

Labor Movement

Until 1954, Vietnam was under French domination, so there was no possibility to speak of trade unionism. Workers were allowed to join mutual societies or associations. As to employers, they could form any union they liked. This was an anomalous fact unknown in the history of trade unionism all over the World. We used to call it "putting the cart before the horse" policy.

As the term "trade union" was taboo in Vietnam and the founding of Trade Unions was then prohibited by law, the militants of the labor movement had to find a way out of the difficulty. The Trade Union movement in Vietnam has an embryo of Christian Socialist tendencies. It started as a small group called "Confederal Delegation" of the "Confederation française des Travailleurs Chrétiens" (French Confederation of Christian Labor) in Indochina, which was set up in November 1947.

As workers were only allowed to form mutual associations, the leader of the Christian trade union movement set up, under the cover of "CFTC delegation" an association called "association to defend the professional interests of employees of commerce, industry and liberal professions."

In October 1949, by joint decision of the CFTC and the IFCTU, the "CFTC delegation" was transformed into "IFCTU Confederal delegation" in Indochina, contributing in this way to strengthen the position of the association in question.

In June 1950, the association was approved by the International Labor Office in Geneva, but under the name of

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"Federation of Wage Earners in the Private Sector". This was followed in December 1950 by the Government authorizing the use of this name to designate all the Christian pre-trade union organization existing in Vietnam.

In October 1951, in Vienne (Austria) the IFCTU recognized the "Federation of Wage-Earners in the Private Sector" as a national organization affiliated with it under the name of "Confederation Vietnamienne du Travail Chrétien" with the approval of the ILO in Geneve and the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

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This led ~~the~~ Government of Vietnam in May 1952 to recognize the "Confederation Vietnamienne du Travail Chrétien". So before the freedom to form trade unions had been recognized in a Government's decree of September 1952, the Christian trade union movement represented by CVTC was the workers' sole defense organization.

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C.V.T.C., the first labor movement in Vietnam, ~~although~~ although it was authorized by the Government to function on May 1952, its activities date back to November 1947. Nowadays, on legal ground and in actual fact, the CVTC remains the truly representative organization of workers. That is also true from the international point of view.

The CVTC includes throughout the country;

- 16 regional unions

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- 23 confederal delegations

- 6 federations, three of them being members of international federations: the land workers' federation, the federation of wage-earners in Agricultural Enterprise and Railways Workers' Federation,

- 423 unions representing all the sectors of the country's activity - the working classes, industrial and agricultural, and the liberal professions.

From the above figures are excluded 7 federations and 211 unions and Firm union chapters for they all ceased to function in North Vietnam, following the partition of the country into two zones at the 17th parallel, in July 1954.

Two years after its founding, the CVTC numbered nearly 700,000 members in its all union and federation, but the partition of Vietnam led to a depression.

Activities of the C.V.T.C.

A - Labor Code. - As I mentioned above, trade unionism in Vietnam was struggling unprotected by law at the beginning. So the CVTC and its affiliated trade unions were striving hard to have a labor code promulgated by the Government in July 1952 and in September of that very year the trade union freedom was proclaimed. Our consistent effort had born fruit, though we were living in a period of colonialism and feudalism.

B - First Collective Agreement. -

Thanks to the CVTC's initiative and support, the first collective agreement between the Directors of rubber plantations and their workers has been signed by both parties and

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ENforced by decision of the Ministry of Labor. It is necessary to emphasize the long period of time required for its elaboration, to imagine the possible negotiations between those who, until then, glared at one another and who are now united in the Department of labor to discuss as equals the problems which concern the ~~sacred~~ interests of planters, as well as the working and living conditions of workers to whom the prosperity of the plantations has been indebted.

The first meeting took place in November 1958, and the agreement-elaborating conference only ended 15 months later i.e. February 1960. The representatives of the Department of labor, the body of employers and the trade union required 77 meetings in all to succeed in achieving a work which supplies the deficiency of our Labor Code. As a proof of difficulties encountered in the beginning, I wish to quote the declaration of Mr. Schmitz, Chairman of the Planters Syndicate, made on March 12, 1960 in a solemn meeting when the Agreement was signed:

"If the employers 'representatives and the workers' ones had perhaps preconceived ideas during the first meetings, the situation eased afterwards owing to human relations which enabled us to have a better understanding of the problem, and solve the latter in a sphere of perfect comprehension, materialized by the free accord of both parties on our collective agreement, including in all 257 articles contained in 90 pages

This collective agreement seems to be an incontestable

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ble progress of first importance, because the rubber plantations workers belong to a class of manpower quite different from those of urban and rural workers. Their story deserves to be related, because it describes one of the features of the French colonisation.

Between 1923 and 1927, so great was the demand for labor that agents of the Colonial planters set up recruitment offices in North VietNam, especially in provinces over-populated. For a small loan, the laborer signed a 5 year contract whereby he engaged himself to work in French Colonies.

Upon his arrival at the plantation, he was placed under the severe authority of the foreman who urged him to work with riding-whips. He soon suffered from certain diseases such as beriberi or fever, and was worn-out after a short time, owing to the lack of medical care. If he took to flight, it would be for him a great misfortune. Almost certainly, he would be recaptured and sentenced to several months' imprisonment. Upon his release, he would be brought back under an escort to his employer who forced him to work harder and harder and harder until the expiration of his contract. Then, because of the lack of money and of everything for living, he would sign a new 5-year contract and so on. For that reason, he is still staying at the plantation, and will stay there for an indefinite period of time.

This short story of workers' recruitment in VietNam between 1923 and 1927 by French colonists reminds you of the indentured servants and redemptioners at the time of Colonial

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America in the seventeenth century. Indentured servants were handed to their unknown masters at the port of entry. If the redemptioners did not immediately find employment themselves, they were put up for sale by the ship captains or merchants to whom they owed their passage money. Families were often separated under these circumstances when Wives and offspring were auctioned off to the highest bidder. This shows you that the manpower's exploitation was the same, wherever you were in the EAST or in the WEST.

But, the situation of the indentured laborers in Vietnam has been changed in the meanwhile. Since 1947, conscious of their potential, workers have tightened their rank and file under CVTC's command. They see that, like all the workers of the free World, they may use their right of striking, an unique instrument suitable to their struggle, for the purpose of claiming their comfort and better working conditions.

The collective agreement of rubber plantations was drafted under the following circumstances. In 1957, a serious strike was threatening, according to a certain rumour. Mr. Trần Quốc Bình, Chairman of the CVTC, while attending the 13th Labor International Congress at Geneva, made a consultation on the possibility of constituting a collective agreement in Vietnam. In the meanwhile, the Government decided to intervene in this matter to facilitate negotiations between employers and employees by designating the Inspector General of Labor as a referee.

The planters syndicate sent to the meeting, by turns,

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its Chairman, Secretary General, most distinguished members and legal advisor. The CVTC was represented by its agents of rubber plantations trade-unions. The struggle was keen enough during the debates between the workers' delegates conscious of their responsibilities, and the body of Employers' Representatives who defend forcibly their interests, when given them some advantages? It was with reluctance that the body approved at last the collective agreement.

C-Struggle for freedom. It is true that the workers' movement in Vietnam is still very young (10 years of existence) and its growth has taken place in the face of considerable opposition. To illustrate the difficulties we have faced in struggling for the mere right to organize ourselves as did American laboring masses a hundred years ago, I have to relate an unexpected event which will tell you how the CVTC had defended trade union freedom in Vietnam.

In November 1952, political parties were tearing themselves in Vietnam and one of them aimed at exerting pressure on our organisation in the prospect that we should yield to sustain its movement. On the occasion of a conflict which took place in the North, some great powerful local authority ordered the police to put down all signboards from the permanent bureau of the CVTC's agencies.

Immediately, an appeal to general strike for November 25, at noon, was launched in case we should have no satisfaction. It turned out to be resounding, agitating all provincial authorities that sent telegrams to the Ministry of Interior

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reporting that a general strike was ready to burst out and asking for directions.

The Central Government of Vietnam cleverly judged the situation at the outset, and playing a straight game, no longer censured our information so that the unanimous concert of the press could rise and the Governor of the North could see in what manner he was put into a scrape by his clumsy subordinates. At once, the Governor invited the CVTC's representative to sum up his conditions in order to re-settle calmness. The C.V.T.C. demanded that :

- 1- Trade union freedom should be entirely respected and any union that had not been authorized yet should be recognized.
- 2- All imprisoned unionists should be released.
- 3- All trade union signboards that had been put down by police, should be re-installed.
- 4- All civil servants who had done some harm to trade-union freedom should be punished.

Without discussing the memorandum, the Governor wrote down "approved" and signed.

So ended a historic episode of the establishment of the Christian Trade Union in Vietnam. An excellent lesson of trade union collective solidarity has for the first time realized unity of thought in Vietnam.

No doubt that politicians will not venture to draw to their hands Christian trade union power to serve their own interests. As to the result, is that not so bad an achievement?

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Now, I am going to give you some features of the labor movement in Vietnam.

Labor Force

According to the last statistics by the Ministry of Labor on the manpower survey, the total labor force is about 4,800,000 out of a population of 12,000,000 inhabitants. The workers are distributed into different activities, such as :

Industry and commerce	330,000
Government service, armed forces, servants..	540,000
Agriculture	<u>3,930,000</u>
Total	4,800,000

There are only about 800,000 workers who are union members or 1/6 of the labor force. But to watch its progress, I can tell you that the labor organization grows slowly in my country for in 1954 there were 142 workers' organizations and now there are about 500.

Wages and Salaries

The Government of Vietnam, had, by decree of July 1956, set minimum wages as follows :

Men : 41\$VN per day of 8 hours

Women : 36\$VN per day of 8 hours

Children under 18 years : 27\$VN per day of 8 hours.

In practice, the workers earn more than the minimum wage. On an average, a man earns 80\$VN (from 70\$VN to 100\$VN) per day; a woman 60\$VN and children 40\$VN. I have to add that a dollar in the free rate is equivalent to 72 - 73\$VN.

These earnings are still low regarding the high cost of living, particularly in Saigon.

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Social Security

Our social security system though defective has certain aspects worthy of note :

a- Family allowances for the wife and children of the worker. According to an estimate made recently, there are about 50,000 workers'wives and 70,000 workers' children receiving family allowances.

b- Maternity allowances : working women, during the maternity period, are given 8 weeks'allowances amounting to half their wages.

c- Medical consultations and distribution of medicines are determined and the importance of this work depends upon the number of workers in each enterprise.

d- There is no retirement pension but a retirement grant is paid to workers who have fulfilled certain conditions of seniority. I also remark that there are no old age and survivors insurance, unemployment insurance and other benefits.

Labor Movement of Vietnam in the Future

To foretell the labor movement's future is such a difficult problem that we never imagine so far to do it. But the labor movement depends upon many factors which we have to take into consideration? I have let you know in detail the political, economic and social situations of my country, which would influence the labor movement.

To be optimistic, we don't say so, but in spite of all difficulties we have encountered, and also the extreme danger which we have to face, we are always confident in the leader-

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ship of the CVTC's chairman who is also Vice President of the IFCTU. Thanks to his shrewd tactical sense and his astute opportunism, he will be confronted with many difficulties to overcome. We have realized unity of thought in our movement and Christian Social doctrine perfectly suits Vietnamese workers who are religious minded. We trusted in our collective solidarity when our Trade Union movement was heavily influenced by the political situation. Even in the face of all hardships and losses which you put down not as a defeat but as experience, likely to strengthen our ideals, we are willing to accept the responsibility of supporting the national reconstruction schemes.

We try to forge a path in the undertaking and cooperation between Government, employers and workers. On the other hand, we try also to fight Communism efficiently through social and economic battles. In a country with an underdeveloped economy causing unemployment and rising cost of living and endangering the very life of the people, the anti-Communist movement should be taken both idealistically and practically as I have suggested in my expose of the first point on the political situation.

We have always been aiming at our single goal : to break the workers' bondage in every field of his activities, whether from the labor, economic or social point of view.

So, we hope that the future is our's.

Yours sincerely,

TRINH QUANG QUY