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AN EDITOR SPEAKS.

by CARL J. KELLER.

As is the case in most of the other European countries, the problem of finding sufficient qualified technical labour for industry is becoming more and more acute, in Switzerland also.

Industrialisation in Switzerland is steadily on the increase but, at the same time, the technical staff available is growing too old. When assuming that the average economic activity of a man amounts to thirty years, our country requires solely for the current renewal of the entire Swiss strength of from 5,000 to 6,000 mechanical and electric engineers, at least one thousand students in this branch, each year. The lack of technically trained staff exists not only in the machine industry and in the building trade, but also in other branches of industry. The time has gone by, when firms — at any rate the smaller ones — could manage without any technical staff. Moreover, technicians are being employed to an ever increasing extent by public works and by commercial undertakings.

That the situation does, in fact, give rise to some anxiety is shown by the example of the Federal Technological College in Zurich. Whereas, in the scholastic year of 1947-48, there were more than 3,200 Swiss students registered in this Institute, which is financed by the State, their number declined in 1956/57 to only 2,200, i.e. it decreased by one-third within the space of nine years.

This development is rendered still more acute by the fact that a considerable percentage of engineers who have graduated from the Federal Technological College, have emigrated to other countries, more particularly to the United States.

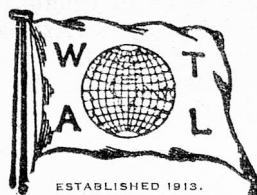
Should this trend be maintained, it will then have the worst possible effect, in a few years' time, on Swiss economy and will lead to an extremely critical situation. Switzerland being as she is, an Alpine and inland country, without any raw materials of her own, the production and export of high-quality goods

is a matter of vital necessity. She can, therefore, only carry out these essential requirements for Swiss economy, in a smooth and regular way if she has sufficient engineers and technicians at her disposal.

The reasons for this dangerous penury of executive technical staff, are, to a large extent, the same as are to be found in the other industrial countries. A disastrous rôle is played in this respect, chiefly, by the increasing levelling that is taking place in regard to wages, i.e. the fact that unskilled or only semi-trained labour is being relatively over-paid, whilst the wages of the skilled craftsmen remain stationary. Of necessity, this state of affairs is conducive to the disappearance of any urge towards further training.

What is still more important than the reasons for the penury of technicians, is the question as to what can be done to promote the numerical increase of successors among the young generation to the existing skilled craftsmen. The most various suggestions have been made for the solution of this problem: for one thing, more apprentices have been accepted in the Machine and Metallurgical industry, during the last few years, their number having risen by 15 per cent since 1954. Furthermore, plans are being made to increase the possibilities for technical training, to a considerable extent. In various towns, such as, for instance, Lucerne, Aarau and Basle, new technical schools are to be built and the existing schools are to be enlarged. Efforts are also being made to interest young people in technical careers by means of special trade councillors, and by taking them to visit plants and ambulatory exhibitions. Promising capacities in young people are helped financially. For instance, there has existed for many years past — as is the case also in the United States — a Scholarship Fund, set up by the employers, which is now going to be extended still more.

In any case, what is important is the fact that nowadays the problem of the shortage in technicians has been realised in all its significance. It now remains to be hoped that the long term measures which have been started, will gradually lead to its solution.



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