

Comment : first signs of unemployment

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● COMMENT.—

First Signs of Unemployment

Switzerland has known many periods of unemployment and recession in its history, but these are sufficiently distant in the past to be remembered by only a minority of workers close to their retirement. There has been no employment problem since the end of the war—and 30 years of prosperity is enough for full employment to be considered today as the normal state of things.

Having been used for so long to a life of growing comfort and apparent security, the Swiss are all the more sensitive to signs that the situation might change. There were a little over 1,000 registered unemployed in Switzerland in January and 300 of them were in Canton Geneva.

For a workforce of 160,000 this only represented two per thousand of the active population. Many national economies are considered to be operating satisfactorily when this rate reaches 4 or 5 per cent. Unemployment in Geneva is still 30 times less important than in Britain as a whole. Yet these 300 out of work represent a massive increase on last year's figure. No more was needed to push the Canton's Socialists and Communists into tabling a motion calling on the Canton's State Council (Executive) to work out regulations that would guarantee the earnings of redundant workers. The cantonal unemployment fund which until now contained a derisory seven million francs was to be fed with new money taken from the rich by means of a new tax on higher incomes. This egalitarian solution, also put forward by the Socialists and Communists, was supported by a vast majority of the Great Council. The unemployment "crisis" has also re-activated the "Office Cantonal du Placement" which will virtually have the role of a labour exchange.

Although the scale of redundancies has been small, with most companies laying off small groups of workers progressively, there have been a few cases where the disappearance of jobs has taken a larger dimension. Thus the Roamer watches, near Solothurn, have laid off 230 employees and Bally's factory in the Valais have laid off 100. Both incidents have caused great concern among labour circles, particularly in the Valais.

Actually, it is very difficult to establish the real number of unemployed as very few of them register. The Swiss trade unions claim that there are ten times more unemployed than officially revealed. If their claim is correct there now could be ten thousand out of work. There is however no way of verifying this. The same is true of lay-offs or redundancies. Those that have been reported in the Press, mainly in the watch industry, only account for part of them since factories do not always report minor redundancies involving small groups of workers.

P.M.B.