

To-day Trade Union activity in the Federation of Malaya and Singapore occupies a position of major prominence on the industrial scene. Arising as the workers' own organization, these Unions have brought about a great social change.

Prior to the appearance of trade unions, decisions in the firm or organisation were entirely the province of the employer. His was the right to "hire and fire", to decide on wages, hours of work and conditions of employment. This right gave the employer great personal and economic power over his workmen. The workers were looked upon merely as tools or means towards achieving the goals of the organization. Their attitudes and problems received little, if any, consideration.

The emergence of trade unions has resulted in a transformation which has alleviated the employees from their completely dependent and insecure position to one where they are able to deliberate upon and influence matters which affect their welfare directly. Collective bargaining has replaced the undisputed word of the management over a wide range of functions that were formerly the domain of the employer. As individual workers, they had been hesitant to stand up for their rights. But as Union members, the confidence that the Union will back them and protect them has encouraged them to speak without fear. It has meant that employers have to be more cautious in their decisions, especially those affecting their employees. In short, the exploitation of the workers is no longer tolerated.

Trade Unions have not only increased in size but also in ~~number~~.

Various trade unions have been established to protect the workers employed in the different forms of organisations - namely, banks, public and civil services, mines, plantations, agency houses, retail and departmental stores, etc. Almost every week one reads about one Union or another serving notice of claims to the employers concerned on behalf of their Union members. When employers become reluctant to agree or to even consider these claims, the Union encourages its members to start a work-to-rule campaign or even decides to go on strike.

Bearing in mind the considerable impact that Trade Unionism has brought about, it would be interesting and informative to gauge the effects, good and bad, which trade union activity has brought about, to assess how far it has benefitted the workers, and to appraise the maturity of the Trade Union Movement itself. It is with this purpose that we shall examine certain collective Agreements which have been signed by the employers of some Agency Houses in Singapore.¹ Most of the agency houses under study have recognised the Singapore Business Houses Employees' Union as the collective negotiating body for their employees, relative to rates of pay, hours of work and other conditions of employment. Mansfield & Co., Ltd., however has made a collective Agreement with Mansfield Local Employees' Union.²

1 For a list of the Agency Houses under study refer to Appendix I.

2 Government Gazette Supplement No. 245, State of Singapore, dated 9th November, 1962.

The exceptions to the employees covered by these Agreements are usually the executive staff, confidential secretaries, contract staff, expatriate officers and, in some cases, cadets and trainees. Each Agreement is to remain in force for two years from the date of agreement. After the expiry of two years, the Agreement shall continue in force until determined by (in most cases) three months' notice in writing from either party. It is further agreed that during the currency of the Agreement, neither the Company nor the Union shall seek to vary, modify or annul any of its terms in any way whatsoever, except in accordance with the provisions of the Industrial Relations Ordinance, 1960.

To maintain aⁿ atmosphere of co-operation, the Company promises to advise the Union before changes in the general conditions of employment are put into effect. On its part, the Union is obliged to inform the Company before it takes action of any kind on behalf of or involving the staff of the Company.