

The protection of the working classes in Switzerland

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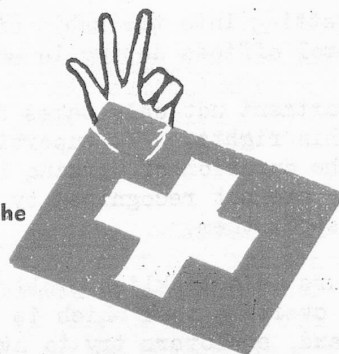
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THE PROTECTION OF THE WORKING CLASSES IN SWITZERLAND.

The Swiss working classes may be said to enjoy a privileged position. In this country, the working man is in fact protected first and foremost by the respect in which he is held by other classes of the population, by the comprehensive attitude of the whole nation in regard to social problems and by the support of the authorities and courts of justice. Besides this moral protection, various social laws have been in vigor for many years, and the system of insurances, pension and health funds long in existence. In brief, Switzerland has established a very satisfactory code of social laws, the imperfections of which are constantly being amended and improved.

In order that the law should be well and truly applied by all, the Federal authorities have created a Factory Inspection Department. The four chief travelling inspectors of this Department, each assisted by a certain number of collaborators, look closely into working conditions in factories all over the country. These men are not police officials, but act rather as arbitrators, often in an advisory capacity, and collaborate with employers on the one hand, and trade unions on the other, in order to ensure the well-being of workmen.

Their sphere of activity extends over some 8,500 factories, and in 1940 their task was not an easy one, for in addition to the usual problems they had to cope with difficulties caused by the mobilization of a great number of workmen. If Swiss industry were suffering from a depression, the temporary loss of a certain number of specialized staff would not matter so much. But as the war is drawing out and Swiss industry has a heavy fabrication schedule to meet for national defence requirements, many branches of industry are working full time. The inspectors have therefore done all in their power to help factory owners to face their new problems.

This temporary task has not, however, made them forget their permanent duties. They have continued to supervise the maintenance of hygienic working conditions. Each workman must have sufficient light and air. Factory owners whose premises are too small or badly lighted, are obliged to ameliorate their installations. It is true that during the last twenty-five years all builders of factories have made it a point of honor to create model plants where conditions are ideal and the workmen do not feel imprisoned.

The factory inspectors have another task, rather more delicate to fulfil; that of suppressing the use of harmful substances, a practice which has become more frequent during the last two years, owing to shortage of first quality raw materials. For instance, acids and fuel substitutes often give off toxic or inflammable vapors. It is notable that the number of accidents has not increased, despite intensification of production.

The inspectors also control goods and passenger elevators and emergency exit doors, and encourage the replacement of old-fashioned narrow rail trucks by rubber tyred electric tractors.

Swiss industrialists are getting into the habit of submitting the plans of new works to official control offices acting in an advisory capacity.

The Factory Inspection Department not only takes care of the working man's health, but also protects his rights. It supervises the strict application of work contracts ruling the duration of working hours, night work, salaries and vacations. The latter are not recognized by Swiss factory legislation, although most employers respect them.

The duration of working hours is a ticklish problem to solve. Factory workers often prefer to do overtime work which is better paid than ordinary day work. On the other hand, employers try to avoid increasing their payroll for temporary work, even if they have to pay more in overtime. The inspector must therefore protect the workman against himself and safeguard his health, and at the same time help the unemployed who are perhaps waiting at the factory doors. It is only right that there should be a little work for all, rather than too much for some and none for others.

Legislation ruling working hours also rules the work of women and minors. It is forbidden to employ women for night or Sunday work, while the minimum working age for minors was raised from 14 to 15 years in 1940.

Finally, factory inspectors also act as protectors of the working classes by constantly encouraging the foundation of relief funds. The Swiss working classes enjoy far greater advantages today than in the last war. Almost all receive unemployment relief when necessary. Mobilized men receive part of their usual salary through the Salary Compensation Funds. In several branches of industry they also receive family grants, and insurance against accidents has been obligatory for the last fifty years.

Swiss factory legislation is, of course, not yet perfect. It is, however, open to improvement, and that is the aim of all men of good will, trade union leaders and many employers who have kept their sense of social duty alive, while the State itself does everything in its power to intensify the collaboration between capital and labor and to make it durable and sincere.

This is the secret underlying the social peace which today reigns in Switzerland.

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NEWS FROM SWITZERLAND.

Switzerland's wheat supplies. (Berne). Competent authorities have lately declared several times that Switzerland's food situation is - if not disturbing as compared with that of other European countries - at least sufficiently serious to make it imperative that production be encouraged by every possible means and reserve stocks utilized as rationally as possible. Although the production of bread cereals and fodder was fairly satisfactory in 1941, it cannot meet all the requirements of the non-agricultural population. On a total production of 25,000 truck-loads of wheat 9 to 10,000 are required to cover the producers' own bread needs; a further 1,500 to 2,000 truck-loads must be reckoned for waste and wheat which is only good for fodder, and finally 3,000 truck-loads must be reserved for sowing. There therefore remain 12,000 truck-loads available for the non-agricultural population, whereas 50,000 are required. Under normal producing conditions, Swiss agriculture can cover the bread requirements of the population for four months. By intensifying production and mixing a certain proportion of potato flour with ordinary flour, it would be possible to cover the needs of the Swiss population for about six months. For the remainder, Switzerland depends on her cereal imports. Up to now, bread consumption has been diminished without rationing, but it is not certain that the measures now in force will prove sufficient in the long run. All depends on arrivals of wheat from abroad, and these have been far from satisfactory for some time past.

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