

Interview With Murphy

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: An interview with the Governor of Michigan and his role in settling strikes and labor disputes in a non-violent way. Highlights his views on law and order, but rejection of force and violence. Notes his membership in the Third Order of Franciscans. (DDLW #885).

“Machine guns are always the last refuge of the undisciplined, impotent official in time of crisis. Patience and tolerance invariably demand more courage and self-control than the vain, bloody exhibitions of weakness which go by the name of action.” Force never settled industrial disputes. And I do not believe that the use of force can settle international disputes.”

These are the words of Governor Frank Murphy of Michigan, whom I interviewed in the hospital at Ann Arbor a few weeks ago, when he was resting up after a recent physical breakdown, due to overwork.

Belongs to Third Order

Governor Murphy is a friend of **The Catholic Worker** and had asked me to come out to the hospital to see him that Sunday afternoon. I had been speaking first that morning to the Catholic Evidence Guild, then over the radio and afterwards to a gathering of the Third Order Franciscans. The latter engagement had made me half an hour late and the Governor readily understood the delay.

He himself is a Third Order man, and as such pledged to peace. Approached once to join another Catholic organization, he had said that the one great association he was a member of was enough for him.

Opposed to Force

The first thing we talked about was the recent congress of conscientious objectors held in Boundbrook, N. J., during the month, at which he had been scheduled to speak and where he could not show up on account of his illness.

“How I wanted to attend that conference!” he said, eagerly hitching himself up on his pillows. He is a young man, haggard from the strain of the last few years of conflict in which he has been engaged, but one felt the moral force there was in the man as he lay there talking. There had been not more than half a hundred at the conference and they the obscure and the unknown, members of groups all over the country who are opposed to the use of armed force in settling disputes, whether civil or international.

“I couldn’t get there,” he repeated, “but I am going to deliver the speech I intended for that conference over the radio, a national hookup on Friday night. Listen in, won’t you, and tell the Catholic Worker crowd in N.Y. to listen in.”

Simplicity

Evidently voluntary poverty was part of the Governor’s credo too, for the room he was in at the University Hospital, one of the largest in the country, was like a small hall bedroom. He was reading a book of Hilaire Belloc and listening to the radio to while away the hours. For days he had not been permitted visitors, but he had insisted on seeing a representative of The Catholic Worker, and I was honored indeed at the interest of this man who stands so high in public esteem and public office.

It was not only the recent industrial troubles in the state of Michigan, and the tremendous exertion of moral force that had to be expended to settle those troubles that had occasioned the Governor’s illness. It was the entire business of government which had rested on his shoulders. Before he was Governor he had been Mayor, and before that a judge. His life has been dedicated towards the common good.

Reforms

Besides supplanting special pleaders and self interest groups with character and ability in government, he had brought about legislation, –unemployment compensation, old age assistance, occupational disease laws and a labor relations law. He had put through a sweeping administrative reorganization, forming new departments of public assistance, department of corrections and a State Hospital Commission.

Without Violence

“And in the midst of it all, there was the General Motors strike,” the Governor said. “The record will show that all through the General Motors strike conferences we insisted, both orally and in writing, on obedience to the court order. When, on the day of its issuance, the sheriff asked for advice regarding its enforcement, we requested him to defer action for the moment because we felt a settlement was imminent. Five days later the strike was peacefully settled, sending a quarter of a million men back to work.

“Within a few days thereafter peace was made in the U.S. Steel controversy. We claim no credit for that, but parties vitally interested will tell you that it would not have been made then if the example had not been set in Michigan.

“In the Chrysler strike involving 60,000 persons, a friendly conference and the rule of reason were again resorted to successfully. In 24 hours after its settlement the Hudson and Rio difficulties involving 12,000 and 3,500 persons respectively were brought to peaceful conclusions.

“All this, let me repeat, was done with no force and violence, no loss of life, no loss of civil liberty, and, best of all, no rancor and ill-will left behind.

Dignity of Men

“We stand for law enforcement. We believe in the protection of property rights. We believe in intelligent obedience to duly constituted authority. Without these things democracy cannot survive and personal liberty will be of little value to our people. But above all, we believe in the dignity of human personality and human life. We will guarantee the protection of these rights and institutions to our people, but in doing so we do not intend to plunge them into civil war and economic paralysis by abuse of power and excesses on the part of those in authority.

“Government must never become a hateful or oppressive thing in the minds of the people. It can be firm but first it must be just and in such manner establish itself in the hearts of all good men as their friend.”

Support

We left Governor Murphy, assuring him of the support and the prayers of the Catholic Worker Group, and feeling assured myself of the power of this man and the moral strength which will play a significant part in the efforts of those in this country working for peace, civil and international.

“Write to me,” he said as I left, and I assured him that we would keep in touch with each other. And today, the feast of St. Francis, we have sent him Maritain’s recent book, “Freedom in the Modern World,” referring him to the great essay. “On the Purification of Means,” a plea for passive resistance.