak,^{2.} Robertson was generally able to ignore them. However, as an advisor to Borden, Robertson did deal with the most important of the dual unions, the Canadian Brotherhood of Railroad Employees. His attitude toward it is significant, especially when contrasted

1. A dual union is one which organizes workers in competition with an international union.
2. In 1919, the Internationals contained 250,247 Canadian workers. By contrast, purely Canadian organizations were pitifully small: the OBU counted 41,150 members; the Catholic unions 35,000; non-internationals 33,372. (Labour Organization in Canada, 1919, p. 246).

with his aid to the UMW in District 18. The CBRE, under its president A. R. Mosher was, in the eyes of the TLC, a dual union since an American union, the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks existed to organize the same type of workers. Consequently, it refused to recognize CBRE jurisdiction over its workers, though it did attempt to have Mosher's union affiliate with the Railway Clerks. ³.

Robertson, like the TLC, ignored the CBRE, insofar as his governmental responsibilities would allow, most notably in a 1918 jurisdictional dispute involving that union. Mosher had written to Borden about the refusal of the Dominion Express Company to recognize his union, and protested also the refusal of Labour Minister Crothers to grant a conciliation board requested by the CBRE. Borden referred the letter to Robertson, at that time Minister without Portfolio, for suggestions. Robertson's reply was that the company had established its own union and that the government should not get involved in jurisdictional disputes. He suggested that Borden point out to Mosher that a conciliation board would not be established until it was clear that Mosher's union did indeed represent the majority of Dominion Express employees; meanwhile, the CBRE men should stay at work until Mosher submitted figures to prove the support of sufficient employees to justify an arbitration board. Moreover, it appeared to Robertson that the company union had a valid contract with Dominion Express. ⁴. In fact,

3. While negotiations toward this end continued, the CBRE was a member of the TLC; when talks broke down, it was expelled (TLC Report, 1921, p. 171.)

4. B.P., Robertson to Borden, Sept. 6, 1918 (No. 136, 376-8) Sept. 9 (136394-5), Sept. 11 (136412).

each union appears to have had the allegiance of approximately 50% of employees, ⁵. but Mosher's strength was concentrated mainly in Eastern Canada, and consequently, when no governmental intervention was forthcoming his union disrupted service in Montreal, St. John, Halifax, Sherbrooke, Ottawa, Northern Ontario, (and, in the West, Vancouver). ⁶. Though the government received pleas from the mayors of St. John, Levis and Quebec, ⁷. the government refused to intervene beyond encouraging the company to meet with CBRE representatives. Borden had, then, obviously taken Robertson's advice against interfering in the dispute.

Of course, on the evidence available, one cannot prove that Robertson suggested withholding government intervention because he wished to make a strike victory more difficult for a national union. But in comparison to his reactions three years later in District 18 to aid the UMW, his restraint in this case is significant. In 1918, he suggested that the government remain aloof from jurisdictional disputes; in 1921, he personally placed the government's power on the side of the UMW in its jurisdictional dispute with the OBU. In 1918, he suggested that Mosher show proof that he had

5. B.P., H. A. Mowat to Borden, Sept. 6, 1918, No. 136379.

6. B.P., F. Hutchings to Borden, Sept. 11, 1918, No. 136415.

7. B.P., See nos. 136397-401.

majority support among company employees before calling for government intervention; in 1921, he did not question the UMW's position as spokesmen for District 18, in spite of the fact that in many mines the OBU was the union accepted by the workers. There are three interpretations which one can place on these variations in attitude. Possibly, as Minister of Labour, Robertson became a proponent of more active government intervention in labour disputes. However, his early championing of the IDI Act indicates that in 1918 he already supported active government intervention. Alternatively, he may have felt that active government intervention was justified against the "revolutionary" OBU, but not in an ordinary jurisdictional dispute between non-radical unions. This explanation is more likely. Or, finally, he may indeed have wished to avoid aiding the prime national "dual" union in Canada.

This last interpretation is a strong possibility in view of his expressed distaste for national unions. He felt, first, that there was no need for them; to an official of the Canadian Federation of Labour he wrote:

I quite appreciate the sentimental reasons which prompt you to express preference for an all-Canadian organization..I have, however, so far failed to receive any concrete evidence to indicate that Canadian labour interests have been prejudiced by outside interference... 8.

8. M.P., Robertson to Charles E. Clay, April 20, 1921, No. 18590.

In addition, he thought that the CFL "has never been able to make any substantial progress by way of improving the conditions of its members because of its numerical strength being insufficient.." ⁹. Finally, in the heat of battle, he was inclined to drop his reasoned, calm discussions of national dual union demerits, and to associate them, however unfairly, with the OBU. Regarding national unions, he once remarked:

One of them I know something about. I had some dealings with it when it tried to upset law and order in 1919. It professes to be a national union.... 10.

In view of such remarks, officially spoken or written by Robertson, in his capacity as Minister of Labour--supposedly the representative of all labour interests--it is quite conceivable that Robertson did not grant Mosher his request for conciliation at least in part because of a bias against national dual unions.

Robertson's dislike for dual unions was only one objection that he had to Quebec's National Catholic union movement; he also disapproved of discrimination against non-Catholics, and the control exercised over it by church officials.

His opposition to the Catholic unions became public after a 1921 meeting with officials of the Quebec movement. As

9. G.D. Robertson, Senate Debates, May 31, 1921, p. 681.

10. ibid., p. 678

part of its program to encourage industrial councils, the Department of Labour had called a Building Trades Conference for May 3, 1921, at the request of certain employers and employees in the construction industry. Representatives of the Quebec Catholic Unions were not invited. Consequently, Catholic union officials asked for, and were granted, a meeting with Robertson, on March 21, to discuss whether they might attend. Led by Abbe Fortin, a major figure in the Catholic movement, and accompanied by Ernest Lapointe, a Liberal, who acted as interpreter, the officials demanded a three-delegate representation at the May 3 meeting. Robertson refused, stating that the Department of Labour had not chosen the delegates, but had simply made the arrangements for the meeting at the request of the building trade. He also declined to invite the Catholic representatives since "out of a total of 39,000 members (in the Catholic unions), only 700 are engaged in the building trades."¹¹ Thus, the Catholic unions really did not represent a significant group of employees in this trade. Moreover, "The employers of these (seven hundred) are not members of the employers association and will not be present at the convention."¹² However, Robertson did suggest that the Labour Department would ask the labour and employer groups actually choosing delegates to nominate some Catholic unionists and then the Department would invite them. In addition, on

11. M.P., undated, unsigned memorandum, No. 18424.

12. ibid., No. 18424

March 29, Robertson wrote to an official of the Catholic Union stating the willingness of the Department to organize a similar building trade conference between employers and Catholic union employees if these groups so desired. 13. Robertson's position was, then, both conciliatory and fair.

However, the Catholic union officials, perhaps independently, perhaps with Lapointe's guidance, did not choose to see the government's action as impartial and just. After the meeting, they attacked, as discriminatory, Robertson's refusal to invite them to the Building Trades conference. The Montreal Gazette picked up the cudgel in an editorial of March 25, 1921. Both the Gazette and the Catholic union officials ignored Robertson's valid reasons for refusing Catholic representation, preferring to concentrate on the fact that he had, for whatever reason, excluded them and was, therefore, discriminating against them, refusing them recognition as a bona fide labour organization. The Gazette suggested that Robertson's "discrimination" was an attack on national unionism:

The Minister of Labour has, on a number of occasions, acted as if he were the Minister of Organized Labour; He now comes forward as the Minister of Organized Labour Internationally Affiliated. 14.

The editorial went on to state that "the impression created... is that the Minister's real objection to the Quebec unions is

13. M.P., Robertson to J. E. A. Pin, March 29, 1921, No. 18550.

14. Montreal Gazette, March 25, 1921, p. 10.

that they are national. ^{15.} The editorial also accused him of religious discrimination:

The Catholic National Union in this province is none the less a labour organization because its membership is Catholic, nor is it the business of the Minister of Labour to dwell upon or even consider the religious belief of this labour body or of any other, Catholic or Protestant. ^{16.}

One cannot deny the Gazette's claim that, had Robertson wished Catholic representation at the conference "nobody would believe that his efforts would be unsuccessful." ^{17.} At the same time, his reasons for denying representation were fair enough: there were few Catholic Unionists in the building trades; in any case, their employers did not belong to the National Industrial Conference Board which had requested the meeting, ^{18.} and it was not the responsibility of the Labour Department to decide who to invite. Had Robertson simply refused to comment on the editorial, or had he confined his comment to a reasoned stating of his arguments, no doubt the dispute would have blown over.

But he did neither. Instead on March 28, he wrote a letter to the Gazette's editor, not only recounting his reasons

15. ibid., p. 10

16. ibid., p. 10

17. ibid., p. 10.

18. M.P., undated, unsigned memorandum, No. 18423.

for refusing Catholic union representation, but also attacking the very idea of Catholic unionism. He stated that the Catholic unions discriminated against Protestants who could not hold full membership:

Investigation shows that (the) adjunct membership card (for non-Catholics) permitted the holder to pay dues but debarred him from any voting power in the union. 19.

To further support this charge, he quoted from the constitution of the Catholic Union of Quebec Printing and Bookbinding Workers which stated that the union "shall admit among its members Catholic workers only." 20. He claimed, moreover, that the Church exercised an excessive influence over union affairs; the same constitution declared that the union "shall have a chaplain". To Robertson such a statement:

clearly (shows) that the purpose is church control of an organization of industrial workers. Note that no resolution can pass (under the constitution cited) or be adopted without the chaplain's consent, who will in turn -- if he is in doubt -- submit same to the bishop, whose decision is final, regardless of the wishes of the membership. 21.

Robertson contrasted the discrimination of the Catholic unions with the International labour movement in which "every person engaged in a particular trade or craft is eligible for membership...Catholic and Protestant alike enjoy equal rights

19. G. D. Robertson, Montreal Gazette, March 31, 1921, p. 11 (The letter written the 28th. was published the 31st).

20. ibid., p. 11

21. ibid., p. 11

and privileges." 22. He stated, moreover, that it was anomalous that Catholics and Protestants could work together in "the same trade unions throughout all North America...in perfect harmony, except in the province of Quebec."23. In spite of such obvious bias in favour of international unionism, and in spite of his bald statement in the same letter that "The Trades and Labour Congress of Canada is and has for years both by past and present government, been the recognized legislative mouthpiece of labour in Canada", 24. Robertson still denied the Gazette's "oft-repeated inference, i.e. that the Minister of Labour was guided by the wishes of the Trades Congress." 25.

Moreover, Robertson wrote his letter in an aggressive and rather insulting tone. Note, for example, his attack on Catholic claims to representation at the Building Trades Conference:

Having voluntarily cut themselves off from intercourse with all other labour bodies...the National Catholic Union now demands that the Department of Labour force their (sic) unwelcome presence upon this conference, the only possible effect of which would be to destroy its usefulness. 26.

Such a letter obviously goes far beyond a simple recounting of the facts; Robertson was actively attacking a union philosophy with which he did not agree, Whether or not

22. ibid., p. 11

23. ibid., p. 11

24. ibid., p. 11

25. ibid., p. 11

26. ibid., p.11

one shares his sentiments, their expression in the Gazette was obviously dangerous to Robertson's image as an adequate representative of all labour. The letter was just as dangerous to the reputation of the Conservative government, already alienated from French-Canada through its past association with conscription.

Robertson's Gazette letter renewed the controversy in the press, and introduced it to Parliament. In the same issue in which it published the letter, the Gazette replied, in another editorial, attacking Robertson's bias toward Internationals. Robertson had claimed in his letter that the TLC contained national as well as international unions, and that it therefore represented the interests of all Canadian labour. The Gazette questioned this conclusion since the nationals were too tiny a proportion of total TLC membership to successfully present the Canadian viewpoint in Congress deliberations; or, as the Gazette put it:

The tail does not wag the dog, and certainly so small a tail as that to which the minister alludes could not be expected to resist the international leanings of the Trades Congress. 27.

The paper did not necessarily champion Catholic unions, but it preferred them to American-dominated internationals:

The desirability of clerical control in labour matters may, as a principle, be debatable; but as between clerical control in Quebec and the control of foreign office holders or of their Canadian representatives, the choice is not difficult to make. 28.

27. ibid., p. 10

28. ibid., p. 10

The paper then contrasted the industrial peace of Quebec with the upheavals in the rest of Canada where internationals predominated unopposed as justification for the choice it had obviously made.

After March 31, the war of words spread beyond the Montreal Gazette. On April 2, Abbe Fortin charged in Le Devoir that Robertson was prejudiced against Catholic unions, Far from isolating themselves, as Robertson claimed, the Catholic unions would cooperate with any other union group. Indeed, the proof of their cooperative spirit was their demand to be "représentées dans les mêmes commissions gouvernementales." Their stand vis-à-vis other unions was that:

Nous avons déclaré que nous étions un corps distinct, mais nous n'avons jamais fermé la porte à toute relation. 29.

He denied that the clergy made union decisions (while tacitly admitting the clergy's veto power):

...Le Ministre du Travail...serait bien en peine pour citer un seul cas allant à prouver que les décisions prises par les syndicats catholiques concernant les questions de salaires..etc. n'ont pas été prises librement par les ouvriers catholiques...De plus,...il n'est pas à ma connaissance qu' aucune décision prise jusqu'ici par les syndicats ait été l'objet d'un veto soit de la part des aumôniers soit de la part des évêques. 30.

Moreover, as Minister of Labour, it was not Robertson's place to approve or disapprove Catholic union principles:

29. Abbe Fortin, Le Devoir, April 2, 1921, p. 3.

30. ibid., p. 3

Nous ne sommes pas allés (à Ottawa) lui demander son approbation pour nos unions. 31.

Fortin stated that he and his associates had gone to Ottawa to prove publicly Robertson's prejudice, in principle, to Catholic unions:

(Les unions catholiques) connaissent depuis longtemps sa politique...Ce que les unions catholiques ont voulu obtenir par leurs demandes à Ottawa, c'est de faire donner au public les raisons pour lesquelles le ministre prend une telle attitude. 32.

Robertson's refusal to grant them representation at the Building Trades Conference, but more particularly his ill-considered letter to the Gazette, had certainly achieved this result for Fortin. The abbe could now claim that Robertson had revealed his prejudice:

Le ministre a parlé; il a fait connaître ses raisons...Ce résultat était le but visé par les syndicats catholiques à savoir: prouver qu'ils sont injustement traités par le Ministre du Travail actuel. 33.

Thus, the Catholic unions had used the request for representation at the Building Trades Conference not primarily to gain entry to the conference, but to point out Robertson's prejudice. Robertson's Gazette letter especially had assisted them in this end.

31. ibid., p. 3

32. ibid., p. 3

33. ibid., p. 3

From the newspapers, the debate spread to Parliament. Ernest Lapointe, on April 6, 1921 led the attack on Robertson. He agreed that, in international meetings, the government might select labour delegates from the most representative Canadian labour body, the TLC, but that in national meetings, such as the Building Trades Conference, every labour organization should have representation commensurate with its membership. He objected to the excessive influence of the TLC on government labour policy and attacked "the triumvirate, Robertson, Moore, and Draper" who, he said, were widely held to be "ruling labour in an autocratic manner and desire to perpetuate by all means their domination and arbitrary methods." ³⁴. Lapointe thought that Robertson's favouritism ill became his office:

Personally, the Minister of Labour is quite entitled to prefer the International Union to the other, but I say that in his public capacity...he had no right to discriminate against either union and to refuse to give (the Catholic movement) recognition proportionate to its membership... ³⁵.

On May 31, Robertson spoke in the Senate on the whole thorny question of his department's attitudes to labour organizations. He denied that the Department of Labour had "discriminated against any lawful labour organization which was carrying on lawfully."³⁶. He offered, as a demonstration of his even-handed approach, the fact that he met annually with

34. Ernest Lapointe, Hansard, April 6, 1921, p. 1636

35. ibid., p. 1633

36. G. D. Robertson, Senate Debates, May 31, 1921, p. 685.

the Catholic unions as well as with the TLC., However, he made no attempt to conceal or even qualify his objection in principle to Catholic and national dual unions. Again, as in the Gazette letter, he turned to union constitutions to prove his point. He demonstrated, once again, the Catholic constitutions' discrimination against Protestants and their determination to stand separate from the rest of organized labour. He used the OBU as an example of a national dual union,^{37.} and stressed the revolutionary intent of its constitution to prove that a national union was not necessarily desirable. And, predictably, he quoted from the constitution of the Railroad Engineers, an example of international, craft unionism, with its membership open to all religions, and its aim "to cultivate amicable relation with the employer."^{38.} These comparisons moved Senator Beaubien to exclaim:

The Minister of Labour has presented a pathetic tableau of the International Unions practically crucified between two thieves--on the one side Bolshevism, and on the other side Catholic unions.^{39.}

To this charge Robertson replied, "and the fact."^{40.} Moreover, in his Senate speech, Robertson added yet another charge against Catholic unions, that they were a barrier to national unity:

37. thus contradicting his former contention that the OBU was simply an offspring of the IWW (see Chapter VI, p. 98.)

38. G. D. Robertson, Senate Debates, May 31, 1921, p. 678.

39. C. P. Beaubien, Senate Debates, May 31, 1921, p. 684.

40. G. D. Robertson, Senate Debates, May 31, 1921, p. 684.

...In this country, where we have people of different nationalities and varying religions... it is improper and not in the interest of the State and of harmony as between people of different race and different religions to set up divisions in the industrial field and to have a Catholic and a Protestant labour union operating in the same locality. 41.

Amid all this controversy, Robertson still claimed he had treated the Catholic unions "fairly and impartially", and in a sense, he had. He annually met their representatives; he offered departmental assistance if Catholic unions and their employers in the Building Trades wished a conference; and he had sound grounds for refusing to admit them to the original Building Trades Conference. But in his Gazette letter, and his Senate statements, he displayed a prejudice against them which was neither appropriate to a Minister of all Labour, nor politically wise for an official of a government already distrusted in Quebec.

The furor caused by the Building Trades Conference made Robertson more solicitous, in future, of Catholic union demands for representation. Later in 1921, the Catholic unions complained of not being represented in the Canadian delegation to the International Labour Office. Again Robertson had an adequate excuse: supported this time by the Minister of Justice, he pointed out that Article 389 of the Versailles Treaty stated that labour delegates for international conferences should be

41. ibid., p. 680

42. M.P., Robertson to Meighen, April 8, 1921, No. 18584.

chosen from the most representative labour body in each country. However, perhaps remembering the controversy of the previous spring, Robertson appointed a Catholic union representative as advisor to one of the government delegates. 43.

But such action indicates no change in his general attitude to Catholic unionism. He did not, for example, accept the view of Abbe Fortin that "nos unions nationales et catholiques sont celles qui ont le plus contribué a maintenir l'ordre public." 44. Thus, in July 1921, Robertson noted, with a sense of vindication, a violent fireman and police strike in Quebec city which necessitated the calling out of the militia four times in 48 hours:

So we see men who are forbidden by the law of their province to strike, who are members of the lauded National Catholic Union which obligates its members not to strike; right in the stronghold of the Union....defying all. 45.

Moreover, though the church was committed to exercising a social influence over businessmen as well as workers, Robertson did not see any evidence of it:

why not exercise some influence over employers, and have them conduct themselves in keeping the same religious doctrine? 46.

43. H. A. Logan, Trade Unions in Canada, p. 597.

44. Abbe Fortin, Le Devoir, April 2, 1921, p. 3.

45. M.P., Robertson to Meighen, July 1, 1921, No. 24571.

46. ibid., No. 24571.

These sentiments, written after the Building Trades controversy, indicate that Robertson had in no way altered his opinion of the Catholic movement, though, as mentioned, in future, he displayed a healthier respect for its capacity to cause him trouble. His appointment of a Catholic union advisor to the ILO delegation indicates a growing political wisdom rather than a change of attitude.

It is clear, then, that Robertson sought to advance the cause of international unionism against even its non-radical adversaries. He thought national dual unions ineffectual at best and potential OBU allies at worst. He therefore ignored them when possible, or, as in the case of the CBRE, gave them the minimum of government assistance. He objected to the clerical domination and discrimination against non-Catholics which characterized the Quebec Catholic unions, and publicly stated his objections.

While his animosity toward the dual and Catholic unions was not expressed in aggressive action as in the case of the OBU, his hostility was, nevertheless, a matter of public record, and his views were hardly likely to inspire the confidence of the Catholic and dual unions in the Conservative government's impartiality. Moreover, whether or not one agrees with his objections, their public expression ill became a Minister of all Labour. His public hostility to the Catholic and dual unions no doubt gratified the international movement, but they did not serve the best interests of the Conservative government to which he was also bound.

C O N C L U S I O N

The success of any man's career is dependent on two factors: his individual ability, and the degree to which his beliefs fit the needs and desires of the society within which he works. Gideon Decker Robertson was obviously a man of considerable ability - an able administrator, a skilled mediator - and his ability was rewarded by his promotion within his own union and in the federal government.

But his commitment to a non-radical form of unionism, and his willingness to work within the existing political system were equally as important as his ability in making him an acceptable national representative of labour both to most unionists and to the government. Finally, circumstances entirely beyond his control - improved relations between international unions and the Conservative government made possible his rise to prominence.

As labour's representative in government, Robertson's achievements were limited less by his own ability and desires than by the Canadian labour movement's relative weakness and consequent inability to force the government into beneficial action. Despite this limitation, Robertson achieved substantial gains for labour in general, but more particularly, for the international craft movement he personally espoused.

Gideon Robertson's philosophy of unionism, derived first from his experience in the Order of Railroad Telegraphers, did not change significantly at any time during his career as either union executive or politician. His work as the chief Canadian executive of an international union convinced him of the value and effectiveness to workers of a union which transcended national boundaries, cultural, linguistic and religious differences. He could, then, never accept the rivalry of national dual unions or Catholic unions, which sought to divide the basic unity of worker interests for reasons of nationalism and religion -- issues which, to him, were essentially irrelevant to the labour movement.

He believed, like the ORT, that craft organization was the most efficient method of enrolling workers, as each craft union united men of similar skills, functions, interests and needs. Such a belief led him to oppose the industrial principle when he encountered it in Winnipeg in 1919. By his collective bargaining agreement, he prevented the Winnipeg Metal Trades Council from representing various crafts in negotiation with employers, and thus restored the traditional bargaining by individual craft unions representing the workers of each trade.

Most important, he believed that employer and employee complemented each other's efforts in industrial production, and that, therefore, the cooperative spirit between worker and manager was to be preserved and fostered. Robertson's implacable

opposition to the One Big Union is logical in view of this belief; he was bound to oppose strenuously any organization which held that between the producing class and the exploiting class, there were no grounds for cooperation. But his belief in the cooperative principle did not lead him solely to a negative response; that is, simply to an attack on any opposed philosophy. Indeed, much of his career was devoted to the active promotion of cooperation between business and labour. He never lost faith in the value of negotiation in good faith, by reasonable men, as the means to effect a just settlement, and thereby prove that employer and employee could co-exist amicably.

Examples of this abiding belief in calm, reasoned negotiation are everywhere evident. He strongly supported the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act which provided, in essence, a last opportunity for workers and owners to present their cases through their representative before resorting to a strike or lockout, which would not only interfere with the public good but would also render both sides intransigent and unwilling to compromise. The contract which he worked out in the Winnipeg Civic Strike of 1918 and the Robertson Agreement in the British Columbia shipbuilding dispute of the same year both provided for continuous negotiation as a means to prevent further strikes: in the Winnipeg settlement, through a permanent grievance committee; in Vancouver, through a permanent mediator. Again, through Industrial Councils, Robertson

hoped to provide permanent forums in industry for the settlement of grievances and demands as they arose.

However, Robertson's belief in the cooperative spirit of worker and manager was, at times, unrealistic. In his industrial council plans, he obviously thought that businessmen were sufficiently broad in outlook to surrender voluntarily some of their power of decision-making to their employees in the interests of industrial harmony. For his part, he had enough trust in managers to believe that they would not take advantage of unorganized workers in industrial councils and that, therefore:

where organizations among the workmen do not exist, that fact should be no bar to the establishment of an industrial council. 1.

Such a statement displays an excessive and unwarranted trust in the good faith and social conscience of business. Robertson was almost certainly wrong to assume that, without the pressure of a union to provide a countervailing force, managers would concede to workers a meaningful share of decision-making in an industrial council. At the same time, Robertson's willingness to make such a concession is a measure of the length to which he would go to establish councils as a vehicle for continuous negotiation.

Robertson harboured none of the distrust of government which characterized a wide gamut of labour men from the TLC to the OBU. While the majority of even the conservative union

1. G. D. Robertson, Address to the Conference on Industrial Relations, Labour Gazette, 1921, p. 544.

movement, typified by the internationals of the TLC, opposed the IDI Act as an attempt to infringe on labour's freedom of action, Robertson warmly endorsed it, even though it entailed government intervention in labour disputes. He obviously believed in the impartiality of the government and in its sincere desire to achieve settlements just to both sides. His willingness to serve in the Senate and the Cabinet, while it displays his ambition, also indicates a belief that a labour representative would be given an honest hearing within the existing political structure.

At the same time, the growing power of labour and the heightened conservatism of the largest Canadian labour body, the TLC, after its 1918 purge of the radical wing, made the Borden government more amenable to granting labour's increased recognition. Robertson's long experience as a non-radical unionist, and his views on the IDI Act and conscription made him an obvious choice to symbolize the government's new-found concern for labour. He was, consequently, appointed to the Senate and then to the Cabinet.

As a Senator, Robertson was of benefit to the whole labour movement simply as worker representative; his was a lonely voice of reason in a Chamber not notable for its friendliness to the movement. In spite of the very modest Conservative government record in labour matters, Senator after Senator bemoaned labour's

dictation to, and dominance of, Canada and its government.².

Robertson helped balance the record, defending labour's reputation, basic good sense, and loyalty (especially during the war). After his appointment to the Cabinet, his enhanced prestige served as an even better brake to Senate reactionaries, since his defence of labour's good name had the authority of the government behind it.

As Minister without Portfolio, he was instrumental in preserving industrial peace coupled with fair contracts for labour to the benefit of both the government's war effort and the workers he represented. As Minister of Labour, the benefits which he achieved for the whole labour movement were meager: a Technical Education Act and limited federal commitment to unemployment relief. Indirectly, he helped to achieve amendments to the Immigration Act barring Orientals, and reducing the influx of competitive European labour during a period of high unemployment. He made, however, no progress toward the introduction of a social welfare program (unless

2. Senator Bradbury, Senate Debates, May 7, 1920, p. 387 --
"The question is whether we in this Parliament are going to be dictated to by labour or any other organization."

Senator Belcourt, Senate Debates, May 27, 1920, p. 424 deplored "the tendency... nowadays in Canada...of pandering to and endeavouring to meet all the wishes of the labour men in this country."

Senator Milne, Senate Debates, May 31, 1921, p. 683 --
"(The Americans) will not stand any longer for dictation by the labour element." He went on to suggest that Canadians shouldn't either.

one chooses to define Robertson's departmental study as significant progress) and was unable to influence the government to enforce the right to organize, collective bargaining, or the eight-hour day. Some of these questions were primarily provincial responsibilities, or else involved long-term planning before legislation could be presented; but at least as significant a factor in the government's refusal to act on them during Robertson's tenure of office was political consideration: though it was prepared to establish a closer rapport, especially with the international labour movement, it was not ready to introduce potentially controversial legislation solely to please organized labour, which still represented but a small proportion of all Canadians. ³. Robertson recognized this fact, and therefore always sought support for his innovations from business as well as labour, with notable success in his Technical Education Act and unemployment relief plan. ⁴. The dearth of government benefits to labour during Robertson's tenure as Minister of Labour is, therefore, attributable not to lack of zeal on his part but to lack of political power among organized workers and to the failure of unions and business to come to terms on questions such as the eight-hour

3. In 1921, the Canadian population was 8,787,949 (M.C. Urquhart, ed., Historical Statistics of Canada, p. 19) Unionized workers, however, numbered only 310,000 (Labour Organization in Canada, 1921, p.8.)

4. He urged labour to do likewise as the best means of achieving its ends:

The Minister of Labour...made special appeal for workers and employers to get together whenever possible and agree on policies which they desired the government to adopt and felt sure that, under these circumstances, there would be very little difficulty in having legislation enacted, pointing out that it was by such method the Unemployment Service, Technical Education and other progressive measures had been brought about. (TLC Report, 1921, p. 6.)

day, collective bargaining, etc.

Likely the greatest effect of Robertson's participation in the Conservative government lay in the support he lent to the international craft unions within the Canadian labour movement. He helped restore them to primacy in the West through his intervention in the Winnipeg Strike and in the Alberta-British Columbia coalfields. Though Minister of all Labour in theory, his partisan attacks on the Catholic unions and the national dual unions indicate that, in practice, as the Montreal Gazette had charged, he was Minister of Labour Internationally Organized. He believed that only through the powerful internationals, and their prime agent the TLC, could labour's voice be clearly heard, and that other organizations, even if non-radical, simply obscured the issue. This view is nowhere more evident than in his address to the 1919 TLC convention:

In all forms of organization, there must be order and control...If a government of this, or any other country is going to successfully and satisfactorily cooperate with labour it must be through some central agency...The Government of Canada, and, I am sure all the provincial governments, share that view that the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada is the real organized mouthpiece of labour in this country, and is recognized as such. 5.

This statement represents Robertson's personal view--and betrays his personal loyalties; the government as a whole was not prepared to go quite so far in recognizing the Congress' right to speak for Canadian labour. At the 1920 convention, Prime Minister Arthur

Meighen admitted only that "This Congress represents a large proportion of organized labour in Canada." However, he did concede that "it is the principal functioning body for trade unionism in this country similar to the American Federation of Labour in the United States." ⁶. Thus, while not acknowledging the TLC's primacy to the same extent as Robertson was prepared to do, Meighen tacitly recognized the power of its voice in labour affairs.

But there is a much more graphic illustration than Meighen's words of the new respect of the Conservative government for the international union movement: in 1921, the Immigration Act was amended to waive the usual immigration requirements for international union organizers of American citizenship sent to work in Canada. ⁷, Though in itself a rather minor and unpublicized government action, the amendment is highly significant when contrasted with the immigration amendment bill of 1903 presented by Conservative Senator James Lougheed which sought to imprison American union representatives involved in Canadian labour disputes. ⁸. It also represents a notable contrast to Borden's objection toward international unions as expressed in 1907. ⁹. In 1903 and 1907, leading Conservatives had opposed the international connection, and attempted to limit by law the influence of American-based unions

6. TLC Report, 1920, P. 145.

7. Department of Labour, Labour Legislation in Canada, 1921, p. 10

8. See Introduction, p. 8.

9. See Introduction, p. 7-8.

on Canadian workers. By 1921, the Conservative government was facilitating the expansion of the internationals. Obviously, there had been a dramatic alteration in the Conservative attitude toward the international craft union movement between 1903 and 1921. The 1921 Immigration amendment is, therefore, symbolic of the new rapport between the Conservative government and the international movement.

No doubt the change of heart illustrated by this amendment stemmed from the government's recognition that the internationals did in fact hold the allegiance of most organized Canadian workers, as the Catholic and national dual unions did not. Moreover the Conservatives came to recognize that the international unions, and their spokesman, the TLC, were prepared to work within the established economic system, as the Canadian-organized One Big Union was not. Therefore, desiring, after 1917, closer ties with a significant and cooperative representative of organized labour, the Conservatives really had no alternative to a rapprochement with the TLC and the internationals. Through the entente the Conservatives probably hoped to garner votes and to prevent another breakdown in communications such as had produced the conscription crisis. But no doubt they also sought to promote a form of unionism committed to working within the capitalist system, thereby alleviating the threat of industrial disputes leading to political violence or even revolution. For its part, international craft unionism gained a voice in government (through Robertson), and on government boards and committees; some minor legislative aims; and some major assistance

in combatting rival union philosophies.

Gideon Decker Robertson was the symbol and agent of Conservative government - international labour cooperation. When the two were in accord, Robertson, as agent of both, exercised considerable power, as in his destruction of the OBU in District 18. His authority had, however, narrow bounds: for example, without the active mutual support of either government or TLC, his Industrial Council plan was stillborn. His was not, therefore, the power of a leader able to draw support even from reluctant followers; but rather that of an ambassador, or a mediator, who presents and argues the case of each side to the other. This was a role that Robertson, by both experience and temperament, was thoroughly capable of filling. He served both sides of the accord conscientiously; indeed, the OBU, the Catholic and the dual unions would no doubt say he served international craft unionism too conscientiously. But every man in public office espouses, and is the prisoner of, a particular philosophy. Robertson truly believed that the craft, international cooperative labour movement best served the Canadian worker and Canadian society. His actions as a member of the Conservative government reflected this belief. Within the limits of his union philosophy, Gideon Robertson faithfully served his notion of the Canadian labour movement by forwarding the alliance of the Conservative government and international craft unionism.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Unfortunately, there is no special collection of Robertson Papers. Therefore, in researching the thesis, it was necessary to rely heavily on letters to, by, or about Robertson found among the papers of other public figures, especially those of Sir Robert Borden and Arthur Meighen.

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