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LABOUR PROBLEMS.

by THÉO CHOPARD.

If one takes into account the overtime hours worked, then a good many European industries still go in for a 52- to 55-hour working week. In the United States the acceleration taking place in regard to technical progress already makes it possible to envisage the introduction, in about ten years' time, of the 30-hour working week. In Europe, on the other hand, all kinds of Customs barriers, routine, conservatism and a good deal less mobility in regard to manpower, make it impossible to give the same drive to the rationalisation of industry, to the distribution of commodities, and to administration, whilst at the same time proceeding to reduce as rapidly and as effectively the number of working hours.

Whereas in the United States the 30-hour week is no longer a Utopian dream, in Europe the effective 40-hour week is still a distant ideal. However, the economic unification of our Continent, which now belongs to the order of possible things, may possibly accelerate more rapidly than we think the reduction in working time.

The possibility which now exists of bringing down the working week, on the other side of the Atlantic, to 30 hours, raises various extremely interesting problems. The reduction of ten hours, as compared with existing conditions, which is now being contemplated, will open up all kinds of possibilities of choice for the workers. It will not only increase their leisure time, but also the *margin of liberty*. This is an important fact. Let us make ourselves clear. At present the length of working hours is regulated schematically for everyone. Its reduction will offer the means for regulating working hours in a more flexible manner. The 48-hour week offers no other solution except that of working from Monday to mid-day on Saturday. The 44-hour week constitutes some progress and allows of a 5-day working week. In the United States, where a reduction of the working week from 40 to 35 hours is now on the agenda, some people are asking themselves whether it would not be preferable to maintain the 40-hour week and to increase vacations from two to eight weeks, or else from two to four weeks, whilst at the same time giving a three-day week-end every fortnight. Later on one might, instead of cutting down working hours to only thirty a week, fix them at thirty-five hours per week, but compensate for this by granting eight weeks' holiday per year and three free days at week-ends. The Collective Agreements which render possible a variation in the regulation of work, in accordance with the trades and professions, the business undertakings and, even, the categories of workers employed

within the same plant, make it possible, as we have just said, to reduce working hours "à la carte" or, in other words, at choice. It is possible that "white collar" workers may wish to have longer holidays, whilst the manual workers will prefer to have one week less.

It goes without saying that the prospect of a reduction of working time to 30 hours per week, in the United States, presupposes, in view of the increase in industrial output, wages which will possess the same purchasing power as those in force at present. However, in ten years' time, a 30-hour week will represent the minimum which is indispensable in order to ensure production. Thus, the workers will have the possibility of working longer hours, i.e. overtime, but this without prejudice to their health. The workers will therefore have the choice open to them between more leisure and new products and commodities. It is thought that a large proportion of them will give preference to the second solution and will work overtime, so that should there be any slump in orders one will need to proceed to reduce the number of overtime hours worked, all the more so as this can be done without any prejudice to the workers, in view of the fact that the wages for a 30-hour week will correspond to those paid today in respect of a 40-hour week. It is also thought that, owing to the extension of the régime providing for a guaranteed yearly income, the earnings derived from a 30-hour working week will be guaranteed for one year or for 1700 hours. Thus, the reduction in working hours offers the possibility of increasing the security of employment.

It might happen, however, that industry will consider this scheme as going too far. In that case provision could be made that those workers who are subject to the 30-hour week but who are ready to work overtime, should renounce from any immediate payment in respect of overtime, in favour of delayed payment. Overtime work would be put down to their credit, and bring them in some interest. This money would be paid them should there be any slump in activities, in addition to the unemployment insurance benefits and the allocations from the firm's Relief Fund. Of course, all these are merely suppositions and prospects, but they certainly appear to be realisable. They show that the increase in productivity resulting from technical progress offers social solutions which may still appear somewhat Utopian to us in Europe, but which may very well become realities for our children.

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