CCHA *Report*, 10 (1942-43), 87-96

Daniel John O'Donoghue
Father of the Canadian Labor Movement

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When Daniel John O'Donoghue died in 1907 Mr. W. L. Mackenzie King, C.M.G., deputy minister of labor (now Prime Minister of Canada) paid the following tribute to the deceased:

"I first came to know Mr. O'Donoghue when I was an undergraduate of the University of Toronto, 16 years ago. I was interested at the time in a study of labor problems, and received great sympathy and very generous help from him. He brought me into personal touch with a large number of labor leaders in the city and assisted me in other ways. He had great experience in the labor movement and was able to render an assistance to one who was interested in the study of labor problems which, perhaps, no other trade unionist of his day could have done.

"Though considerably his junior in years, we were close friends at the time the Department of Labor was created, and that friendship and the respect and admiration on which it was founded has grown during the years of our work together in the department.

"Perhaps no other man is more worthy of being called the father of the labor movement in Canada than Mr. O'Donoghue. He was a strong champion of the cause of labor in the days when labor organizations were fighting for their right to exist, and much of the progress that has been made was due to his active and zealous interest on behalf of his fellow workingmen. In the Department of Labor he was a faithful and efficient officer. If he had any fault it were that of being overzealous in the cause to which he devoted his life. His last illness was, I believe, really hastened through his desire to discharge some of the duties as Fair Wage Officer which took him to the Pacific Coast at a time when he was really too frail to make the journey. The department endeavored to persuade him to allow some one else to be sent in his stead, but he would not hear of this. It was in concluding the work of this journey that he was overtaken by the illness which has since carried him off. He was able to return to his home in Toronto, but has never been able to communicate with the department since.

"When I saw him last on Christmas Day he told me that he believed his work was done. Almost his last words to me were that the experience of his life had taught him that there would be an end to lockouts and strikes and to the serious features of industrial strife if employers and employees could only

be brought together to discuss their differences at a common board. He believed that in the teachings of Christ would be found the ultimate solution of the labor question. He has gone as he would wish to have, in the midst of his work and he has left an inspiration and an influence which will cause his name and memory to be revered and cherished in the years to come."

It was a graceful tribute to one who consecrated his life to raising the living standards of the working classes. He was a worker himself and he experienced the ordinary woes that beset those of his own class, and his great heart urged him ever on in the struggle to better the lives of the people. He and his brother and two sisters were born in Tralee in County Kerry, Ireland, but his father died when Daniel was only nine years of age. Those were the harrowing times, of the absentee-landlord scourge in Ireland, and the children, with their mother, were thrown out on the roadside in the rain, to fare as best they might. Eventually they reached Ottawa and began the long, hard struggle for subsistance. Schooling he had none, but with the tenacity that marked his adherence to principles during his life, he acquired a training in the hard school of the world that soon marked him out for public life. Apprenticed in a printing office, he became successively printer, proof-reader and publisher, while all the time acquiring the experience and knowledge that led him on to the active part he played in the labor movement.

The first trade union in Canada, of which the Department of Labor has any record, was a boot and shoe workers union in Montreal, in 1827. In the neighboring United States there were earlier adventurers in trade unionism: the shoemakers of Philadelphia in 1792, the printers of New York in 1794, the tailors in 1806, and some others. In the early 'seventies in Ottawa there were three trade unions: the Typographical, the stone cutters and the masons.

The period from 1825 to 1850 was one active in reform movements, and no doubt echoes reached Ottawa to inspire the workers to unite for their common betterment. Trade unions, however, were illegal in Canada until 1872. A number of printers employed in the Toronto Globe office were arrested for organizing a strike, and among those arrested was one of the founders of the Dominion Trades and Labor Congress, which was founded in 1873, though it did not function until 1883. The first strike in Canada was, curiously enough, not by members of a trade union but by members of the Bar of the Province of Quebec who resented a new bill of costs (wages) imposed on them by the Judges of the Supreme Court. No prosecutions followed in that case.

It was in that general atmosphere that Dan. O'Donoghue found himself. At that time, as a local historian says, he was a "mighty force in politics and very popular with the workers. He was an orator of some note." Confederation was but a few years old and, in 1874, the Government of Sir John Macdonald had been defeated. The Hon. Alexander MacKenzie, in forming his government, created a vacancy in Ottawa in the Ontario legislature, and the

local Trades Council decided to nominate a labor man as a candidate.

The advent of a labor candidate caused great consternation in the ranks of the two old political parties, but a convention was held and two labor men were nominated, namely, Dan. O'Donoghue, of the printers, and Donald Robertson, of the stonecutters union. On the day before the convention the Liberals nominated a candidate, so Robertson retired in protest, and the nomination of Dan. O'Donoghue was made unanimous.

The Conservatives refrained from naming a candidate but no one harbored the idea that that was done through any particular love for the workers. Politics then as now meant more than the science of government. It meant the winning of elections, or, if that was not possible, then defeating the opposition. The latter was the objective in this instance, and the strategy was successful, as D. J. O'Donoghue polled more votes than the total gathered by his three opponents. Thus the first labor candidate in Canada took his seat in the Ontario legislature in 1874.

In the provincial general election which followed, he went down to defeat, and a labor candidate in Ontario was not heard of again until the Toronto Trades Council nominated March and Rooney to contest East Toronto some time in the 80's. They were unsuccessful and it was only after many years that that stalwart labor man, Allen Studholme, was elected in a Hamilton constituency. A plaque in the Parliament Buildings in Toronto recites that Mr. Studholme was the first labor man elected to the Ontario legislature, but the statement is not according to the fact.

As a labor representative in the legislature, the new labor member from Ottawa was in a state of isolation, but he found the government of Oliver Mowat (later Sir Oliver Mowat) responsive to his urgings for beneficial labor legislation and gave it his support. He cooperated with the government and of course was anathematized by the Tory Party. The legislative records are the best testimony to the good work accomplished by the lone legislator. During the long reign of Sir Oliver Mowat and after the Ottawa electorate had defeated him for reelection, he continued to exert a strong influence, with the result that the records show a splendid body of labor legislation. Indeed, some of it was far ahead of the times and fell into desuetude. For example, a Conciliation Act for the purpose of settling industrial disputes. Only one case was tried under the Act and ultimately it was repealed in a revision of the statute laws. The intention behind the Act was correct. It was to bring the disputants together for the discussion of differences. Mr. O'Donoghue always contended that the great difficulty where disputes occurred between employers and employees was the attitude of the employer that "there was nothing to arbitrate." He claimed that if the parties could be brought together to talk things over, most disputes would be solved. In later years experience under the industrial Disputes Investigation Act of 1907, embodied the same idea, with notable success.

After his defeat, which was due in large part to the removal from Ottawa of many of the workers who had supported him and who were victims of the depression of that period, he settled in Toronto, after a year in Guelph, Ont. His natural bent toward trade unionism soon led him as a delegate to the Toronto Trades and Labor Council. In the meantime he had entered the service of the Ontario Government in the Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Industry branch, which later became the Department of Labor. His appearance in the Council came about through the Knights of Labor.

That organization was founded by Uriah Smith Stevens in Philadelphia in 1869 and its outstanding Master Workman was Terence V. Powderly. It was designed to amalgamate the forces of all classes of labor into a centralized general assembly, with local, mixed and trade assemblies. It grew rapidly and reached the zenith of its power about 1885 when it had nearly a million members. There were many local assemblies in Ontario, and Mr. O'Donoghue became a member of mixed Local Assembly, No. 2305, as he was not then working at his trade. As a delegate of No. 2305 he was sent to the Council where his ability and energy soon made him secretary of the Legislative Committee of that body, and he continued in that post until the end of his official connection with the labor movement.

He was an indefatigable worker and he watched the proceedings of the Federal House and of the Ontario Legislature for anything that affected the rights or the welfare of the working classes. It came to his notice that the labor situation in Canada was made much worse by the influx of assisted immigrants from the British Isles. The assistance given by the Dominion Government was for the admission of agricultural workers but all kinds of workers were sent out under that name and they soon made their way to the towns and cities to glut, still further the number of idle workmen in those places. The Leopold Agency in England was the main recruiting agency and it was suspected by organized labor that some Canadian government official was conniving with the Agency in its operations. Mr. O'Donoghue took up the question and week after week criticised the Federal action until at last a committee of the House was formed to investigate: the Leopold Agency and the charge that W. T. R. Preston, the Dominion Government agent in England, was collaborating with Leopold in dumping workmen in Canada' under the guise of agricultural workers. The charges of wholesale dumping and connivance were amply proved and an end was put to the practice. In his work Mr. O'Donoghue was in constant touch with the leaders of labor in England, who regarded him with the greatest trust.

The Trades Council grew in importance in Toronto and was soon recognized as the mouthpiece of organized labor. Many able men were among the delegates, including Alfred F. Jury, Charles March, Robert Glockling and many others, including William Prescott, who later became President of the International Typographical Union, while March became President of the

Trades and Labor Congress of Canada.

In the municipal field the Council paved the way for many advances that benefited the whole city. The Toronto Technical School owed its beginning to it and Mr. O'Donoghue was one of its early chairmen. Another gift to the city from the Council came about in an odd way. The Legislative Committee of which Mr. O'Donoghue was secretary used to meet on Sunday afternoons and indulge in long walks while discussing affairs before the committee for consideration. On one of their walks they went to Center Island and strolled along the lake shore until stopped by fences running down to the water from nearby cottages. Disregarding "No Trespassing" signs, they climbed over the fences and were berated by the cottage owners for trespassing. The members of the committee claimed that the cottagers had no right to exclude the public from the foreshore and they started an agitation that led to the shore line being reclaimed for the use of the citizens. These are only single instances of the good work carried on by the Council but are mentioned as examples of work to which Mr. O'Donoghue's efforts were directed.

The Trades and Labor Congress of Canada had been growing in strength and importance. Organized in 1873, it did not function until 1883, when it was reorganized. Since then it has met every year in convention. In 1939 its membership was about 200,000. Mr. O'Donoghue was a delegate from the Ottawa Typographical Union to its first session in 1873 at Toronto, and was elected vice-president. He was a familiar figure at the annual conventions, where he gave his full energy to the deliberations of the Congress and by his wise and experienced leadership did a great deal to add to the esteem in which that body was held. He acted on many committees and by reason of the fact that the activities of the Congress covered matters arising in all the provinces, his wide experience and sound advice contributed largely to the solution of the many intricate problems that came before it. His connection with both the Toronto Trades Council and the Congress ended as a result of the clash between the American Federation of Labor and the Knights of Labor.

The seed from which came the American Federation of Labor was planted by a group of trade unionists in New York, most of whom were cigarmakers who had formed a debating society styled the Economic and Sociological . Club. In that group was Samuel Gompers. Their first attempt was The United Workers of America, which had little success. That was followed by the International Labor Union, which passed out in 1872. In 1881 arrangements were made for a labor congress in Pittsburg. The congress met in November of that year and a committee, of which Samuel Gompers was chairman, proposed as an appropriate name The Federation of Organized Trade and Labor Unions of the United States of America and Canada. That was adopted. The last congress under the long name was held in Washington, D.C., in November, 1885. During the intervening years trade unions were meeting competition from the Knights of Labor and attempts to bring about harmony

failed. In 1886 the American Federation of Labor was formed in Columbus, Ohio. The officers of the old group merged in the new Federation with Samuel Gompers as President. Its estimated membership in 1886 was 150,000. In 1939 the total membership was 4,006,354.

It was a federation of autonomous national and international unions, organized chiefly by crafts, but in some cases by related crafts. A fundamental breach on the issue of organization by crafts, as opposed to centralized general organization, soon developed between it and the Knights of Labor and continued until the beginning of the 20th century when the American Federation of Labor emerged as the winner, and thereafter the Knights of Labor dwindled away to nothing.

The struggle between the two organizations affected the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada in this way: The Congress membership was composed largely of Canadian members of international trade unions, and when the A. F. of L. insisted upon the ousting of delegates to the Congress from the Knights of Labor, the Congress agreed. As Mr. O'Donoghue was a delegate from a local assembly of the Knights of Labor his official connection with the Congress and with the Toronto Trades Council, which followed the lead of the Congress, ceased, and his activities thenceforth were carried on independently.

When the Department of Labor at Ottawa was organized under Sir William Mulock it was felt by the latter that the confidence of organized labor could best be secured by the appointment of someone who already held the complete trust of the organized labor elements. He turned to Mr. O'Donoghue and invited him to become his deputy minister but Mr. O'Donoghue thought that his lack of scholastic training was a barrier and he recommended instead the appointment of W. L. Mackenzie King who was then studying in Germany. Mr. King was duly appointed and Mr. O'Donoghue accepted the position of Fair Wage Officer in the department. His duty was to proceed to the district where it had been determine some public work should be undertaken and to determine a fair wage to be inserted in the contract for the work. In that way the chiseling or cheating contractor who sought profit regardless of the rights of the workers under him, was prevented from undermining other contractors who tendered for the work.

In performing his duties Mr. O'Donoghue travelled from Halifax on the east, to Nanaimo, on the west, and it was a tribute to his fairness and his judgment that very few complaints were ever made about the figures he recommended. As Mr. King said in the remarks quoted at the beginning of this article, Mr. O'Donoghue's death was largely due to the conscientious discharge of his duties.

His story is that of a man with a passionate concern for the welfare of his fellow workers. He sought no reward for his advocacy of the rights of labor, nor did he look for or expect gratitude from those whom he served with such

assiduity and singleness of purpose. He was born into humble circumstances and he died that way. At one time he could have been a Senator if he had been willing to resort to a subterfuge. A property qualification is required of a Senator. He had no such qualification, but a friend offered to transfer enough property to him to enable him to qualify. He would not do that. Again, when he was a member of the Ontario legislature an attempt was made to upset the Mowat government. It success depended upon a change of vote by the labor representative from Ottawa, and in an attempt to secure that change, he was offered a Cabinet position in the new administration to be formed. He refused to be a party to the scheme. In labor affairs, as in all his actions, be was the' same stalwart adherent of honesty and fairness and justice. He more than once told the workers that once they made an agreement with an employer, they should respect that agreement, even if they got the worst of it. He was decidedly opposed to resort to violence by strikers. Those who indulged in conduct of that kind were not, he warned, friends of the strikers but their worst enemies. He just as vigorously opposed violence instigated by employers through hired spies and thugs. In his day sit-down strikes were unknown, but his philosophy would just as surely have condemned that form of interference with the legal rights of employers. He believed in respecting the law, however unjust the law might be. His idea was to have the law changed rather then to violate it.

He guided himself on the principles laid down in the great Encyclical on The Condition of Labor by Pope Leo XIII issued in 1891. He was then working in the Bureau of Industry Branch of the Ontario Department of Agriculture and through him the salient parts of the Encyclical appeared in the Bureau's report for 1892. Shortly after the publication of the Encyclical he was invited to address a Forum whose members were, in some part, a motley collection of extreme radicals, fanatics, atheists, crackpots and such like. He adopted the unusual course, for him, of reading his speech. That was something he had never done before and never did again. Labor, of course, was his subject, and at the end of his address the sentiments he had expressed received the unanimous and enthusiastic approval of the audience. In responding to a vote of thanks he disclosed that what he had read were extracts from the Encyclical on The Condition of Labor. Immediately angry speakers attacked the Pope, but his reply was "Take it or leave it." And he left it at that.

When Leo XIII declared that workmen were not slaves; that employers must respect in every man his dignity as a man and as a Christian; that labor is nothing to be ashamed of but is an honorable employment, enabling a man to sustain his life in an upright and creditable way; and that it is shameful and inhuman to treat men like chattels to make money by, or to look upon them as such much muscle or physical power; or to tax work-people beyond their strength or employ them in work unsuited to their sex or age – he was

expressing with benevolent authority the ideas that motivated Dan. O'Donoghue during his lifetime. He believed that "to exercise pressure for the sake of gain upon the indigent and destitute, and to make one's profit out of the need of another is condemned by all laws human and divine." He believed that "To defraud anyone of wages that are his due is a crime" and that "there is a dictate of nature more imperious and more ancient than any bargain between man and man, that the remuneration must be enough to support the wage-earner in reasonable and frugal comfort." He knew from hard experience that "On the one side there is the party which holds the power because it holds the wealth; which has in its grasp all labor and all trade; which manipulates for its own benefit and its own purposes all the sources of supply, and which is powerfully represented in the councils of the State itself" and that "On the other side there is the needy and powerless multitude, sore and suffering, always ready for disturbance."

He knew that it would be a long time before the world would accept the precepts laid down by His Holiness, and that in the meantime the, only hope of the working classes was to organize into trade unions for their own protection. So he threw himself into the struggle knowing that strong trade unions would be advantageous not alone to their members but, in the long run, to the employers who so blindly opposed them. The work of organization was a difficult one as he began at the bottom, but time has justified him in his beliefs and he would welcome today the great advances that have been made in the field of collective bargaining and the new light that has come to many among the employing classes.

There was no secret about what the worker wanted. It was an open book to Dan. O'Donoghue. Every worker wants his children to be brought into the world under decent conditions of health, both pre-natal and postnatal He wants those children to be reared in comfort – frugal comfort at least – with enough food, clothing, medical care, and opportunity for schooling. He wants their mother to be able to stay at home to look after them and not to be driven by stark necessity to seek employment outside. He wants remunerative employment for himself and a chance to save enough to buy a home. He wants provision for periods of unemployment, for old age and during illness. He wants to be free to exercise his religion without oppression. He wants a free press, the right to meet in assembly to discuss affairs, the right to petition government for the redress of his grievances, to give voice to his thoughts. He wants to vote as he sees fit, to see the courts of justice without fear and without reproach. And he wants time and opportunity for healthful recreation. Mr. O'Donoghue was wise enough to know that all these things could not be achieved at once, but he saw no reason for failing to begin the campaign for them.

The iniquities of the old Employers' Liability law were too often demonstrated in legal decisions. By a useful fiction – useful from the

standpoint of the profit-grabbing employer – a workman was presumed to accept the risks of employment, so that, no matter how negligent the employer was, no worker could secure compensation for an accident occurring through an employer's negligence. This unjust and unreasonable interpretation of the law finally gave way to the Workmen's Compensation Act after a long-protracted campaign in which Mr. O'Donoghue played an active part. So, too, amendments to the Factories Act remedied existing grievances. There was more to be done than could be encompassed in his lifetime, but day after day, night after night, week in and week out, he maintained his aggressive fight against the evils under which the worker

The Communist was not the problem in his day that he has 'since become, but the conditions that breed communism existed to feed the flames for extreme radicalism. So late as 1891 Pope Leo XIII had summarized the conditions that evoked revolutionary demands:

"It is not surprising" His Holiness said, "that the spirit of revolutionary change, which has long been predominant in the nations of the world, should have passed beyond politics and made its influence felt in the cognate field of practical economy. The elements of a conflict are unmistakable: the growth of industry, and the surprising discoveries of science; the changed relations of masters and workmen; the enormous fortunes of individuals and the poverty of the masses; the increased self-reliance and the closer mutual combination of the working population; and finally, a general moral deterioration." And he added the warning that "there can be no question whatever, that some remedy must be found, and quickly found, for the misery and wretchedness which press so heavily at this moment on the large majority of the very poor." And amongst other evils, he pointed out "the concentration of so many branches of trade in the hands of a few individuals, so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the masses of the poor a yoke little better than slavery itself."

And so, in and out of the labor movement, the extremist, obsessed by the misery he saw around him, was aided and abetted by those very conditions. But these men were not necessarily Communists. Calling them by that name did not make them such. Justin McCarthy in his *History of Our Own Times,* relates that the workingmen who joined the Chartist movement were a race "of fierce, unmanageable and selfish Communists" according to the ruling classes of that time.

Karl Marx, the apostle of Socialism, was born in 1818 and died in 1883. He gave the name Communism in his Communist Manifesto, his idea being to associate his system with the most extreme form which Socialism had already taken. His leading sociological principle was the materialistic conception of history, or "Economic Determinism". God had no place in it. When man died, he was dead, just like a dog.

His theories had not seeped through to the minds of Canadian workmen

in Mr. O'Donoghue's time. It was only about the beginning of this century that the real Communist, the Marxian variety, made his appearance in Canada, and he made the trade union movement his stamping ground. He sought to "bore from within" the ranks of organized labor. Some were located in Western Canada and there were a few in Ontario. They called themselves Comrades, but the good, strong sense of the trade unionists soon isolated them, knew them for what they were, and ridiculed them out of influence in the movement. They advocated reforms sought by the workers while at the same time introducing hints of "revolution", and they followed the line of Marx materialism.

Naturally, Mr. O'Donoghue, as a Catholic, opposed them, and not alone as a Catholic but because of his opposition to violence as a means of securing reform. He was a sincere Catholic, but in the labor movement race, creed and color afforded no ground for intolerance. The only intolerance he knew was intolerance towards intolerance and injustice. He worked beside and with men and women of all creeds, color and nationalities. He often said that he never heard:, of any of these tests raised in the labor movement, and he recognized no place for them there. He never obtruded his views on religious matters upon others, but he never hesitated to make clear that he was a Catholic. On one occasion, in addressing an audience from a Methodist pulpit, he opened his remarks by saying that he was a Catholic and therefore very poor material from which to make a Methodist. So, in general gatherings, he never forced attention upon labor, but if the moment called for it, he left no room for doubt as to those for whom he spoke. Lord Dufferin, Governor General of Canada, at a public reception, enquired, when shaking hands with him, whom he represented. The reply was "The rag, tag and bobtail." Lord Dufferin joined in the laughter that followed.

He had no misconceptions as to the plate of trade unions. They were one of the means to an end, and not a cure-all. He saw only one solution to the ills that beset humanity and that was the application of the Golden Rule: Love thy neighbor as thyself. In the words of Mr. King "He believed that in the teachings of Christ would be found the ultimate solution of the labor question."

We are told that greater love no man hath than this, that he giveth his life for his friend. Daniel O'Donoghue contributed the work of his life and, through that work, his life, for his friends, the working classes, and in death surely that will not be forgotten by the God who treated him. He left no worldly possessions to his children. He left instead the memory, the inspiration and the example of a self-sacrificing farther, and these were a finer heritage than all the wealth of Ormuz and of Ind.