

Comment

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COMMENT

SWISS MANAGING DIRECTORS GET MORE SLEEP

One of the plagues of Britain, and a theme on which we've heard more than enough in recent years, is the disastrous tendency of the British worker to walk out on strike. Of course, such generalisations are dangerous. There are more days lost in strikes in America and Italy for example, and umpteen British plants work smoothly and efficiently without a hitch in their labour relations. But there can't be void behind the reputation that British Industry has been building for itself lately. The Londoner, for example, has in a year, experienced an underground strike, a railway strike, a national newspaper strike, a dock strike, a dustmen's strike, a major strike in the car factories of Dagenham, only to mention the most publicised. When the workers don't go on strike, they sometimes hinder the most favourable running of their plant by all sorts of practices, such as work-to-rule, prolonged breaks, casual walkouts, slapdash work, union meetings, excessive bonus work, blackings, demarcation disputes and poaching squabbles. They often do their best to knock down weekly hours, only to catch up on better paid overtime work. Apprentices, who are there to learn and cannot be fully productive, are also getting greedy and setting conditions to their employers.

This situation has fortunately been spared to the Swiss manager in the prosperous post-war era. The only strikes which I remember having happened during the last year, were a week-long stoppage by Spanish builders in Geneva, and a walk-out by 80 workers in a shoe factory in Ticino. Strikes like these are not even worth mentioning in England!

The most important single reason for this curious situation lies in the different kinds of industries in England and Switzerland. In England, great factories with a mass of destitute workers were created in the 19th century, whereas factories remained small in Switzerland and the direct contact with the boss and owner was never lost. However autocratic the rule of the Swiss boss may have been, there was a human relationship with his men which somehow prevented the birth of an acute working class consciousness and a pernicious desire to serve a vengeance on the master of industry. This is what is effectively happening in Great Britain.

There is also the element that the work carried out in the Swiss industry bears, in the main, less drudgery than elsewhere owing to the specialised and finely finished nature of its output. This means that the Swiss worker has more chance of enjoying his job.

This is not to say that there has never been any labour unrest in Switzerland. There were plenty of strikes before the war, when socialism was a more militant ideology than today. There was a general strike in 1918. But these differences have been settled by mutual efforts from both sides of industry. The first landmark was the famed "Peace of Labour" pact signed within the metal working industries in 1937. Similar agreements have followed in practically every branch of industry, with the result that strikes have been effectively prevented by an established framework of procedures and contracts binding management and labour. The industrial peace which the Swiss economy now enjoys is due in great part to these agreements and the positive spirit which they have instilled in all those whom they concern. The present British government would dearly like to reach such a satisfactory *modus vivendi* within British industry, but it is doubtful whether British conditions will allow a lasting "Peace of Labour" to be contracted and abided by. Some "bloody-mindedness" can perhaps be sensed in some of the very large and less specialised workshops of Swiss Industry. But it would be virtually impossible for any worker to stage a wildcat strike—and none would dream of doing so. The most dissatisfied workers are the lesser paid and lesser qualified foreign and seasonal labourers. They are, of course, not in a position to be too demanding as they can all too easily be replaced by others of their kin.

During a very short spell in a medium-sized Swiss company, I have observed that most workers were proud of the achievements of their firm. They accepted to work 45 hours a week and to come on one Saturday in two. There was very little relaxation and slackening at the work bench. The constant pressure of the British Unions may have earned better working condi-

tions for the British worker. It is possible that an English worker would refuse to work like a Swiss worker (this must be especially true in the watch industry) and would require longer breaks and shorter hours—while of course demanding the same wages.

The Swiss Unions are as powerful as British Unions and command the same membership. It seems that they make better use of their power. Their guiding philosophy is very pragmatic: It is not to overhaul the system and chuck out the bosses, but only to assure a fair share of the wealth and a peaceful life to all. They make sure that there are no victims in the Swiss system and act as silent watchdogs. That's enough to keep industry running smoothly.

(PMB)

SWISS NEWS

POLITICAL LIFE

The Swiss President for 1970, Mr. Hans Peter Tschudi, gave a grand welcome to the General Secretary of the United Nations, U Thant, before the U.N. Centre in Geneva, which was decorated with the flags of the 126 member states. The ceremony was to mark the 125th birthday of the United Nations. U Thant pronounced a characteristically pessimistic speech. He presented his listeners with the gloomy picture of a planet with four billion inhabitants by 1975 and six billion by the turn of the century. He recalled that the nations of the world had spent 200 billion dollars on armaments last year and that 10 per cent of this sum would have been enough for the needs of developing countries. U Thant underlined the necessity for a radical change of mind and behaviour in international affairs.

Mr. Bruno Kreisky, the Austrian Chancellor, paid an official visit to Berne. As head of state of a country with great similarities with Switzerland, he had plenty of matters for discussion with Mr. Tschudi and the Federal Council. In the main, these exchanges of views were concerned with the problem of European integration. In the course of a press conference in Berne, Mr. Kreisky said that, although Austria's practice of neutrality differed in some respects from Switzerland's own neutral policy, there were many points of agreement in the attitude adopted by the respective countries towards the European Common Market. Speaking of the economic situation of his country, Chancellor Kreisky said that Austrians had never had it so good. There were, however, a few less developed areas left and he welcomed Swiss investments. Flattering the patriotism of his audience, he said that the neutrality of his country had at the start