Industrialization and Industrial Conflict in Lebanon

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The past decade or so has witnessed an increasing amount of interdisciplinary research on the general problem of industrial conflict. The specific results of most such studies remain tentative and inconclusive. Two main propositions, however, can be drawn which seem to appear with impressive repetitiveness and regularity: First, that some degree of industrial conflict is inevitable in a changing and developing society; second, that this prevailing state of industrial unrest probably stems from the strains that modern industrialism imposes on individuals and groups. The objective of this paper is to provide further evidence in support of these two propositions.

The pattern and intensity of industrial conflict in Lebanon has already been surveyed. If a period of nine years is in any way adequate to depict a trend, one can readily observe a slow but steady increase in the incidence of both labor disputes and strike activity. Also, the pattern of such conflict is indicative of the weak bargaining position of labor and the nature of industrial relations in general. Labor protest, for instance, is still largely individual in character, and collective action has not yet begun to play a decisive role in labor-management relations.

In accounting for this persistent increase in industrial conflict, it was argued that such a trend is the result of some peculiar institutional shortcomings. Accordingly, factors such as the absence of collective bargaining, the character of the labor movement, managerial attitudes and practices, absence of government control, and the workers' psychological propensity to protest have all been analyzed in an effort to determine their role in aggravating the incidence of industrial unrest.¹

In this essay, it will be suggested that the disruptive consequences of industrialization are inextricably associated with the incidence and pattern of industrial conflict. The early stages of industrialization, with or without the institutional shortcomings, remain everywhere a painful process. A certain degree of industrial unrest, then, will inevitably reflect the changing patterns in the industrial community as Lebanon undergoes the process of industrialization.

Before we consider the impact of such factors, it is pertinent to account for the inevitability of conflict in a developing society like Lebanon.

Inevitability of Conflict

In so far as one accepts the proposition that discontent is a normal condition of mankind, then the expression of grievances or the inherent instability of labor-management relations becomes an inevitable and continuous phenomenon in most changing societies. This is more the case in a newly developing society where the disruptive forces of economic and rapid social change may widen further the gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots”, and where discontent emerges as a reflection of the unequal distribution of power and income. So as long as these dynamic forces exist, the issues between the contending parties can never be fully resolved. It is for this reason perhaps that conflict has not only been regarded as an inevitable and continuous phenomenon, but along with other forms of social interaction – particularly competition, cooperation and isolation – it has been increasingly treated in the literature as a basic social process in society.

Of all forms of social interaction there can be no doubt that labor-management relations epitomize the classic and typical form of conflict. For labor and management, among other things, are perpetually involved in sharing a certain limited amount of power and income between themselves. One party then can only increase its share at the expense of the other. Given this basic tendency, industrial conflict cannot be simply treated as an irrational and accidental expression of a temporary state of affairs, but as something inherent and deeply rooted in the changing socio-economic conditions of a developing society.

In brief, several reasons can be advanced for the inevitability of industrial conflict in a developing society like Lebanon.

1. In the first place, despite the emphasis placed upon solidarity and integration in traditional or “established” societies, a transitional or developing society cannot be expected to completely integrate individuals and groups into the social order. With increasing secularism and rationality, the average Lebanese individual is compelled to divide his loyalties and interests. Because of the inevitable decline in kinship and other forms of traditional social organization, he is becoming increasingly self-oriented, and consequently more motivated by the desire to pursue his own individualistic interests. Under such circumstances it would be difficult to envisage a society with complete identity of interests and a common set of values which will sustain commitment and integration. As Sorensen maintains: “To postulate the identical interests of man is to deny the division of labor and to assume an absolute constancy of progress.” Thus, it is
