

Labour problems

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LABOUR PROBLEMS.

by THÉO CHOPARD.

In all the industrial countries protests are being raised against the rapid and alarming increase in the consumption of analgesic products, against headaches and insomnia, as also of medicines which act as "pick me ups". In Switzerland, alone, where there are only five million inhabitants, the sale of such products attains the figure of 150 million units per year. Inquiries have revealed that tens of thousands of persons take between ten and twenty tablets per day, and even if hundreds of thousands take less, nevertheless their consumption of such drugs is regular. The abuse of such analgesics being just as great elsewhere, it may be said that tens of millions of individuals participate in this toxi-mania, which would appear to be spreading to all classes of the population. Indeed, this phenomenon would seem to be very marked among the working classes. Quite obviously, it constitutes a social problem, all the more so as the enquiries made show that in the majority of cases, the abuse of such products is due, originally, to psychological troubles which relate to the family or to the job, to being overworked, or to fears for the future; in less than half the cases, the abuse of these medicines really comes from headaches, sleeplessness or other physical ills, but even these are generally the consequence of psychological conflicts.

All this would go to show that the abuse of these products is due to a serious lack of adaptability on the part of the individual, to the technical society of today, to its cadence and to its exigencies. The proportion of women who yield to this abuse is approximately twice as great as that of men; it is much more marked among women with outside jobs, than among the housewives. This would seem to prove that the economic activities of today make too excessive demands upon women and, especially, that the organisation of work and its climate, do not take its nature sufficiently into account.

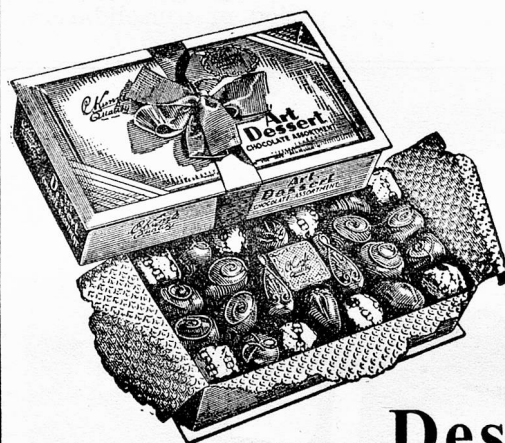
Efforts are being made everywhere to discover a means to put an end to this abuse. It has been suggested that there should be more severe regulations governing the sale of these products, as well as their advertising. Excellent. But, what should be done first of all, is to fight the causes of this abuse. Attention should be paid, above all, to noise, to the physical and psychical consequences of our present gigantic urban concentrations, to the excessive speed at which work is being done, to the organisation of work and to human relations on the job itself.

The following example will serve to illustrate this necessity. A number of young women working on an assembly line, in a German plant, complained of violent headaches, the pain being in the nape of the neck. Both treatment and medicines brought no relief whatsoever. After a week's treatment in hospital, however, the pains disappeared, but they started again immediately when work was resumed. The management of the firm, which was at its wits' end, finally applied to a specialist in work psychology. In a few days' time, the latter discovered that these headaches were caused by fear, this fear, in its turn, being due to the fact that the assembly line was placed in such a way that the foreman had to pass behind the workers, when engaged in controlling their work.

These young girls never knew at what moment they would be controlled and lived in a state of perpetual anxiety. After the assembly line had been re-arranged so that the control was effected in front of the workers, so that they could see the foreman on his rounds, and were able to prepare themselves psychically for the control, the headaches disappeared as by enchantment. Moreover, the proportion of spoiled work and wastage, which had been very high until then, declined in a most astonishing manner, from one day to the other.

It would not be difficult to multiply similar examples of irrational or un-psychological organisation of work, liable to produce psychic troubles, followed by physical ills. When one thinks of the large number of plants and of people who work there, one feels convinced that it would only need just a little more attention paid to means for mitigating labour disputes and for increasing the workers' happiness in their jobs, in order to obtain an appreciable decrease in the consumption of pain-relieving drugs. This abuse, which is too to be found to a particularly marked extent among those women who have an outside job, in addition to running a house and looking after their children, must have a solution found for it, which will render women's work more easy. One thing which comes to one's mind, is the extension of part-time work. One can also hope that the reduction of working hours and the gradual generalisation of the five-day week, will contribute towards a reduction in the use of analgesic drugs and their consequences. In any case, efforts should be directed not so much to the establishment of legislative measures which may prove ineffectual, as to the eradication of the causes which constitute the origin of the scourge.

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