



**“The right to strike is conceded, but...”**

**R**ARELY CHALLENGED is the right to strike. While nearly everyone in the population, including the strikers themselves, will acknowledge the inconvenience and dangers of strikes, few will question the right-to-strike concept. They will, instead, place the blame on the abuses of this assumed right—for instance, on the bungling or ignorance or evil of the men who exercise control of strikes.

The present laws of the United States recognize the right to strike; it is legal to strike. However, as in the case of many other legal actions, it is impossible to find moral sanction for strikes in any creditable ethical or moral code.

This is not to question the moral right of a worker to quit a job or the right of any number of workers to quit in unison. Quitting is not striking, unless force or the threat of force is used to keep others from filling the jobs vacated. The essence of the strike, then, is the resort to coercion to force unwilling exchange or to inhibit willing exchange. No person, nor any combination of persons, has a moral right to force themselves—at their price—on any employer, or to forcibly preclude his hiring others.

Reference need not be confined to moral and ethical codes to support the conclusion that there is no moral right to strike. Nearly anyone's sense of justice will render the same verdict if an employer-employee relationship, devoid of emotional background, be examined:

• *An individual with an ailment employs a physician to heal him. The physician has a job on agreeable terms. Our sense of justice suggests that either the patient or the physician is morally warranted in quitting this employer-employee relationship at will, provided that there be no violation of contract. Now, assume that the physician (the employee) goes on strike. His ultimatum: “You pay me twice*

*the fee I am now getting or I quit! Moreover, I shall use force to prevent any other physician from attending to your ailment. Meet my demands or do without medical care from now on.”*

Who will claim that the physician is within his moral rights when taking an action such as this? The above, be it noted, is not a mere analogy but a homology, an accurate matching in structure of the common or garden variety of legalized, popularly approved strike.

To say that one believes in the right to strike is comparable to saying that one endorses monopoly power to exclude business competitors; it is saying, in effect, that government-like control is preferable to voluntary exchange between buyers and sellers, each of whom is free to accept or reject the other's best offer. In other words, to sanction a right to strike is to declare that might makes right—which is to reject the only foundation upon which civilization can stand.

Lying deep at the root of the strike is the persistent notion that an employee has a right to continue an engagement once he has begun it, as if the engagement were his own piece of property. The notion is readily exposed as false when examined in the patient-physician relationship. A job is but an exchange affair, having existence only during the life of the exchange. It ceases to exist the moment either party quits or the contract ends. The right to a job that has been quit is no more valid than the right to a job that has never been held.

The inconvenience to individuals and the dangers to the economy, inherent in strikes, should not be blamed on the bungling or ignorance or evil of the men who manipulate them.\* Rather, the censure should be directed at the false idea that there is a moral right to strike.

LEONARD E. READ

\*For a splendid explanation as to why men of questionable character obtain control of unlimited power situations, see Chapter X, “Why the Worst Get on Top” in *The Road to Serfdom* by F. A. Hayek. Write FEE for paperbound copy, 248 pp., \$1.50.