

The Continuing Struggle

How Companies Use Rights Act to Break Southern Unions

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Last month this column dealt, in general, with the need to see clearly the reality of U.S. society; and the need, then, to work out programs which can at least be supposed to deal with that reality. To observe reality, and to accept it, is a difficult task. From the cradle we are taught in home, school, church, by newspapers, magazines, movies, radio, TV to believe in a social reality that does not exist. Using the analogy of the bullfight, a writer once remarked that the process of education and communication—politics—in the U.S. teaches the people to charge the cloth. Here is a fine example.

There's been great distress in the media, and among the leaders, about "crime in the streets." "The time has come, in my judgment, when the American people are going to raise up and revolt against the lawbreaker in this country," declared President Johnson the other day. "We are going to have to obey the law." He was talking about "domestic disorder."

Meanwhile 18 of the largest and most respected publishing houses in the country admitted, in effect, that they had conspired to fix the prices of school books abnormally high. This meant that every school system and every parent in the country paid an extra tribute to these publishing houses for books for their children.

The State of Florida filed suit against five of the largest chemical companies for fixing prices of tetracyclin sold to city and county health units, thereby overcharging these health units millions of dollars annually.

A Threat to Health and Safety

Twelve of the largest corporations in the country have been sued in Illinois for discharging into Lake Michigan "dangerous materials posing a grave threat to the health and safety of the population."

These three incidents were reported during a three-day period. They are typical of the behavior of U.S. business. Which crime does more social harm? When a kid throws a brick through a window, or when a corporation steals millions from public-health units? When a demonstrator defies a cop, or when a corporation charges so much for school books that many families cannot afford to buy them for their children? When a young thug mugs a citizen



in the park and lifts his wallet, or when a corporation poisons the drinking water of millions?

Movement people must answer these questions for themselves, or they'll charge the cloth from now on, and every pass will be a victory to them.

From all this, can we draw a general conclusion about business behavior that will help us anticipate and understand the reaction of many corporations to the fair-employment provisions of the 1964 Civil Rights Act? I think we can if we're prepared to look at reality.

The Logic of Profits

The men who run the corporations are not conscienceless devils, doing evil for its own sake. Rather they are quite ordinary individuals merely following the logic of their own premises:—maximize profits. Now how would you, as a good corporation executive on the way up, use the employment provisions of the Civil Rights Act to maximize profits? The answer is simple: minimize wages.

We have undisputed evidence that one of the largest corporations in the country is doing precisely this. In a plant where they employ a large minority of black workers, the company last year integrated wash rooms and drinking fountains. Management, through this and various other devices, endeared itself to the black workers. Thus, when management was confident that it had the loyalty of enough black workers, it began upgrading black workers in a way that was certain to drive white workers into a wild-cat strike. The objective was to break the union so management could set wages and working conditions on its own.

We have persuasive evidence that this is a concerted program of many corporations, working through their business and trade associations. When unions in the South have been broken, then management can hire workers, black and white, on its own terms, and work them on its own terms.

Had people in the movement been as sophisticated about the U.S. as, say, a Chamber of Commerce executive in a medium-sized town, they'd have known this was a likely outcome of the 1964 act.

Knowing this, they'd have never charged the cloth. They'd have gored the matador.