

Comment

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COMMENT

THE COST OF PROSPERITY

Prosperity has a multitude of disagreeable side-effects of which sociologists, psychologists and environmentalists have been speaking and writing about for years. First, prosperity means the ample possession of material goods which must be produced in a rational way — hence big, soulless organisations, mind-stifling drudgery, social conflict, etc. Of late, the smoke and the effluents coming from factories have come more and more in the forefront. As for the “mental pollution” caused by wealth of the kind daily reflected in the style of publicity and the worship of comfort it has been decried for long enough. The inflow of vast numbers of immigrant workers to sustain this prosperity can also be considered as a kind of “social pollution”, even though the connotation appears injurious to fellow human beings. But from the point of view of a society not prepared to fully integrate these workers and ready only to use them as units of production, the problem can indeed be one of social pollution. The attitude of such a society will inevitably lead to social stresses: housing problems, misunderstanding, overburdened schools, division of the working class community into national and alien camps, enhanced resentment of the lower classes against the rich who benefit from cheap imported labour, and so on.

This and the physical pollution of lakes and rivers is the most talked-about problem of modern Switzerland. Fortunately, action has been taken in both cases (although more efforts seem to be made in defending the environment) and there are reasons to hope that Switzerland's “over-foreignization” problem will get better.

The figures are impressive. Switzerland's continued economic expansion has required the hands of 844,395 foreign workers this year. The figure was recently given by Mr. Ernst Brugger, Head of the Department of Public Economy. It breaks down in 595,250 workers allowed to live in Switzerland with their families and rent a flat (yearly-permit holders and residents),

148,018 seasonal workers (the census was carried out *before* the yearly arrival of workers in the building trade) and 101,132 borderer workers who in principle cross the border every day to work in Switzerland.

Thus prosperity requires one worker in three to be foreign and industry to be totally dependant on non-Swiss people who, for the services they give, are sometimes considered as second class citizens. Mr. Brugger was pleased to recall that the foreign working population in Switzerland had only risen by 0.1 per cent from April 1972 to April this year. This marginal increase was mainly due to new arrivals of seasonal workers. Of the various categories of foreign workers, these are the worst off, yet the most desperately required by some industries, particularly hotellery, building and agriculture.

Seasonals must immigrate alone and theoretically may remain no longer than nine months a year in Switzerland. Many of them do not because their employers can't afford to let them go. They are known as “false seasonals”. If an alien worker has worked for five consecutive years in Switzerland, and thus probably lived as a bachelor in grubby hotel room or site barracks for 45 months, he is entitled to apply for a yearly renewable permit. This confers on him almost equal material advantages to those of his Swiss workmate. After five years of renewable permit status he may apply for residency. Two years later, he can, and many do, apply for Swiss nationality. Thus every year the Immigration Police processes several thousand “transformations” of seasonal to yearly-permit, and yearly-permit to resident status. The fact that thousands of Italians and Spaniards yearly accept to remain almost definitely in Switzerland shows that they are not unhappy in the country. Many of them eventually alter their names and apply for Swiss citizenship. The process has not been in progress for long enough to allow an assessment of how well integration works. The fact that foreign workers are fellow Europeans eases the problem. There are very few non-European workers and hardly any coloured at all (some

have recently been “smuggled” in the country). The main *moral* problem pertains to the seasonal workers for which the Government has just set a ceiling of 192,000 at any one time of the year amid the cries of despair of hoteliers and contractors.

The Government also reiterated that the ceiling for established and yearly-permit holders of 603,000 (fixed in 1969) was still valid. Given these constraints and the transformations processed by the Immigration Police, the quota of yearly-permit holders allowed to re-enter the country was reduced on 15th July from 20,000 to 10,000 a year, with 5,000 of the allowable entries temporarily frozen. These workers and the seasonals allowed entry are shared out by the various Cantons following a table established by the Office for Industry, Handicraft and Trade. The industrialised Cantons naturally have a right to more hands, although the needs of developing cantons are also taken into account. Each canton is responsible for the distribution of this precious labour among the various industries scrambling for it.

The stringency of the quota system shows that the Government has decided to compromise between the legitimate needs of modern industry and those of a harmonious society. It has failed in keeping adequate control of seasonal workers, who have come in more numerous every year. This is now corrected with the new ceiling. Berne has to steer a difficult course between the claims of factories who now have to expand abroad for lack of labour, and demands of the great majority of the working classes who want to see a clamp put on immigration. When Mr. James Schwarzenbach, the right-wing champion of a “Swiss Switzerland”, called for the staggered expatriation of some 300,000 residents three years ago, he was followed by 47 per cent of the (male) electorate. Although the needs of industry could be satisfied by converting seasonals into more efficient and better-integrated resident workers, the Government cannot contemplate this for the political reasons so well illustrated by the results of Schwarzenbach initiative.

P.M.B.



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