Government's Due To The Worker Likely To Be Defined Soon In Congress

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The modern working man lives and works in the context of a complex society and within the restrictions of a complex and highly advanced technology. Since the industrial revolution, the worker who supplies the labor and the investor who supplies the capital and owns the physical plant in which the work is done have become widely separated. With the increase in size and complexity of our factories and the growth of the stockholder as a supplier of capital, a class of managers and foremen has been introduced which, often apart from the considerations of personal ownership, administers a vast and largely impersonal army of men and machines. These factors, products of mass manufacturing and the resultant need for high efficiency, have brought about the formation and development of specialized methods of labor-management relations and specialized organizations for carrying them out.

ALL OF THIS has been to some extent recognized for some time, both in law and in literature. It is the contention of the proponents of the social and labor proposals currently being considered by Congress that the legal and practical framework which surrounds the worker, his union, and his job has not yet fully adjusted itself to contemporary economic conditions.

In the modern factory, the simple tools of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been replaced by complex machines. Since it is possible by mechanization to reduce the number of workmen as well as the skills required of them, the machine has come to symbolize the fact that the worker no longer controls the conditions of his work. The relationship between machinery and men cannot be characterized as one of competition, but it is clear that the rate and quality of work, the length of the working day, the location of employment are tending to become increasingly standardized. And the standardization takes place most often in relation to the demands of machine technology.

IN ADDITION, THE modern worker (and, with him, the modern American economy) is confronted with the rapid fluctuation and long-range shifts of the national economy. American participation in the world-wide economy, much of which is geared to lower living standards and lower prices, makes the position of American industry often even more precarious. Large numbers of low and middle income laboring people face the constant threat of either temporary or permanent unemployment, or both. Sometimes the unemployment is brought about by economic recession, when mechanization and automation, and sometimes by industrial obsolescence. But telling the unemployed in West Virginia that arbitrary stimulation of coal mining would constitute artificial stimulation of an industry whose products have been replaced by more modern fuels will neither pay their grocery bills nor remove the drag they place upon the whole economy. The problem becomes even more serious when unemployment of this type is coupled with a business slow down in the rest of the country.

CAUGHT IN THE squeeze of machines, technology and the economy, none of which he claims, either he or his union can control, the worker turns to the government for help. It is his instinctive belief that the problems he faces are national rather than local that leads him to turn to the Federal Government. And it is the politician's instinctive belief, both that the worker is right and that he controls a large and important segment of the electorate, that leads him to propose such programs.

In general, governmental programs are of two kinds: those which may be classed as regulation and those which may be classed as relief in an economic sense. Regulatory schemes include restrictions on hours and working conditions, provisions for a minimum wage and guarantee of union bargaining rights as well as attempts to maintain a stable economy such as the controls imposed by the Federal Reserve Board. Welfare programs include aid to depressed areas, unemployment benefits, medical insurance, and social security.

ALTHOUGH THE worker gains both expression and political potency through the use of his union, his influence on the domestic economy is powerful without recourse to large-scale organization. The Administration's proposal of a $1.25 minimum wage, for example, will not affect the majority of union members whose standard pay scale is much higher than this minimum figure. While there may well be controversy about the specific nature of the programs to be adopted, it is a fact of modern political life that the government bears a responsibility to the worker, and it is this session of Congress that that responsibility is likely to be defined in a broader and more comprehensive manner than ever before.