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LABOUR PROBLEMS.

By THÉO CHOPARD.

Production means distribution. Industrial expansion is accompanied by a prodigious development of the distributing machinery: of trade, of insurance, of transport, of publicity, of banking and of administration of every kind. It is, therefore, quite natural that proportion of and the demand for salaried staff increase more rapidly than those in respect of manual workers. For the first time, in any big industrial country, the proportion of salaried staff in the United States has become greater than that of the manual workers. This is also the case in regard to the demand.

In spite of this, there exists a paradoxical situation in that salaried staff who are over forty years of age have great difficulty in finding a job, or even of maintaining the one they already have. This is an absurd state of affairs. It is just as if business undertakings knowingly deprive themselves of an essential factor of success — namely, experience. Here is a typical example of such ridiculous behaviour: An export firm puts the following advertisement in a paper: "Young employee required, not more than thirty years of age, possessing thorough knowledge and extensive experience of foreign markets". Surely, anyone should be able to realise that such experience can only be obtained after many long years on the job and that only an employee of from forty to fifty years of age is capable of filling such a post in a satisfactory manner?

What can be done to counteract such absurd and socially unjust behaviour? The following story, which comes from the U.S.A., tells us what should be done. A very rich old lady in Los Angeles was always dressed by a very smart "haute couture" firm in that town. For years and years she had always been served by an elderly assistant with whom she was very satisfied. One day, when the old lady came to the shop, she was received by a very young man, who knew neither what her tastes were nor what she wanted. After a little while of inept service on the part of the young man the old customer grew impatient and asked for the elderly saleswoman who had always served her so well. Somewhat embarrassed, the manager had to admit that she had been dismissed because "she no longer gave a modern effect." On hearing this the old lady observed: "She was younger than I am, however; so, if she is too old to sell, I am too old to buy", and left the shop, never to return.

This is not, however, the end of the story. The old lady was very energetic, besides being the President of a women's association possessing more than ten thousand members, at least half of whom were more than forty years of age. The old lady appealed to them in the following manner: "What will happen to the tradespeople if each one of us refuses to buy anything in a shop which does not employ at least one person who is our own age?" In their turn, the members of the Association sent out an appeal to several thousand of their elderly acquaintances, possessing a considerable purchasing power, asking them: "Do you consider it to be right to dismiss employees who are younger than you yourselves, on the pretext that they are too old to do their work?" In view of the fact that a number of these persons were also shareholders in various firms, the

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effects of this new-style propaganda became visible very rapidly. Everywhere employees who had been dismissed or relegated to subordinate functions because of their age were reinstated in their former jobs. This story does not require any particular commentaries. It is exemplary. One wishes that it might be repeated elsewhere, as it would do far more for the solution of an important social problem than many a State intervention.

This behaviour, against which the old lady of Los Angeles and her friends waged such a successful battle, is all the more absurd in that the increasing complexity of the economic machinery, which we spoke of at the beginning of this talk, demands a bigger proportion of employees who possess experience. This, however, can only be obtained at the price of many years of labour—and of youth. This complexity of the economic machine requires a long training. This, in its turn, needs money. Thus, it is in the interests of the firms to have a stable staff at their disposal. An employee who has been trained at great expense, and then leaves, constitutes a dead loss. It is a well-known fact that, today, transfers of labour from one job to another are abnormally numerous. Is not this phenomenon the consequence of the systematic preference which is now given to young people, to the detriment of their elders? For, after all, it is only natural that young people want to improve their position and to increase their knowledge, and that, therefore, they are less stable than the others. The stability and the experience of

the staff, however, constitute two elements of the prosperity of a business. But, now, this is enough to show the absurdity of that behaviour which so annoyed the old lady of Los Angeles.

OUR NEXT ISSUE.

Our next issue will be published on Friday, November 15th, 1957. We take this opportunity of thanking the following subscribers for their kind and helpful donations over and above their subscription: H. Furrer, C. B. Adam, Dr. V. Umbricht (Berne), B. Frick, G. E. Suter, H. Monney, Swiss Club Manchester, E. Goodbehere, W. Tschuy, C. O. Brullhard, J. H. Speich.



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