

Reformational organisations for labour relations

R. Coletto

School for Philosophy, Potchefstroom Campus,
North-West University

The rich and the poor meet together:
the Lord is the creator of them both.
(Prov. 22:2.)

Background

In a previous short article I have mentioned a few organisations dealing with politics on the basis of a Christian-reformational program. The opportunity is now available to see whether similar organisations have been established to deal with labour issues.

A classical definition states that labour (or trade) unions are organisations of workers (and union leaders) aiming at negotiating wages and working conditions with the employer. Unions also raise demands and settle grievances in favour of their members. Without mentioning the many types of unions, the different policies and the eventual links with political parties, we can notice that the first union-like societies date back to the Middle Ages. Modern unions emerged for the first time in Europe and became important during the Industrial Revolution, when the workers' power of negotiation was rapidly declining.

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important writings were delivered to encourage the Christian communities to take more seriously their contribution to and involvement in socio-cultural issues. For the Catholic part, one should mention the encyclical letter *Humani Generis* by Pope Leo XIII. On the reformed front, an important text was Abraham Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism*. It was in that context and time that the first Christian unions were organised in the Netherlands. Before coming to these, I would, however, like to begin from the Canadian experience. Just like in the previous article, I limit my focus to the neo-Calvinist or reformational organisations.

Canada: the CLAC

• The beginnings

The life of the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC) is an example of what it means to persevere in the midst of opposition. The CLAC was founded in 1952 mainly by immigrants from Europe, who were used to a consolidated system of trade unions. The first opposition to the idea of a Christian union came from the Christian ranks: opposition from the Evangelicals who did not want too much involvement in worldly affairs; opposition from Liberals who regarded the union as divisive of the workers' common good; opposition from other groups who were allergic both to the biblical revelation and the creational order as sources of normativity.

But the CLAC wanted to be a Christian voice in the field of labour relations and eventually it managed to get established.

In 1954, it sought to get legal recognition from the Ontario Labour Relations Board. This time the opposition came from the magistrates: the first application was rejected on the basis that a Christian union was discriminatory on the basis of creed. In fact, its constitution spoke of Christian (social) principles as the foundation of the union's policies. A few other attempts at getting recognition failed during the 1950s.

In 1957, out of discouragement, some of the members started suggesting that the Christian character of the CLAC should be dropped, but the idea was resisted. Instead, it was decided to appeal to the Ontario Supreme Court. Their perseverance was rewarded in 1963. Chief Justice J.C. Mc Ruer ruled that the Labour Relations Board was wrong in denying certification to the CLAC. In Mc Ruer's words, that decision would have implied:

... that a union that requires no ethical or moral standards and opens its meetings by reading from Karl Marx and singing the Red International might be certified, but one that permits the practices here in question could not be.

Incidentally, Justice McRuer noticed that the Labour Relations Board had declared the opening of a union meeting with prayer to be unlawful, while the law concerned was passed during a session of Parliament which had been opened with prayer! He concluded that the intention of the legislation was not fairly reflected in the previous ruling of the Labour Relations Board.

• The context and the principles

Thus CLAC started its adventure, knowing very well that being a Christian union entailed much more than opening its meetings with a hymn or a prayer. CLAC's Christianity was busy with the content, not only with the form. The Canadian labour scene was a world dominated by democratic unions, so democratic that they immediately provided the next opposition front to the young organisation. The legal framework of Canada is always keen to protect the right of association, except when it comes to unions. In this case the workers are compelled to join the union which obtains the majority of subscriptions

(in some cases as little as 15%). We will return on this issue below.

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The biblical principles underlying CLAC's view of man and labour centred around public justice, stewardship, sphere sovereignty, confessional and structural pluralism. This inspired a model for action which differed from the class-struggle model. It also differed from what CLAC defines as the *adversarial system*, in which workers and employers are forever engaged in a struggle over the economic pie. The CLAC-model opposes also the economicist view that work is basically a necessary evil and its sole purpose is the maximisation of wages or profits. The CLAC promotes a model in which workers must be given responsibility and be recognised as partners of the enterprise having a say on how it should be run. Without such responsibility, it is argued, one cannot speak of a real work-community. In addition, the CLAC preferred negotiation to strike and favoured pluralism among trade unions.

North American trade-unions have never enjoyed great popularity and they represent only some 20% to 35% of the workers. In Canada each company is obliged by law to deal with the union that signs up the majority of its employees. The policy is known as closed shops: the workers too have to join the majority-union or face enormous challenges. Sometimes workers must choose a certain union as a condition for employment.

In opposition to this system, wherever the CLAC obtains the majority of supporters, it does not accept subscription fees from the members of other unions (until now a unilateral decision). Although such payments are received (to avoid allegations of

creating the so-called free ride problem) the CLAC negotiates to devolve such revenues to some help-organisation chosen by the worker.

According to the CLAC, the adversarial system has turned collective bargaining into a reductionist power-struggle over economic issues. In this situation Canadian trade unionists preach workers' solidarity mainly in terms of a united front against the employers. At the same time they are adversaries of rival trade unions who adhere to different principles or prefer other approaches and methods. The Canadian unions have thus become monopolistic in character and opposed to pluralism. In addition, they oppose the emancipation of workers as partners of an enterprise (otherwise they would identify more with the company than with the union). The two parties must remain implacable foes.

A few years ago Harry Antonides wrote that such policy is "a violation of the workers' fundamental freedom of association and is contrary to the elementary standards of a just and free society". In some cases Christian workers were firmly opposed to some of the policies of their unions and have, sometimes at great personal cost, fought valiantly to defend their freedom of association. "Invariably" says Antonides, "the unions have shown no respect for such deeply held convictions (...) They have, in fact, demanded that these workers be fired!"

- **The people, the numbers ...**

Antonides is among the brave leaders who have represented the CLAC for several decades. Let us also remember Edward Vanderkloet together with several Christian academics who have supported the CLAC through their publications. Among them one finds for example Calvin Seerveld, Bernard Zylstra and Evan Runner (see his classic, *Can Canada tolerate the CLAC? The Akille's heel of a democratic society*). CLAC has also published its own journal, *The Guide* six times per year for the last 50 years.

The CLAC is now present in all Canadian provinces, it employs some 150 staff members in eleven provincial offices and it is one of the few Canadian unions which

are still growing. Founded by a few members in 1954, it counted around 5 000 members in 1978. In 1990 it doubled its numbers. In 1995 it had around 14 000 members. Today it has reached 50 000 members, including those who sign for solidarity.

The solidarity project proceeds as follows. In some cases, members support the CLAC with subscription fees even though, due to the "fraternal" system described above, they cannot have any benefit from their payment, no representation and no other advantage. Considering the situation, therefore, one can say that the membership of the CLAC has reached a modest yet more than significant number.

A quick look at the web will be sufficient to find out how the "democratic" unions are ready to demonise CLAC and its principles. This is hardly surprising. When such attacks are insufficient, since 1975, boycotts, discrimination and even arson have been used against workers choosing the wrong union. But in its 50 years of life, the CLAC has proven to be a "hard nut to crack". In its struggles it has frequently asked for help from older reformed trade-unions, based in the Netherlands.

The Dutch experience

- **The Federation of the Christian Trade Unions**

The Federation of the Christian Trade Unions in the Netherlands (Christelijk Nationaal Vakverbond – CNV) had a more quiet existence. If CLAC has reached 50 years of service, the CNV has reached 100 years. It was born in May 1909 and it was an interconfessional union which aimed at representing both Protestant and Roman Catholic workers. However, in 1912 the Dutch Bishops convinced the Catholic workers to establish their own union (RKWV). After the Second World War there were attempts at founding one single federation of unions, but in 1974 the CNV abandoned the negotiations. In 1976 the Socialist and the Catholic unions merged into the FNV. A few years later Arije Oordijk, then secretary general of CNV, wrote an article in which he noticed how the FNV was gradually moving towards secular positions, while the CNV was consequent to its principles.

What are those principles? The CNV aims at maintaining “justice, solidarity and stewardship” which translate into “three practical objectives: participation, shared responsibility and sustainability”. The CNV aims at promoting justice irrespective of race, gender, age, religion or social status. Solidarity, according to the CNV, “reaches further than people’s front doors or the company’s gates”. The CNV operates towards a society where people can take part in social and labour processes. Sustainability is about a balanced economic growth that takes into account the interests of the future generations.

The CNV is one of the largest unions in the Netherlands, with a support base of 355 000 members. Eleven unions are affiliated to the CNV federation, working in sectors like the manufacturing industry, transport, police, education and health care.

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The CNV started off as a moderate Christian-democratic union, opposed to class-struggle and preferring negotiating with the employers over strikes. Gradually, therefore, it oriented itself towards cooperation with the employer’s organisations. This gives us an opportunity to look at a few Christian unions of employers (or including employers).

- **Christian unions of/including employers**

The Dutch Union of Christian Employers (Nederlands Christelijk Werkgeversverbond – NCW) was founded to include both protestant and catholic employers. In 1996 it merged with the Verbond van Nederlandse Ondernemingen (VNO), of Liberal inspiration. The union is now indicated by the acronym NCW-VNO. In my opinion the move was not the best one could devise. References to the Christian character of

NCW are rapidly disappearing from websites, publications and presentations of NCW. It seems to me it won’t take long before the process of secularisation will put to an end the Christian character of an institution which played a decent role in the history of reformational organisations. The loss of Christian vision seems to be a much greater challenge than opposition from rival unions.

By way of consolation, we may turn to the Reformational Social Union (Reformatorisch Maatschappelijke Unie – RMU), an organisation of both employers and employees counting 16 000 members in 2007. The RMU finds its principal basis in “the Bible and the three unitary Confessions of faith”. Founded only in 1983 the RMU seems to attract especially the younger generations: 40% of its members are below 35 years of age and 80% are below 55. The growth rate has been 8% average per year. The favourite party among its members is the Reformed Political Party (SGP).

Something in the same line is offered by the Reformed Social Union (Gereformeerd Maatschappelijk Verbond – GMV) based in Zwolle, an organisation related to the Reformed “Vrijgemaakt” Churches and established in 1952 to welcome both workers and employers. This union serves 12 000 members. Once again, academics played some role. The union is inspired by the solidarist-organic ideas of J.C. Sikkel (1855-1920) and P.S. Gerbrandy (1885-1961).

Concluding remarks

The principles and policies of reformational organisations, far from being outdated or even reactionary, often constitute more viable, pluralist and just alternatives.

With this, we have mentioned the main reformational organisations in the field of labour relations. I think there are good reasons to be thankful for these achievements and service-opportunities.

Unfortunately similar organisations are not present in the USA or in other countries with a considerable presence of reformational Christians. However, I think one may conclude that, globally speaking, the reformational movement has kept its promise. And once again, the principles and policies of reformational organisa-

tions, far from being outdated or even reactionary (as some would like to imagine), often constitute more viable, pluralist and just alternatives.