

# Labour problems

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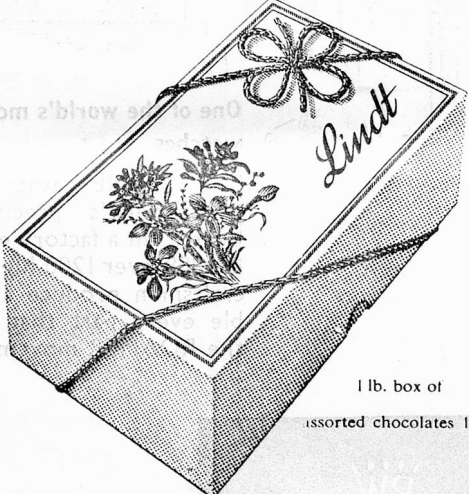
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## LABOUR PROBLEMS.


By THÉO CHOPARD.

The Swiss Federation of Trade Unions has just taken a decision which has aroused great interest throughout the country. This decision is not solely of local import. *It affects the very idea of trade union policy.* What is the decision? A political party has launched a Popular Initiative which has for its purpose the introduction into the Federal Constitution of an Article which enjoins the factories and plants to limit their working time to 44 hours per week, and this within the space of one year. The Federation of Trade Unions has issued a recommendation to the workers to reject this Initiative.

This decision may appear to be very surprising. What! The Federation of Trade Unions is opposed to a reduction in working hours? Certainly not! It considers, however, *that all social claims must be adapted to economic possibilities and formulated in such a manner as to prevent the occurrence of economic difficulties and perturbations* — the brunt of which is always borne by the workers. The Initiative advocates a reduction of four hours per week in working time — which corresponds to the granting of an additional month's holidays per year, or to an increase in wages amounting to nearly 10% each year. And this at a time when competition is becoming intensified on the international markets. The application of such a measure carries with it the risk of weakening, in a dangerous manner, the capacity for competition of Swiss economy, and of thus having repercussions on the labour market.

Moreover, this Initiative, while demanding a reduction of four hours right away, *does not provide for any compensation for the loss which the workers will suffer in their earnings.* This loss will amount to four hours per week, and a month per year, and it is not at all certain that the Trade Unions will be able, at one go, to obtain such a considerable increase in wages. Even if they did manage to obtain it, this would have the effect of increasing the cost of production, of compromising the capacity for competition, of giving a fresh impulse to the cost-of-living and of creating new social tensions. Moreover, if working time were to be reduced suddenly by four hours the firms would be obliged, in order to compensate for the decline in production, to speed up the rhythm of work to the detriment of the workers' health, thus rendering illusory the benefits of shorter working hours.

For all these reasons the Federation of Trade Unions had decided, in 1955, in favour of a *gradual reduction* in working hours, to be achieved by means of direct negotiations between the employers and the Trade Unions. In several industries Collective Agreements have already been concluded, stipulating that there should be a *reduction in working time of one hour per week per year, accompanied by an integral compensation for loss of earnings.* This solution makes it possible for industry to digest — so to speak — the reduction in working hours without any economic perturbations. Already, a large proportion of wage earners are benefiting from this reduction, *and* the compensation for wages, so that any intervention as arbitrary as that implied in the Initiative is quite *superfluous*, all the more so as the principle of a progressive and contractual reduction in working hours is rapidly gaining ground.



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To all this the partisans of the Initiative retort that, in view of the fact that several branches of industry have already adopted the 46- or the 45-hour week, they will have no difficulty in reducing it to 44 hours and in shouldering the compensation for wages. They forget, however that these are the most flourishing branches of industry. In those in which the 47- or 48-hour week still exists and in which economic difficulties have got to be faced, as for instance in the textile, footwear and even watchmaking industries, a reduction in working hours carried out on such a massive scale, and at so rapid a rate, cannot be achieved without repercussions on employment. The Federation of Trade Unions points out, very rightly, that solidarity forbids one to think only of the workers in the prosperous industries, without taking any heed of the others. The Federation is not opposed to a Law on working hours which would, later on, *consolidate* the results acquired through the Collective Agreements, but it wants a Law which will sanction a gradual reduction in working hours.

And, finally, if the Federation is against this Initiative, this is because it considers that a political party which *does not possess any responsibility* for the defence of the interests of workers and of employment has no business to intervene in the regulation of labour conditions. It holds the view that it is for the employers and the workers, jointly, to know what is possible and what is not. The regulation of labour conditions and the solution of social problems should remain subject to the *electoral policy*. The Federation of Trade Unions is of the opinion that, should the concessions made by the employers prove to be insufficient, trade unionism is strong enough to-day to defend the claims which it considers to be legitimate.

#### AN APPEAL.

The Swiss Benevolent Society and the Swiss Churches in London appeal once again to all their compatriots for contributions in kind or in cash in order to provide a little extra cheer at Christmas for our fellow-citizens in need. Articles of clothing, including clean old garments (even if repaired) ready for wear, as well as household goods and furniture will be very much appreciated and gratefully received.

Kindly send parcels, preferably not later than 15th November, to Swiss Benevolent Society, 31 Conway Street, Fitzroy Square, London, W.1, and cash remittances to any one of the following addresses:—

Swiss Benevolent Society, 31 Conway Street, London, W.1; Rev. C. Reverdin, 7 Park View Road, Finchley, London, N.3; Frl. Pfr. D. Voegelin, c/o Swiss Hostel for Girls, 9 Belsize Grove, London, N.W.3; Rev. A. Lanfranchi, St. Ann's Church, Abbey Orchard Street, London, S.W.1.

#### COCKTAIL PARTY.

Monsieur and Madame Marcel Luy, previous to their departure from London, gave a cocktail party on Monday, 20th October, at their residence, 37 Albert Court, Kensington Gore, S.W.7.

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