REPORTS AND ENQUIRIES

Labour Conditions in France during the War

A brief account of Mr. Arthur Fontaine's book, *L'industrie française pendant la guerre*[1], was given in the *Review*[2] shortly after its publication. We propose to discuss in more detail the account of labour conditions in France during the war as given by Mr. Fontaine in his very fully documented and clearly arranged work. The following points will be considered :

(1) The special conditions of labour supply imposed on French industry by the war ;

(2) The steps taken by France during the war to reconstruct and reinforce her labour supply ;

(3) The incidental and temporary — though more or less lasting — consequences of the war for the French labour world ;

(4) The lasting and even permanent changes brought about by it.

As regards the industrial labour supply, the situation produced by the war in France was briefly as follows : part of the labour supply dislodged, part diverted to other work, and part annihilated.

The dislodgment of a large number of industrial workers was caused by the enemy occupation of certain regions in the North and East during almost the whole of the four years of war. These regions represented 6 per cent. of the territory of France, 9.6 per cent. of the total population, and 14 per cent. of the industrial population. The effect of the occupation of the mines was that 41.8 per cent. of the mine workers were no longer able to work in their ordinary places ; the proportion was the same for workers in the food industries ; 42.2 per cent. for the workers in alcohol and sugar factories ; 41.5 per cent. for brewery workers ; 36.4 per cent. for workers in potato flour, starch, and margarine factories ; in the textile industries, 48.8 per cent. for flax, hemp, and jute workers, 53 per cent. for cloth workers, and 64.3 per cent. for wool workers ; lastly, in the metal-working industries, the iron and steel works which were in the invaded territory ordinarily employed 60.6 per cent. of all the workers in France in this industry. In other words, in most of the industries which are fundamental for any country, and especially for a country at war, a considerable proportion of French workers — from more than one-third to nearly two-thirds of the total

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[1] Arthur FONTAINE : *L'industrie française pendant la guerre.* Histoire économique et sociale de la guerre mondiale (série française). Published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Division of Economics and History. Paris, les Presses universitaires ; New Haven, U.S.A., Yale University Press. Not dated. XII + 504 pp. 40 fr.

[2] Cf. *International Labour Review*, Vol. XI, No. 3, March. 1925, pp. 437-438.

number — were deprived of their ordinary work places and means of working, or rather would have been so deprived if they had still been available for these industries.

But most of them were diverted from their ordinary work by the mobilisation. During the war France mobilised more than three-fifths of her active population. All occupations did not of course provide such a large contingent of mobilised men. In the early days France drew 29.44 per cent. of the men mobilised from industrial workers, while 45.3 per cent. of them came from workers in agriculture. But in order to appreciate the effort made by each group, it must be remembered that in 1914 the number of agricultural workers (proprietors and paid labourers) in France was much greater than the number of industrial workers.

Lastly, a large proportion of this mobilised labour force was annihilated by the losses of war. During the war French losses were 1,454,000 in dead and missing ; 267,000 of these belonged to industry, so that as 2,338,000 industrial workers were mobilised the loss coefficient was 11.4 per cent. Taken for the whole period of the war, this coefficient is no doubt less than the corresponding percentage for agricultural workers, workers in commerce and the liberal professions, and the general average percentage. But in the early days of the war, before measures were taken to send workers back to the factories, the percentage was approximately the same for all occupations.

The steps taken by France to reconstruct and reinforce the labour supply so dislodged and diminished, and literally even more than decimated, fall into six main categories:

(1) From the summer of 1915 onwards exemptions and permits were granted to skilled workers, at first in the war industries (arms, powder, and explosives factories, and general war supplies), and later on in all industries. From 1915 onwards 500,000 men were recalled from the army in this way under the Dalbiez Act. In 1917, as France had to depend less on foreign imports for her food supplies on account of the submarine war, the problem spread to agricultural workers. From April 1917 to January 1918, 300,000 agricultural workers were sent back to the land, in addition to 48,000 workers of other kinds (in mines, railways, shipping, etc.) who returned to their ordinary work. The imperious needs of the war of course had to have the first consideration. But in spite of that, on 1 November 1918 out of a possible mobilised force of 5,530,000, 4,143,000 (74.9 per cent.) were actually with the colours, and 1,387,000 (25.1 per cent.) were employed outside the army.

(2) Large numbers of refugees (not only French, but Belgians and even Alsatians) were placed in employment. The Central Public Employment Exchange and the regional and departmental exchanges founded from 1915 onwards placed about 629,000 workers, including a large number of refugees, during the war years 1915 to 1918.

(3) An increased use was made of foreign and colonial labour. Foreign workers who used to come to France before the war — from Algeria, Italy, Belgium, Poland, Luxemburg—were called in to help, but in larger numbers than before, as well as workers from other

countries—Portugal, Spain, Greece, Alsace-Lorraine, etc.—who came only exceptionally and in small numbers. All these came under an official immigration scheme with headquarters at special points. In addition there was the usual stream of unofficial and unregulated immigrants. Adding the immigrants brought in with their families by the agricultural employment organisations, and the native workers from distant colonies brought over by the Colonial Employment Department of the Ministry of War, we reach an important figure which may perhaps touch the half-million. This call on foreigners and colonials should be remembered, as it has maintained or created currents of immigration which the period after the war, with France in her depopulated condition, has not yet dried up.

(4) In spite of all these measures male labour was insufficient and it became necessary to use female labour in greater numbers than before the war (627,000 women were employed in industry on 1 July 1917 as against 487,000 in 1914), and for unfamiliar work, even on the roughest kind of work of the war industries. From 1 January 1916 onwards 109,000 women were working in factories more or less dependent on the artillery. Similarly women were employed in bread-making, in the chemical industries, in the printing trade (even for working large printing presses), in the textile industry (even for working the heaviest machines), in the metal-working industries (even for working steam hammers). The fact is interesting and of far-reaching consequences, since the opening of these factories to the weaker female labour not only obliged the heads of the factories to adopt new methods for the division of labour and the arrangement of shifts, but in order to avoid heavy physical labour as much as possible also led to a development of the use of mechanical processes which has persisted.

(5) The work of disabled men was also used. Special institutions had to be set up for the functional re-education or vocational education of men whose disablement made it necessary for them to learn a new trade.

(6) Lastly, there was the employment of prisoners of war. It may be estimated that at the end of the war 306,000 out of 530,000 prisoners were working either in agriculture or in loading and unloading goods, in navvy work or on the docks, and even in certain branches of industry.

It may be noted that of these six war measures adopted to cope with the shortage of labour, the third (foreign and colonial labour), the fourth (female labour), and the fifth (the adaptation of disabled men to labour), have all played their share in the organisation of labour in post-war France.

For the world of labour the war has had temporary consequences which have been more or less lasting. First, there were the effects on the regulation of labour. Under the influence of the pressing needs of the early days, exemptions were allowed to the laws constituting the Labour Code, or these laws were not strictly enforced: for instance, hours of labour were extended in order to increase total output. Later on, on the contrary, with the prolongation of the war and the progressive exhaustion of muscular and nervous strength, came measures to protect

the health of the workers, and especially of women and young persons: the prohibition of night work for women and children, the protection of women before and after childbirth, shorter hours of labour for women —all of these on the initiative of the Ministry of Munitions.

The war had its effects also on the increase or decrease in the number of workers in various industries, both from the creation of new needs and from the obliteration, or at least the relegation to a secondary place, of peace-time needs. For instance, in July 1917 there were only two groups of industries which employed more than 100 per cent. of the number of workers employed in July 1914 : the chemical industries (120 per cent.) and the metal-working industries (167 per cent.). In January 1919 these two industries still employed more than 100 per cent. of the workers employed in 1914 (103 and 120 per cent. respectively) and they were joined by a third group, that of the workers engaged in loading and unloading goods (105 per cent.). All other industries, even fundamental ones like the textile industry, employed in January 1919 less than 100 per cent. of the number of workers in 1914, and *a fortiori* of the number in July 1917.

The war also had a temporary influence on the number of labour disputes. These were very few during the first two years of the war, but their number rose suddenly and sharply in 1917 with the increase in the cost of living — an indirect effect of the submarine war — and with the revulsion of feeling which followed the check to the spring offensive. After falling again in 1918, it made a new leap upwards in 1919, in consequence of the change over from war-time to peace-time industries, and of the industrial demobilisation with its inevitable hardships.

Lastly, the war had its effect on wages, but in different ways. For industrial workers real wages during the first half of 1921 were either equal to those of 1911 or were higher than them by a percentage which in the most favourable cases was not more than 34. For the staffs of public administrations in Paris, post-war real wages varied for different categories from 128 to as little as 36 per cent. of pre-war rates. At the end of the war, therefore, it cannot be said that even in the most favoured industries the increase in wages was of any great importance or proportionate to the real increase in the cost of living. For most of the workers in public services the reduction was perceptible ; for some of them it was calamitous.

To these consequences, which may be described as temporary and incidental, although some of them were fairly lasting, the war added other deep-seated and, if we may use the term, permanent effects, on conditions of labour and of living of the working-class population of France.

First, there are certain economic and social effects, without counting the movement of wages (the extent of which has been indicated above). Then there was the increase in and the organisation of the immigration of foreign labour, which now shows such an unexampled increase on the pre-war figures that France may fairly be called one of the principal countries of immigration. Above all, there was the new regulation of

hours of work and the institution of the 8-hour day by the Act of April 1919, with all its economic and social consequences.

Then there were the financial effects. The monetary crisis, from which France has not yet emerged, has had its effect on labour as on production in general. The low but not abysmal exchange has favoured exports, kept industrial activity at a high level, and prevented any serious or prolonged unemployment.

Lastly, there are the effects on the actual organisation of industry — effects which are among the most durable. The war has brought about an evolution so sudden that it resembles a revolution, in methods of manufacture. The application of scientific methods and discoveries to industry has become both more specific and more general, with the intention of meeting the situation caused by the shortage and lack of technical skill of the labour supply. The Taylor system and the use of machinery for mass production have spread from the largest industrial organisations to the smallest and most scattered industries. If on the one hand Mr. Fontaine can point to a shipyard like that of Penhoët in Brittany, which employs 3,000 workers and which saved 215,000 hours of work in 1917 by applying scientific methods, at the other end of the scale he can lay stress on the great extension of the use of kneading machines in bakeries, even in the country, to such an extent that he is able to assert that whole regions of France, including the country districts, no longer have a single hand kneader. The shortages and necessities of the war have given a vigorous impetus to the development of more scientific methods of using the resources of the country : the shortage of coal has led to the development of the hydro-electric industry ; to meet the need for large-scale production, especially in the metal-working industries, new factories scientifically and lavishly equipped have sprung up full grown in the interior of the country to replace the occupied factories in the North and East. Certain industries which were weak or even non-existent before the war, have developed and concentrated their forces, as, for instance, the chemical industries and certain special branches of the metal-working industries.

It is thus impossible to exaggerate the consequences of the war years for French industry and French labour alike ; though within the scope of this summary we have not been able to give more than an outline of Mr. Fontaine's logical exposition of this thesis, with a few examples chosen from the wealth of data he adduces in support of it.