

THE VAL-DES-BOIS FACTORY COUNCIL



LETTER TO AN INDUSTRIALIST

By Mr Léon HARMEL



APRIL 1894



THIS EDITION

This is an English translation of the original French text, made for the website leonharmel.com in 2026. It follows the original sentence by sentence, without cuts or additions.

The text is given in full, translated from the 1894 edition. It has been typeset in the spirit of the original: title pages and headings follow the layout of the book.

The numbered notes are those of the original work; here they are numbered continuously from beginning to end.

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Version of 4 October 2026.

LETTER TO AN INDUSTRIALIST

ON THE FACTORY COUNCIL

Val-des-Bois, 2 April 1894.

Dear Sir,

You ask us to tell you about the “Factory Council.” We shall tell you how this institution came into being at Val-des-Bois, what its spirit and its method are, how it is composed and chosen, and what its functions are. We shall then watch it at work through extracts from its minutes.

I

We did not arrive at agreement on professional matters at the first attempt; minds were prepared first of all by religious action, then by economic action.

It was in 1861 that we began the workers’ associations. Our first aim was to rebuild the Christian family by bringing together, while taking ages into account, those who have the same functions in the home: the fathers, the mothers, the sons, the daughters.

We devoted our efforts to the religious restoration of our population. The apostolate of like by like appeared to us as the most practical means in our district, where the large concentrations of workers and the constant demand for labour made the direct influence of the employer difficult.

That is why the workers’ councils were called, from the very first days, to an important and continuous action.

The religious organisation was completed in ten years; we then began on the economic side: the approved suppliers, cooperation,

direct purchasing, etc.

As early as 1875, we had established, under the name of *Christian Corporation of Val-des-Bois*, a religious and economic association comprising the families of the employers and of the workers¹.

There remained only one step to reach the professional side. We were led to it by the gradual and natural development of our organisation. In 1883 we set up the Professional Council (or factory council), composed of delegates chosen from among the longest-serving workers, in sufficient number for every workroom to be represented. This institution was codified in the statutes of the Val-des-Bois mixed union of 2 August 1885.

II

What are the spirit and the method of our factory council? It bears the mark of the family atmosphere which is truly the atmosphere of our works.

It seems to us that the various methods which have governed human institutions can be classed under two headings: the parliamentary method and the family method.

The first, which we call parliamentary, is the triumph of the written law. It is inspired by the mistrust that drives adversaries. It assumes everywhere opposed interests which must be defended with equal means. Thus in the family, when the head happens to die, some gentleman steps in, on the pretext of defending the children against their own mother. The odious joins the ridiculous in this legislative intervention, whose frequent result is the ruin of the orphans it is supposed to protect. Thus, in the world of labour, interests are presumed to be contrary, and the official organisations, which claim to

1. See the *Manuel d'une Corporation chrétienne*.

aim at peace, most often have no other effect than to stir up war, and consequently to harm the interests of both sides.

The method we call the family method is based on custom. No doubt perseverance is needed to restore it where it no longer exists. But we must admit with Mr Le Play that the restoration of customs in the workshops is the best means of ensuring peace between the different factors of labour.

The family method presumes that interests are distinct but bound up with one another. It seeks first of all to establish mutual confidence, the source of all agreement, just as mistrust is the source of discord. We believe that the employers and the workers of one and the same factory form a workers' family, a name given by analogy with that of the domestic family for the home². They may be divided without ceasing for all that to belong to the same family, just as war may reign in the home without those who make it up ceasing to form a social unit. The bonds between the employer and the workers are formed at the moment of the contract of hiring, and from that day a higher community of interests exists. Indeed the ruin of the industry brings with it the ruin of the workers, whereas its prosperity enables the employer who is aware of his duty to ensure the prosperity of the workers.

What is the bond of confidence? It is first of all direct and personal relations, for which nothing can be a substitute. It is next the feelings of justice and brotherhood inspired by the Gospel.

Personal relations began with the works, by means of the councils, which held regular meetings where employers and workers exchanged their thoughts with all the openness of a family. This practice of the councils has already trained us ourselves. We have seen with what tact and discretion the employer must act when he wishes to encourage the workers' initiative, and how easily he could diminish

2. See *Le Catéchisme du patron*, Offices of the *Corporation*, 262, Boulevard Saint-Germain, Paris.

it without meaning to, if he did not, so to speak, set aside his authority. Experience had likewise shown us with what delicacy the workers' councils act when they feel in the employer's heart the heart of a friend.

From then on, we had only to apply to professional interests the method practised for so many years. That is what we did. The one of my sons who is in charge of the factory council has often told me: "I have only one role in the council, that of noting down the requests and of meeting them as soon and as fully as possible."

III

How is the factory council composed and chosen? What are its functions? It is composed of one worker for each workroom, appointed by the Union Council from among the longest-serving workers. Its meetings with one of the employers take place every fortnight. Absolute regularity of the meetings is the condition of fruitful action. If the employer in charge of this council is absent, a clerk takes his place, so that there is never any interruption. Those present sign the register, and the minutes are taken during the meeting itself, in telegraphic style.

The functions of the council are defined by article 2 of the general rules of the mill: "It is particularly charged with taking care to prevent accidents, by pointing out defective things, and by watching over the working of the ventilation and hygiene equipment and of the bells for starting and stopping. It records accidents and their causes.

"It is the spokesman of its comrades in whatever may concern each of them in professional matters, and it maintains a good spirit in the workshop, by seeking to be of service, without impairing the discipline necessary to the good running of the mill.

"Finally it deals with apprenticeship and with vocational training."

As the factory council is composed only of men, we thought we ought to complete it with a special council, composed of one woman worker for each women's workshop. The workshop councillors meet every month at the Sisters' house, under the chairmanship of one of the employers or of a lady of the employer's family. They deal in particular with apprenticeship and with the services to be rendered to their companions. (Art. 3 of the mill rules.)

IV

In studying the minutes, we find in them a variety of subjects dealt with, which we class under the following headings:

1. *Preventing accidents.* Fans have been installed in almost all the workrooms, as indicated by the council. Bells communicate with the stoker and allow him to give signals in the workrooms. Protective devices for the gearing and for the engines, gears to be covered, floors or paving to be repaired.

Formerly our women workers were very tired by the heat in the preparing room; by means of humidifiers and fans a bearable temperature has been reached. The workers asked for an arrangement for heating the food for breakfast, and in general coffee or a hot drink (other than wine or spirits) during the day; it was arranged. For the lavatories: disinfection with chlorine, cleanliness, decency. Drinking water in all the workrooms. Recently a mask was requested for the logwood sawyer; he was provided with one the following week.

Before the meeting, the secretary reads the *Bulletin de l'Association des Industriels pour les accidents* (6, rue Chaussée d'Antin, Paris) and reads out the passages of interest. He does the same for the *Bulletin de la Société de protection des apprentis*.

2. *Discipline.* We find it very worthwhile to take no measure without consulting our council. It may also propose measures. It is at its request that for ten years the barbers have been admitted into the

mill on Saturdays, to avoid the moral drawbacks that had been pointed out on account of shaving on Sundays. As soon as the law of November 1892 was promulgated, the council studied its application to the mill, and it was with the council that our new rules were drawn up. At present we are beginning to study the decree on hygiene in factories. On occasion, the times of leaving and returning are discussed, for a better organisation. The housewives have long been allowed to leave half an hour before the regular time.

3. *Services to be rendered.* The large number of councillors does not always allow comrades to be discussed in the general meeting, besides which some prefer to do so in private. The employer who looks after the factory council has a special notebook in which he writes down the requests, which he then seeks to meet himself or through the staff clerk. Examples of requests: for the apprentices there is a graded minimum wage from 13 to 18 years of age, and the accountant may forget the ages. Piecework may be unfavourable for various reasons, several of which can be avoided: cutting or change of lot, faulty setting-up of the machine, draughts, etc. It may be in a worker's interest to change machine or neighbour. Care is taken that members of the same family are placed near one another and can help one another in their work. Finally some workers believe, rightly or wrongly, that they have been wronged by the foreman; the councillor studies the matter and gives his opinion to the employer.

4. *Apprenticeship.* We are very anxious that the young people should be trained and become skilled in the trade. For that, care must be taken that they are taught by intelligent workers who take an interest in them. At the forge, in the joinery, among the spinners, as in the women's workshops, the factory councillors seek to interest comrades in their protégés. This question is discussed at every meeting; each one reports on the apprentices of his workroom.

As you see, dear Sir, the factory council, as it has worked for eleven years at Val-des-Bois, is quite different from the arbitration

council and the conciliation council: it is rather a family council. The relations of confidence and affection are maintained on the one hand by the regularity and frequency of the meetings, on the other by the individual relations that each councillor can easily have with the employer or, failing him, with the staff clerk.

Misunderstandings do not have time to produce their unfortunate effects. The abuses so often laid at the door of foremen are greatly reduced, if not done away with altogether, and the foremen have recognised from experience that their authority has nothing to fear from this organisation. Peace reigns in our little society, and the clearness of people's eyes everywhere shows the calm of their minds.

Please accept, dear Sir, the assurance of my affectionate devotedness.

Léon Harmel.