

abused consumers and exploited workers in the "bad old days." The free society will never have much of a chance as long as most people believe that it has been tried and has failed. It is no good saying that businessmen have learned to behave themselves better under the pressure of interventionist legislation and union disciplines. For people correctly ask themselves: if the free market could not protect workers and consumers from the predations of business and if it could not provide security against health and old-age hazards without the intervention of government before, why should it do so now?

Statism seems always to advance. Politicians and leftist ideologues daily blame businessmen and the market economy for the bad results of the treacherous villainy of government. Although inflation, unemployment, energy shortages, and their even more wretched consequences all trace to government interventionism, the people believe it when they are told that business is to blame. Why are they so prone to believe the worst of the best public servants the world has ever had—the business firms which feed, clothe, and otherwise provide for us so munificently while government only takes, and takes, and persons such as Ralph Nader have never succeeded in producing anything other than exploitation of the con-

sumer in the name of "consumerism"?

People don't think very well of government, either, it is true. But this fact serves only to emphasize how suspicious they are of the free market and of businessmen. Trusting government very little, they trust business even less and are therefore prone to believe the worst of it. Why? Let us examine one area of public policy which may provide a clue to the answer.

The Law of Labor Relations

Consider the law of labor relations. Scarcely a more destructive field of interventionist public policy exists. This policy, though dating back to the 1920s, rests on five still prevalent ideas: (1) that employers and employees are natural antagonists; (2) that in this antagonistic relationship the employers have all the advantages; (3) that in a market economy the employer is driven by competitive exigency to use his power-edge to abuse and exploit his employees; (4) that protection from such abuse lies in strong unionism and collective bargaining which the government can promote only by giving worker-organizations special legal privileges at the expense of the common-law rights of employers and anti-union employees; (5) that the common-law courts cannot be trusted to administer such a regime

of special union privileges, so they must be replaced by administrative tribunals (such as the National Labor Relations Board), agencies which can be relied upon to implement the pro-union policies and not to be bothered by what Felix Frankfurter called the "pernicious abstractions" of liberty and property and the rule of law which tend to influence the decisions of the regular courts.

Widely Popularized

Practically everyone accepts as unshakeable truth one or more of these commonly held beliefs: university professors, preachers, high school and grammar school teachers, businessmen, journalists, "intellectuals at large," novelists, comic-strip creators, singers, dancers, actors, newspaper columnists, TV commentators. How then can the general public help taking these premises as gospel? And if they share the belief that the common law and the market economy, left unhampered, will abuse workers, how can they prefer free labor markets under the rule of common law? And if the general public does not want them, what response is to be expected from politicians, the turgid mirrors of muddy public opinion?

The big unions are today no longer as popular as they used to be. Still, no one is seriously proposing that the special privileges which ac-

count for their destructive social effects be repealed. No government, even today, with union popularity at a low, seriously considers repealing the existing pro-union legislation.

The situation is even worse. In fact, the moves in Washington are for *more* special privileges for unions. Each year lately the great political battle has been between those who wish to mulct the public with still more favorable laws for unions and those who say "thus far and no further." To repeat, proposals to repeal existing pro-union laws are rarely if ever made, and when made they are always ignored. Why is this so?

Ruling Ideas

There is an argument going on in libertarian circles between those who contend that *ideas* rule the political world and those who believe that *interests* rule. Probably the dispute here is basically a terminological one. Interests and ideas are, as Mises might have said (if he thought the dispute worth noticing), congeneric and concentric. Decisions about what interests to pursue are shaped by values and ideas, and values and ideas are interacting phenomena. Much more important than this, while proposals may be made by interest groups largely out of base greed, with ideas secondary in their calculations, the big question for them and for the country lies