

Can Public Employee Strike Be Avoided?

For 50 days, Detroit, "The Motor City," was stalled.

During that time, the 3,700 city employees who operate Detroit's ground transportation system were out on strike for higher pay, and not a bus-wheel turned.

As a result two million citizens of Detroit found out how badly too many private cars can choke a city's streets, how business suffers when shoppers are forced to stay away, and what a staggering problem it is to get 280,000 production workers to work.

Detroit's citizens did have one small consolation, however: The strike was illegal.

Michigan's Hutchinson Act, not yet tested in the courts, was designed to punish striking municipal workers with immediate dismissal. If re-hired, they faced a loss of seniority and pension rights. Despite this, the law proved no deterrent, and the willingness of municipal employee groups to buck stringent legislation is not confined to Detroit.

In 1950, city employees in Yonkers, New York, defied the state's Condon-Wadlin act — probably the most drastic of its kind on the books. New York City's 44,000 transport workers went Yonkers employees one better: with a token strike of 8,000 non-operating workers, they refused to recognize its existence, and for a time threatened a complete work stoppage. Behind the backing and filling, however, and the bargaining between New York City officials and union leaders are these very real facts that have little to do with legal issues:

1. Invoking the law and thus dismissing 44,000 transit workers would not provide transportation facilities for the 7½ million people in and around New York who rely on daily service.

2. Municipal jobs are becoming increasingly difficult to fill, even under the most favorable conditions. There are, for example, 10,000 provisional

employees among New York's transport workers, and there is no reservoir of skilled candidates. Stern anti-strike legislation, coupled with low-take-home pay and other problems of civil service employees, will not improve the recruiting picture.

Yet, against this background, an increasing number of states are outlawing strikes by public employees in well-meaning attempts to prevent civil servants from destroying the framework of orderly government. Many of these laws, though, are patterned after New York's Condon-Wadlin act, which misses the basic point in labor — and human — relations: employee relations is the responsibility of the supervisor. It is a management skill and one that cannot be legislated. The law may prevent a few strikes, but being prohibitive, will not solve basic issues. Sound administering will.

Since, one after another, the anti-strike laws designed to keep public employees on the job and performing their vital services have proved ineffective, and at times have seemed — as in the case of the New York transport workers — an invitation to chaos, the question arises, can these damaging and potentially dangerous strikes be avoided?

They can, if along with legislation that protects the public welfare, machinery is set up for handling employment problems before they reach the crisis stage.

This idea of catching problems at their source, which is so well understood in industry, is invariably forgotten by legislative groups who feel that passing a law is enough. The results are exactly the opposite of what the legislators hoped for: often public employee disputes develop to the point of "crises" before an effort is made to solve it. Frequently, the effort at a solution comes too late.

As far back as 1946 the National Ci-
(Continued on Page 20)