

# Convention News

## SOCIAL MISSION OF THE CHURCH

ON June 30, Group 7 had what was probably its most successful meeting so far. The matter under discussion was chapter IV of the draft document: Employment and Working Life. An encouraging feature of the discussions was the number of young workers who spoke so eloquently about their problems and who shared with the Group their suggestions about what the Church could and should do to help bring about an improvement in the lot of workers in Hong Kong's factories.

The first speaker was a member of the Y.C.W. who expressed the hope that from the discussions there would emerge guiding principles for solving workers' problems; as soon as these principles have been formulated, he said, their application to Hong Kong should be studied and action to implement them considered. Ever since the time of Leo XIII, the Church has had to hand a series of sound social principles, but it has done little to promote them. Various non-religious international organisations have accepted these same principles, he added, and are pushing them with far greater zeal than Catholics: with us there is a serious gap between faith and action.

A priest said that employers should be urged to give as much day-release time as possible (preferably with pay) to enable their employees to attend seminars on workers' problems, etc. He appealed for facts and figures concerning profits and productivity, to make it possible to judge whether increased prices must be the inevitable consequence of increased wages. This same speaker questioned the distinction that some others had made between the just wage and the generous wage, arguing that papal teaching would seem to look on the generous wage as the only just one in a prosperous society. Finally, he stressed the social undesirability of women and children being forced to work: the family should be able to live a life of decent comfort on the wage packet brought home by the family wage-earner.

Another delegate took up this last point and asked whether this principle applies to all families irrespective of size: being the father of 11 children he had more than an academic interest in the matter! Another speaker stated that many factors contribute towards determining what wage a man should get, the number of his dependents being one of these. He warned against the worker's productivity becoming the sole factor to be considered: this would be to reduce the human person to the level of a machine.

Another objection was raised against the distinction made between the just and the generous wage, but from a different point of view. The speaker felt that we should think in terms of the just wage only: which would not of course prevent workers asking for a generous wage; but the employers ought not be for-

ced to give what would cause them hardship. Moreover we should stress that employers have the right to expect an honest day's work from their employees.

Employers should assist their workers to further their education not only by giving them time off to do so, but also by helping them financially; better educated workers are an asset to any firm: this was the view of a delegate who also suggested the setting up a research centre to gather statistics and carry out scientifically prepared surveys; hitherto, she stated, our social programmes have been drawn up without careful planning based on solidly established facts.

A worker pointed to a serious obstacle in the way of achieving an adequate family wage for adult workers, namely the practice of employing in factories young boys who, because of their age, need not be paid full adult wages. The speaker gave the example of the electronics factory where he works: out of a total of 400 employees, more than 200 fall into this category. Many are under 14 years of age, having deceived the management about their age in order to get employment. These young people, the delegate added, face numerous problems in adjusting themselves to the adult world: and very many fail to do so. He concluded by saying that young workers in Hong Kong seldom get more than \$400: with this salary they can perhaps contribute something to the support of their parents, brothers and sisters, but cannot set aside any money with a view to marrying and having a family of their own some day. Another speaker supported the suggestion for a research centre: individual workers, he said, had told the Group of conditions in their factories: but how representative were these accounts? While undoubtedly many workers are exploited by management, examples could also be quoted of factories where the workers have no problems, being well treated and well paid. Where workers are badly treated, sometimes they have only themselves to blame for this situation.

## IMPERFECTIONS OF LABOUR LEGISLATION

A young worker challenged a number of the points that are made in one of the additional documents that form the basis of the discussion. She objected, for example, to a statement which seemed to her to imply that Hong Kong's labour legislation is wellnigh perfect; then she asked, how the figure of HK\$654, quoted as "the average (median) household income of 1967" had been arrived at. Finally, she rejected the suggestion that, since the Hong Kong employer likes to be thought of as one who treats his workmen generously, "the resistance to demands for generosity might be smaller than imagined."

Another young lady who works in a textile factory, agreed

with her colleague in rejecting the suggestion that our labour legislation is perfect. She quoted examples from recent labour disputes to point out the "short-comings and contradictions" of Hong Kong's labour laws. According to the law, she said, striking workers have the right to invite other workers to join them in strike action. She described how, in a recent dispute, a carload of workers approached a factory where many of the workers were on strike: the only way for the strikers to exercise their right of inviting their fellow-workers to join them was to stop the car and speak with the occupants; however, when they tried to do this they were arrested for illegal obstruction. In another case employees of a wig factory had been trying in vain for four or five days to get an opportunity to meet their employers to open negotiations with them over their grievances; they went to the Labour Department but nothing came of it. Usually, this same speaker asserted, labour disputes end with the worker coming off second best; the workers have few friends to champion their cause; they are easily scared of being branded as political agitators.

A priest who works in a factory made the following points: in the factory where he works, Pakistani workers are discriminated against; Government should not be so easily influenced by the laissez-faire theories of industrialists; we should not exaggerate the threat of a serious falling off in the rate of foreign investment resulting from improvement in the wages and working conditions of our workers. The speaker then quoted the labour ordinance regarding the permitted working hours of women and children and said that Government and the Church should insist that the

stipulations of the ordinance be everywhere observed. He added that factories should be encouraged to set up schools and organise courses for their workers; he stressed the need for workers to organise themselves in order to protect their human rights as enshrined in the U.N. Declaration of Rights, in face of the opposition of unscrupulous industrialists. It is important, he concluded, to educate workers away from violence and to train them to make use of the democratic processes, so that there can be dialogue between Government, employers, workers and public opinion: this the speaker saw as the most urgent task of the Church in the '70's.

The last speaker of the evening raised the practical difficulty of assessing what a family living wage amounted to. He referred to the delegate with a family of 11 children: is he to get a higher salary than the Governor, who has only one daughter? He asked. Should a father who is the family's sole breadwinner get the same as a father whose wife is also gainfully employed? He thought that the Church should advocate legislation for the introduction of a minimum wage: young workers are so badly paid, he asserted, that the prospects of their being able to get married and have a family of their own are very remote. A final point he made concerned the tendency of employers to engage daily-paid rather than monthly-paid workers, since they are easier to get rid of. It is of course only fair, he concluded, that factories should determine a probationary period, but once this has been completed, workers should be employed on a permanent basis and raised to the status of monthly paid workers; this is very important for enabling them to retain a sense of their dignity.

## Programme of forthcoming meetings of Working Groups

Place: Catholic Centre, Hong Kong. Time: 8-10 p.m.  
Religious : (No Meeting)  
Evangelisation : Monday, July 13  
Social Mission of the Church: Tuesday, July 14  
Communications Media : Wednesday, July 15  
Ecumenism : Thursday, July 16  
Government of the Diocese : Friday, July 17

**N.B. After July 17 there will be no further meetings of the Diocesan Convention until August 17.**