

Labour problems

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LABOUR PROBLEMS.

By THÉO CHOPARD.

Mr. Arthur Steiner, the President of the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions, died recently in Lausanne at the age of sixty-two. Arthur Steiner embodied the Swiss conception of trade unionism and of the organisation of working conditions. This conception has brought us twenty years of social peace and of civic concord. During this period a steady improvement took place in the social climate, in industrial relations and in labour conditions. This evolution was not perturbed by any labour disputes. Arthur Steiner's idea is quite simple:

Switzerland does not possess any raw materials, her domestic market is tiny and her prosperity is based essentially on exports. This means that the living conditions of the workers and social institutions can only be improved if the expansion of the export trade is not hindered by any social conflicts. It is therefore necessary for the employees and the employers to consent to an adjustment — and this in a constant and peaceful manner — of these interests and to a settlement of their divergences within the framework of collective agreements and of joint committees, by means of an exchange of views, a permanent collaboration and of mutual concessions.

Such an adjustment is difficult and requires above all the observance of contracts — on both sides. It constitutes the essential foundation of social peace — perhaps, even, of peace itself. The development of contractual relations between employees and employers demands that engagements be kept on both sides. Employees and employers must, first of all, renounce from having recourse to force — the former to strikes, the latter to lock-outs. The trade unions must undertake to abstain from putting forward exaggerated claims, but industry, on the other hand, must, in a loyal manner, assure for the employees an equitable share in the output and the fruits of productivity. Output, however, can only increase if industry develops and improves its equipment. This it will do only if it possesses the assurance that its expansion will proceed freely, safe from any hazardous economic experiment and from any threat of dispossession. The conception of trade union policy affirmed by Arthur Steiner condemns nationalisation and all excessive interference on the part of the State. This, because an industry whose prosperity is based primarily on exports must remain capable of adapting itself, at any moment, to the new requirements of markets. Its initiative must not be paralyzed by any directivism. At the same time — so Steiner adds — one must never confuse economic freedom with anarchy. The practice of economic liberty presupposes for everyone — including the trade unions — respect for a discipline which has been freely accepted and stipulated in the collective agreements concluded by both sides. If one wants the employers to consent to an intensification of their collaboration with employees, and, more particularly, to the establishment of welfare schemes and social insurances that are administered in common, then it is also necessary for trade unionism to give up the principle of class struggle, and not to demand revolutionary changes. Only a short time ago Arthur Steiner remarked: To all those who believe that the domination of one class over another will solve all the problems, I would like

to recall the fact that nothing resembles a dictatorship as much as another dictatorship. And all dictatorships have this in common, everywhere and always — whatever may be the label attached to them — that it is the workers who draw the losing number and have to bear the brunt of the operation. Wherever the trade unions have lost their liberty, they are no longer in a position to be able to defend effectively the interests of the workers, and thus accomplish their mission.

This idea, defended by Arthur Steiner, and which is foreign to all dogmatism, has enabled Swiss trade unionism, through the conclusion of a great many contractual agreements with the employers, to achieve a considerable improvement in the living conditions of the Swiss workers, and this without any labour disputes or intervention on the part of the State in the question of wages. Arthur Steiner, President of the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions, symbolised a trade union policy, founded on conviction and confirmed by experience, that all social evils can be remedied without violence, if the two parties consent to collaborate in a loyal fashion and to respect their mutual engagements.

OUR NEXT ISSUE.

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