

Labour problems

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LABOUR PROBLEMS.

By THÉO CHOPARD.

Aid to the economically under-developed countries belongs to the Order of the Day. The solution of this problem is an urgent matter. It must contribute towards placing the peace of the world on more solid foundations, a peace based on justice and on solidarity.

But there are also highly developed countries, such as the United States and Switzerland, which also possess under-developed regions. And these regions also give rise to the problem of solidarity, only, this time, within the national framework. In Switzerland, for example, this problem applies to the High Valleys in the Alps. Their population is still a long way from participating in the general prosperity. The soil is poor and, moreover, it is parcelled out to a very large degree, so that it is not capable of providing food for the whole of the population. These valleys are becoming depopulated. Attracted by industry, the able men, especially the young ones, leave the mountains, in order to establish themselves in the towns on the plains. Mostly they work as labourers, for they have not learned any trade. Whilst the population in the plains lives in increasing comfort, the mountain people grow more and more poor. One's reason tells one that something must be done to put a stop to this state of affairs. Why not set up factories in the High Valleys? The electricity, which is to be found in the smallest Swiss hamlet, would make such a thing possible. A well-developed road network, numerous mountain railways, telfers in increasing numbers and telephones everywhere, which make it easy to attain the most far-flung valleys — all these things would seem to indicate that there is nothing to prevent the establishment of industries in these valleys. Several Swiss firms have made experiments in this regard. Indeed, one of these experiments has succeeded so well that the firm which undertook it is just about to open a second factory in a distant valley in the Canton of Valais, namely at St. Nicholas. The results achieved have proved the pessimists to be wrong when they alleged that the mountain population was incapable of furnishing the skilled workers required by modern industry. In a very short time several hundred men and women belonging to the farming class were taught how to do the work necessary for the manufacture of precision goods. Their desire to learn, and to emerge from their distressful conditions, coupled with an innate manual dexterity and a great faculty for adaptation, were the decisive elements of this success. After a short period of training, these men and women from the mountains are now able, in consequence of an appropriate rationalisation and equipment, to produce articles of precision exactly similar to those manufactured in the urban establishments belonging to the same firm down on the plains.

And what are the social results of this conclusive experiment? The men of St. Nicholas and of the surrounding villages no longer abandon their valley. Many of those who had left, have returned. The work is organised in shifts, so that it is possible for these new workers to have sufficient time to cultivate their land, which is now much better farmed than it used to be. The farmers can now buy fertilisers and proceed with improvements and repairs long overdue.

Their stock of cattle has increased. Dozens of new houses have been put up since the factory was opened; others have been repaired. The wretched furniture of yore has been renewed. Every child now has a bed of its own. Those who have visited the villages of the High Alps know what this means. As for the Commune, it is now free of all debts. Running water has been installed in every house. A secondary school has been built. The church has been renovated. The population is now able to put something in the Savings Bank. There is less illness in the place. In short, the industrialisation of the valley has put an end to the exodus of the population and it has achieved, without any subsidy or intervention on the part of the State, a veritable re-birth of the village.

Similar experiments have been attempted, with the same success in other valleys. Such transfers of industrial activities, from the plain to the mountains, do not present advantages solely for the benefit of the plants and of the population which is directly interested. They also have the effect of ensuring a more equitable distribution of the national income among the various regions of the country. In consequence the national economy is better balanced and more resistant to the effects of crises. Social justice and national concord are also placed on a more solid foundation. Solidarity for all is no longer a term void of meaning for the mountain folk. Such experiments should be multiplied, not only in Switzerland, but in all the mountainous regions of Europe, all of which suffer from these same problems. These satisfactory experiments are only at their beginning.

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