

INDUSTRIAL GOODWILL

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Industrial Goodwill by John R. Commons

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INDUSTRIAL GOODWILL

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. Commodity	1
II. Machinery	7
III. Goodwill	17
IV. The Public	28
V. Democracy	37
VI. Solidarity	49
VII. Theory and Practice	62
VIII. Security	65
IX. Labor Market	74
X. Insurance	83
XI. Health	94
XII. The Shop	106
XIII. Education	126
XIV. Loyalty	143
XV. Personality	151
XVI. Depression	168
XVII. The World	187
REFERENCES	198
INDEX	201



INDUSTRIAL GOODWILL

I

COMMODITY

A few years ago I visited the employment office in a factory of several thousand workers. Scattered about were a number of sturdy immigrants fresh from the old country. On that day the manager was hiring Swedes. He said that the week before he had been hiring Poles, and before that he had taken on Italians. It was a good idea, he said, to get them mixed up. He told me of other large firms in that city with similar employment managers and a similar policy. They had an informal club that met usually once a week.

One of the things of which they were proud was their plan of forecasting the labor market. If labor was getting restless they could anticipate it by a concerted raising of wages 10 per cent until the storm blew over, and then reduce the wages back again, thus counteracting the work of agitators.

In order that they might be more accurately informed of the prospects of the labor market they had confidential arrangements with certain leaders of trade unions in the town, so that, if the unions were bringing organizers into the factories to stir

up unrest, the leaders would let them know in advance and would tell which establishments would be organized.

I visited one of the sidewalk offices of one of these establishments. A hundred men or so were assembled at the gate. The foremen were sending down their requisitions. The employment officer went along the line of the unemployed, looked at their feet, sized up their nationality and fitness, picked out ten or fifteen and sent them in. The others stood around with serious faces and then drifted away.

I went inside the factory. The raw material or semi-finished product was coming along on trolleys. One man performed one operation, another man another. Some highly skilled men in the gang were paid 50 cents an hour. Some of them seemed to be scarcely exerting themselves at all; others less adept were sweating. If any man did not do his part, the work piled up and he blocked the gang. The business of the foreman was, in part, to piece out the spots where men were not keeping up, or else fire the man and put in someone who could do it faster. Common laborers were on the jump, bringing in carts, carrying away the finished product.

Later I attended a meeting of strikers from that establishment. A Bohemian stood up and made a speech. By his side stood a Russian Jew who translated the speech into English. He pledged himself never to go back to work until their grievances were settled. He claimed that they could not make wages, that they had to work too hard, that they had to pay a bonus or make a present to the straw