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"HOW PEOPLE
MAKE UP THEIR
MINDS ABOUT UNIONS"

BY ROSS STAGNER

LECTURE SERIES NO. 7

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HOW PEOPLE MAKE UP THEIR MINDS ABOUT UNIONS

by

Ross Stagner
Professor of Psychology in Labor and Industrial Relations
University of Illinois

(Address given at Conference on Union Public Relations, Chicago, January 28, 1950)

Public opinion can no longer be ignored by the average union in the United States. Many, if not most, major issues in industrial relations are now decided, not by the relative strength of the industry or the union directly involved, but by public considerations. We have become acutely aware of this fact in connection with such developments as the Taft-Hartley Act, and in the negotiations in the steel industry over the pension question. It thus becomes very important for union people to study the question of how the average person makes up his mind about unions.

Looking at this problem as a psychologist, I am impressed by the fact that there are certain general principles of human behavior that are illustrated by people in unions, in management, and among the general public. There is no special psychological rule which applies to anyone of these groups as compared with the others.

Generally speaking, people make up their minds about unions on the basis of pictures existing in their heads, not on the basis of the real facts as they might be observed in everyday life. Few people are actually aware of the facts in any industrial disputes; rather, they have certain pictures in their heads of unions and industry and they make their decisions accordingly. This is true in many cases even of the people directly involved in the argument.

The kind of picture a person has in his head will, of course, depend on whether his eyes are open or closed. You may remember the story that was popular in England during the recent election campaign about little Mary. Little Mary came to school one morning and told her teacher, "My cat had five kittens and

they are all Tories." The teacher (a conservative) was quite amused by this, and asked her to repeat the story to a distinguished visitor at the school two weeks later. Mary said "My cat had five kittens and they are all Laborites." "But Mary!" said the teacher, "last week you said the kittens were Tories." "Oh, yes," said Mary, "but they have their eyes open now."

Now, some people have their eyes open on the union question in this country and some do not. Whether a person has his eyes open or closed is not determined by whether he is on the side of industry or on the side of the unions. It is a question of how willing he is to study the facts as they exist and not act on the basis of preconceived notions.

All of you know that many people among the general public have pictures in their heads of unions which have very little connection with reality. I grew up in Texas and I know that it was a long time before I realized that union organizers were not completely equipped with cloven hoofs, a tail, and horns. This kind of incorrect picture was disseminated so widely down there that it was very difficult for anyone to get a different view of the situation. Even in the North you know that the newspapers tend to spread a picture of union organizers and union activities which is incomplete, if not grossly inaccurate in many points. These pictures, which are built up in the minds of newspaper readers, lead them to do things which would be perfectly logical if the picture were correct but their actions are quite irrational because the pictures are not accurate.

Now it is very easy for all of you to accept this particular approach to the problem in regard to people's ideas of unions, because you are in close touch with union activities, and you can see what is really going on. But did it ever occur to you that in many cases the pictures of management and industry which exist in the minds of union people may be just as inaccurate and just as misleading? There are many stereotypes, many irrational pictures of business leaders in the minds of union officials and of the rank-and-file, which do

nothing--to say the least--to contribute to peace. The problem, therefore, is much broader than the question of trying to improve the quality of the pictures people have of unions--although we are today particularly concerned with that aspect of the problem. I'm trying to point out to you that there is a broad general question, that in conflict situations people often act on the basis of incorrect notions, and these inaccurate pictures are just as common on one side of the bargaining table as on the other.

This situation of course is not unique to the labor-management relationship. Just think for a moment of how different people picture the idea of democracy. When Mr. Vishinsky gets up in the United Nations and said that Russia is the most democratic nation in the world, he no doubt believes it. His picture of democracy, however, is one that is quite different from the one that we have. When Dean Acheson says that Russia is dictatorial and undemocratic, he is speaking about his particular picture and not about the picture that Mr. Vishinsky is looking at. It is thus true that in all kinds of social conflict situations, the difficulties may arise, at least in part, if not completely, from these differences in the way people look at the real situation.

Now the human seems to act by building up pictures out of such bits of information as are available. Furthermore, it seems to be necessary to have this picture, because we need very much to build up a consistent view of the world around us. We are very uncomfortable if we cannot feel sure of what is going on, and that we have a coherent picture of the world. So people tend to take isolated fragments and information, and put them together as if they knew the whole story. That this is generally not true in regard to labor-management relations, all of you are of course aware. You know that in connection with the disputes over working with the railroads, the average member of the public has no conception of why the railroad brotherhoods ask for certain kinds of rules. These rules are called "feather-bedding" in the newspapers, and the average member

of the public does not have enough facts to know why the rule is set up the way it is.

Let me give you a quick demonstration how the mind builds up a picture out of a few suggestions. Just listen to the following words and see what kind of a picture begins to get organized in your mind.

Glass
Bottle
Alcohol
Noise
Men in white coats

Are you beginning to get a picture now? Suppose I add a cat. Does this change the picture? Now let me add a microscope and a dissecting set. What happens to your picture? I suspect that most of you had first built up a picture of a barroom, where the men in white coats were waiters and the alcohol was being used for drinking purposes. However, it becomes necessary to change that picture when new information about the microscope and the dissecting set is brought in; the whole thing changes over and becomes a scientific laboratory. The alcohol is used for preserving specimens. The men in white coats are doctors.

Now that happens all the time in social situations. A person may have what seems to him to be a completely accurate picture of unions, but because he doesn't have enough information, he has built up a picture which is misleading and inaccurate. If we can provide him with somewhat more complete information, it becomes possible to modify the picture almost completely.

The next question is: How do people get the bits of information on which they build up their mental pictures of unions? You will think at first of newspapers, radio, magazines, public speeches and so on. While I would not question the importance of these, I should like to suggest that our psychological research indicates that they are not as important as commonly believed. These pictures tend to get organized much earlier in life than you may think. Children develop a first picture of social situations from the family, and their notions

about such problems as authority, conservatism, the rights of property and various other significant questions are formed in the earliest years. The relationship between the child and his parents, and the ideas spread from the parents to the child, are of crucial significance at this stage. It is rather astonishing, therefore, to find how few union men make any systematic attempt to influence their own children to develop a favorable picture of unions; and it is rather distressing to see how few unions make any organized efforts to draw in the children of their members through organized recreation, and such activities.

In addition to the family situation, we know that the early school environment is very important. The unions have recently become aware of the importance of the schools, but so far they have not had too many openings to do anything about it. More and more, however, union people are being elected to the boards of education and are beginning to see to it, either that Chamber of Commerce and National Association of Manufacturers propaganda material is eliminated from the schools; or perhaps more constructively, that material is introduced to the school from union sources as a balancing factor. I say this is probably more desirable because I think that youngsters should learn, early in life, to understand that there are different points of view on these questions; and they should learn to recognize a biased presentation such as they will get through propaganda sources all the rest of their lives. If people could learn to recognize an incomplete and inaccurate picture when they see it, this would be of great value in reducing the damage done by such propaganda activities.

In the propaganda activities and materials about unions, we find a great many bits of information and ideas which are good and a great many that are bad. There are some that favor unions and others which are by implication hostile to unions. Which of these does the child select, and why? It is important to be aware of this fact because, especially in adult life, we are constantly running into ambiguous situations and seeing in them what we want to see, not what is

really there. So I want to talk a little bit about some psychological factors which influence the particular things we will pick up from our environment; because we don't pick up everything, don't get all the bits of information that are presented in our external world, but we pick only a certain number and they are picked in accordance with these psychological principles.

First I should like to emphasize that the very earliest experience the child has tends to slant him in a certain direction; and later on he will pick up from the environment the trends which will fit in with this first impression. You can illustrate this by suggesting that if little Johnnie has a nurse who is mean to him, and then later on he goes to school and his first school teacher is a woman who is hard boiled or unsympathetic, and then a little later he has some other experiences with adult women which are unpleasant, he will begin to build up a picture of strange women, that is, women outside his own family, as being very threatening to him and dangerous. He will therefore observe things about women that are critical and unfavorable, and will not notice those things which are pleasant and favorable. He will thus continually reinforce his own notion of the dangerous character of females and fail to make a good adjustment as he reaches adult life.

Another illustration of the same sort of thing is given by psychological experiment. In this experiment the psychologist memorized a speech which had exactly the same number of statements favorable to Roosevelt and the New Deal as were unfavorable to Roosevelt and the New Deal. When he presented his speech to a group of college students whose political attitudes had already been determined, he found that the Republicans considered his speech to be critical of the New Deal and clearly remembered the facts which had been presented unfavorable to Roosevelt. The Democratic students, on the other hand, found the speech favorable to the New Deal, and they remembered the points which had been made which were favorable to the Roosevelt program. Thus we see that when people are presented with quite a

a mass of information, they tend to pick up and remember that which fits in with their prejudices.

A second factor which influences the bits of information that people pick up will be their own personal desires and motives. So, for example, if you have a stake in industry, and you want industry to make as much profit as possible, you will be predisposed to believe good things about industrial management, particularly when they are earning large profits, and to be critical of information purporting to show that unions are justified in asking for a wage increase. The industrial executive who is concerned about keeping as much power possible for himself will be predisposed to believe that all industrial executives use their power wisely and generously; whereas, of course, the people who are prevented from having any say about their own working conditions will not be so favorably inclined toward this point of view.

Third, people may be influenced simply by inner emotional conditions which predispose them to react in a certain emotional direction. For example, the individual who is frustrated and unhappy and aggressive would be ready to believe bad things about almost anyone he hears discussed. We can illustrate this by pointing out that the great increase in anti-semitism in Germany came after 1928, when the economic depression hit, and the average German was suffering a great deal of hardship. He wanted to hate somebody; he was very angry and very unhappy and he didn't know just what was responsible for his misery. When Hitler's Nazis came along and suggested that their troubles were due to the nasty Jews, the Germans were in an emotional state which led them to believe this propaganda, and to develop a very unfavorable picture of the Jewish people. In the same way we have found that the rate of lynching of Negroes in the southern states is related to changes in the value of the cotton crop. When the cotton crop is at a high price, and the white farmers are prosperous, lynchings decrease in number. When the price of cotton is low and the farmers are angry and unhappy, they tend

to take out their hostility by lynching an occasional colored man. Thus we see that people's readiness to hate, to attack and destroy others will determine to some extent what kinds of information they accept and believe.

This leads to the interesting situation, which puzzles some people, that in the general public you may find a considerable number of individuals who in a strike situation are just as ready to fight on either side. If they are first reached by union propaganda, they may be in a mood to throw bricks through factory windows. If on the other hand, they are first reached by pro-industry propaganda, they may be ready to form a vigilante party and wreck the union headquarters. These individuals simply have a lot of pent up hostility, a lot of aggression, and a lot of inner tension which is demanding some kind of outlet. If propaganda suggests that violence is a good thing in the situation, they are likely to accept that idea and--unfortunately--to act upon it.

Now it does not take a great deal of psychological insight to understand that these factors will influence the industrial executive to be anti-union in his beliefs and in his actions. He will tend to build up a picture of unions which is unfavorable, because the union interferes with the satisfaction of his personal desires; and he may feel hostility because the union prevents him from being completely arbitrary in his manner of handling his workers. When he puts out propaganda, however, people in the general population may be somewhat suspicious of it, because they can readily see that he has a personal stake in the situation. They may, therefore, not believe the information and misinformation he tries to put across.

A somewhat more dangerous kind of propagandist is the one who seems to be neutral. We have a considerable number of professional people, and even, I regret to say, a few college professors, who have a great deal of hostility and a great deal of aggressiveness to get rid of, and for one reason or another, they may focus this hostile attitude on the labor movement. In that case they may put

out propaganda, may write books, and make speeches, in which they spread an incorrect picture of unions. This propaganda may get wider belief among the general public, because this individual seems to be neutral and impartial. If there is no obvious personal advantage to him in spreading this idea, people may reason that he is probably giving a correct picture. Now it is easy enough for the psychologist to recognize that a person may have a strong irrational need for this kind of activity and this kind of unfavorable picture, but it is not so easy for the general run of the population. So this kind of propaganda may obtain more acceptance and do more damage than that which is issued under the label of the National Association of Manufacturers.

Now I want to emphasize two points about these mental pictures and the way they operate. One is: to a very large extent, a person may be completely unconscious of the fact that he has this distorted and inaccurate notion. We are not very well aware of all the things that go on in our minds. In fact, some people have compared the mind to an ice berg which is nine-tenths hidden and only one-tenth visible. We may know only one-tenth of what is going on in our minds.

Another point which is important to remember is that, in acting on these pictures, people are usually irrational. It is probably true, as the old Quaker once remarked, "All the world's queer but thee and me, Mary, and sometimes I am not sure about thee"; the psychologist just goes one step farther and includes himself in that classification. We assume that everybody is irrational a great deal of the time, and it is particularly true, when people are dealing with highly emotional questions, like the relationships between labor and management, that intelligence does not play a very big part.

We can identify an important characteristic of people's thinking about these questions by calling it black-and-white thinking. That is, by emphasizing the tendency to make everything on one side as black as a coal pit, and every-

thing on the other side as white as the angels. This error, of course, is very common in people's thinking about unions. There is a tendency to assume that if John L. Lewis does anything, it must automatically be bad. Everything that is favorable to unions is painted black, and everything that is favorable to industry is clearly white and pure.

It is important for us to recognize that this state of affairs does exist, and that a great many people distort situations in a manner which is hostile to the union movement. I would just like to throw in, as a very important thought for you to consider, that in many cases the same mechanism operates on the side of the unions. I mean by that, that many unionists have a tendency to assume that if any idea emanates from a management source, it must be bad. There is an assumption that everything on the opposition side is black, and that everything on the labor side is white. Now, just between you and me, I know that there are some people among industrial executives who are pretty nasty characters. I know that there are some crooks and some racketeers and some people who do things that are distinctly unethical in other ways. But, also between you and me, I am aware of the fact that such people sometimes get into the union movement; it would be, in fact, very strange if in a movement consisting of 15 million Americans, there were not a few scoundrels. What we have to be careful about is the tendency to assume all the bad men are in one group: that it is all white on our side and all black on the other side. You know that a lot of harm can be done by people who think that all the bad men are in the unions; but I would like to suggest that this tendency towards black-and-white thinking is very dangerous, not only when it is directed against the unions, but also when it is directed against management. We need to try to think in terms of what people are really like and not just in terms of these stereotyped pictures.

Now this picture I am building up for you, of human nature as largely emotional and unconscious, irrational, and unintelligent, may seem pretty gloomy.

As a matter of fact, I guess we can concede that the human race is not doing too good a job of managing its affairs. When we take a tremendous technical scientific accomplishment, such as splitting the atom and releasing the tremendous energy that it has within it, and think that so far, all this great nation of ours has been able to do is to use it to kill several hundred thousand people, we are not impressed with the hopes for a peaceful, intelligently managed world. On the other hand, I think there is still hope. A hundred years ago, anyone who talked about atomic energy or television or many of our other scientific advances would have been put down as having pipe dreams. So, while today the outlook may seem gloomy for the psychologist and other social scientists getting the human race to behave more rationally and intelligently, I still believe we can do it if we try hard enough. But I must confess that I don't have many practical suggestions to offer along these lines. Here are just a few ideas that may be worth your consideration.

One is that all the facts must get to the public. The unions are beginning to work on that, as is shown by the very fact that we are meeting here today. The unions must do a more thorough and careful job of presenting information for their side to the members of the general public. Generally speaking, industrial executives and pro-industry people can get their ideas fully stated in newspapers, magazines, on the radio and elsewhere. Ample funds are available to finance this kind of publicity material. Unions, on the other hand, have been handicapped, first by lack of money, second by lack of skilled people, and third by a lack of understanding of the tremendous importance of this job. All three of these handicaps are being overcome to some extent. Particularly unions must develop skilled people like yourselves, who will present information to people in the general population in such a way that they can readily grasp and understand it.

Information and public relations activities by unions, however, do not function unless they are closely tied in with union policy. In industrial management today, it is generally understood that the public relations manager

should be right in on top policy decisions. It is very important, for example, in the public's attitude toward a particular company, when an increase in prices is to be announced. You all know how the steel companies took advantage of the pension settlement to run through a price increase and blame the unions as being responsible for this, even when they cut export prices on steel at the same time. This is an example of tying in business policy with public relations activities for the benefit of the corporation.

Now, union officials need to plan their tactics in strikes and labor disputes and in everyday activities as well, to try to influence the public. It is possible to do a great many things along these lines. A simple illustration of the kind of thing I mean may be given by such activities as the offering of prizes to high school students for essays on topics related to the union movement. The American Legion, the Chamber of Commerce and other groups have made extensive use of this device. The unions could influence public opinion favorably and also help young people to get a better and more accurate picture of unions by doing that sort of thing. Another similar activity would be to give youngsters prizes such as a trip to Washington to visit the national headquarters of the union, or some similar thing, for winning the highest marks in school, or for something else of a general nature. In any event, what the union officers should do is try to think up some activity which will be looked upon with favor by the public and then see to it that this activity is indulged in with plenty of publicity so that the benefit in terms of public attitudes will be maximized.

I think it is obvious, in trying to put across a point of view to the public, that we must carry our case in terms of factual and impartial words, and not so much in terms of vilification and abuse. In a union conference sponsored at Roosevelt College recently, such a problem was discussed by a number of union people. The particular problem was that of a strike situation where one woman continued to work, refusing to go out with the other people. The union distributed

leaflets in her neighborhood, to her neighbors, attacking her personally and slandering her character. It was generally agreed that this particular device had done the union more harm than good. It had antagonized a lot of people and had no effect either on the woman or on other people who were continuing to work. So, let's try to present these things in a fair and straight-forward manner, giving the facts and not just attacking people on a personal basis.

Wherever possible we need to work toward breaking down these stereotyped pictures of unions and of management, and to show that all of us are just people. There are some good folks and some pretty poor characters on both sides. We may very well feel and no doubt justifiably that there are differences in the value of policies on the two sides of the bargaining table, but we do not need to feel that there are any differences in the qualities of the people on both sides.

You may be interested in a very significant piece of research which was just completed by one of the men now on the faculty of psychology at the University of Illinois. He studied collective bargaining sessions from the point of view of the psychological approach being adopted by people on both sides. He classified those approaches in terms of whether the people were focusing on the problems, the facts, the real situations, or whether they were focusing their attention on needling the opposition, making sarcastic remarks, making personal attacks and so on. He found that in those collective bargaining sessions where the approach was fact-centered, where people kept their eyes on the real problem, and not on personal attacks, both the management and union people agreed that the session was a success. In those cases where there was a lot of personal bickering and hostility, the general agreement was that the sessions were failures. So I think it is a good rule for us to follow in our relations with management and with the public, as well with other members of the union, that we should keep our eye as far as possible on facts and avoid this matter of personalities and hostility, needling people in a sarcastic hostile manner.

It is also significant that, in studies of cooperative relations between labor and management, those situations where people have had a joint problem to solve (as in the case of the war-time production committees where attention was centered on getting out more production which was vitally needed by the armed services) that cooperation was good. In those cases where the joint committee had no clear problem to focus on, but was just concerned with vague phrases like "let's work together better" and "let's develop team spirit," the cooperation was not so good. I think that human beings need to have a clear focus of responsibility. They have to have something definite to sink their teeth into. If representatives of unions and representatives of industry can get together to solve a problem, they can help us a lot. If they get together to have a fight with each other, they may develop some new techniques in fighting but they don't accomplish very much of a constructive character.

I am sorry psychology does not have many pat solutions to offer you about the problems with which you are concerned. I wish I could wave a wand and solve all of these public relations problems. I wish I could give you a neat little formula which would bring about peace between labor and management. Psychology cannot give you dependable techniques for influencing the public to believe the union side of the story even where it is justified. Unfortunately, we cannot do that. We can, however, give you some leads along the line as to where work is likely to be most profitable. I have tried to indicate some of these for you and I think that with patience and hard work on all sides, we can solve these problems together.



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