

The Housing of Agricultural Workers in Germany¹

The question of the housing of agricultural workers in Germany is intimately connected with that of the employment of alien seasonal workers. The employment of alien seasonal workers has been known in Germany for decades, but took on much larger proportions with the spread of beet cultivation in the middle of the nineteenth century. The number of such alien immigrant workers (generally Polish and Ruthenian) is estimated at 400,000 before the war. As there were, according to the census of 1907, 1,045,000 German nationals employed in agriculture (apart from smallholders doing paid seasonal work), this means that almost two-sevenths of the total agricultural labour force in Germany before the war was foreign.

Since the war it has been the definite policy of the German Government to cut down year by year the number of alien workers admitted into the country. Apart from any political reasons, the existence of over a million unemployed persons in Germany is advanced as justification for the systematic carrying out of this restriction policy. The restriction policy is based on a well-established system of regulation of immigration and licensing. The number of alien immigrant agricultural workers admitted in 1925 was restricted to 148,600, and for 1926 to 130,000; for 1927 it is to be further cut down to 100,000, i.e. scarcely one quarter of what it was estimated to be before the war. Actually it is computed that during 1926 the quota laid down will not have been entirely used up and that only 125,000 such workers will have entered Germany.

It is a definite part of the restriction policy to replace the alien workers by national workers in such a way as to cause the least possible disturbance to agriculture. Where labour is required in considerable quantities, i.e. where it is truly seasonal, it would appear almost impossible at the present time to do without immigrants, but where it is required for longer periods and on smaller farms there is, in the opinion of the authorities, less difficulty in replacing it by national labour. Thus the practice now obtains of allocating immigrant seasonal labour principally to the large beet-growing exploitations, and refusing it to the smaller farms which grow potatoes and grains in addition to beets, inasmuch as here the operations are less concentrated at a particular moment of the year and are also, as a rule, on a somewhat smaller

¹ SOURCES :

Reichsarbeitsblatt, 24 Aug. 1926, p. 565*.

Der öffentliche Arbeitsnachweis, Vol. III, No. 6, Sept. 1926, pp. 382-390.

Industrie- u. Handelszeitung, Vol. VII, No. 233, 6 Oct. 1926.

Vorwärts, 11 Sept. 1926, evening edition.

For an analysis of a previous article on the same subject in the *Reichsarbeitsblatt* cf. *International Labour Review*, Vol. XII, No. 1, July 1925, pp. 83-87.

scale; in fact, no farmer who cannot put in a demand for a gang of at least five workers together can hope to obtain permission to employ alien labour. The policy is interesting from the social point of view as illustrating the principle that one of the most practical preventives against the evil of rush seasonal work is the establishment of balanced or diversified cultivations¹.

The principal difficulty in replacing alien by national labour in Germany is due to housing. The alien labour hitherto employed, just because it was undomiciled and seasonal, was generally housed in barrack-like dwellings, which in many cases left much to be desired in the way of comfort, sanitation, and even weather-proof condition. Many employers have stated their inability to employ national labour because they could not accommodate it. In general, the question of rural housing is as pressing in Germany as in other European countries. A rural building programme, subsidised from the funds allotted for productive unemployment relief, has been carried on since 7 January 1921. Up to 10 March 1925 over 18,000 rural dwellings had been constructed. A considerable impulse is now to be given to this programme by the allocation of large funds for the purpose from the general budget of the state. The funds to be allotted amount to 30 million marks, and a decision has been taken whereby the administrators of the national estates, hitherto excluded from the benefits of the productive unemployment relief allocation, can share in the funds now available. As these estates employ alien labour there has been a certain anomaly in excluding them from the rural housing policy, if such rural housing is to be definitely brought into connection with the replacing of aliens by national labour.

Under the present regulations two types of housing may be constructed, "industrial dwellings", i.e. dwellings built by the employer for the housing of his workers and controlled by him, and "workers' dwellings", i.e. dwellings built by individual workers and owned by them. The funds now made available are to cover both types of building, and the grant per year is raised so that it can now reach as much as 75 per cent. of the total building cost of an industrial dwelling. Similarly the loan issued to an individual worker to enable him to build his own house is now repayable in thirty years instead of in ten, or exceptionally twenty, years as heretofore. Employers applying for an allocation of this fund must show that the construction of the contemplated dwellings will lead to the discharge of a certain number of alien workers and their replacement by domiciled national labour.

It is estimated that at an average cost of 4,000 marks per dwelling the funds allocated will permit of the erection of 15,000 new rural dwellings. This will mean the replacement by national labour of some-

¹ Incidentally attention may be drawn to an interesting non technical note in the *Journal of the Ministry of Agriculture* (England and Wales), Oct. 1926, p. 671 *et seq.*, in which the Ministry announce the acquisition of patents for England and Ireland and the pursuit of study on the de Vecchis sugar-beet process. This process of drying the beet before extraction of the sugar content would have the important economic effect of enabling work on certain processes to be spread over the year instead of having to be concentrated in a hundred days or so.

thing between 36,000 and 40,000 alien workers. Attention is drawn to the fact that the building of rural dwellings can already be proved statistically to have had a direct influence on the restriction of alien labour. Thus, up to 31 March 1926 about 7,000 new rural dwellings had been constructed in East Prussia and the number of alien agricultural workers had fallen from about 22,000 before the war to 8,000 in 1926; in contrast to Mecklenburg-Schwerin, where only 458 dwellings had been constructed and the 27,000 alien workers of the pre-war period had only been brought down to 15,800.

The practicability of encouraging labour at present unemployed in Germany to go on the land, provided that proper dwelling accommodation is constructed, is greatly increased by the fact that much of this unemployed labour has come from the land within the last few years. The rural exodus from the country to the town was extraordinarily intensified as the result of war conditions, and many of those who will occupy the new dwellings are persons who have lived all their lives in the country and are accustomed to agricultural employment. Their freedom of movement and freedom to seek work as secured to them under the German Constitution is, in practice, made of no effect if they cannot find a place in which to live. From the workers' point of view *Vorwärts* points out that the provision of industrial dwellings is not entirely satisfactory in this respect. An industrial dwelling is a "tied" cottage, and the worker does not secure an independent home from which he is in a position to make a free bargain with an employer. Termination of the employment contract with the farmer means loss, after the lapse of a certain period of grace, of the right to the dwelling provided by the farmer. *Vorwärts* states that it is important to encourage the construction of dwellings of other types, namely, those owned by the worker himself. But even this, in the opinion of the journal, is by no means the perfect solution for the worker, who has sunk all his savings in the construction of a dwelling and is burdened with a considerable debt towards the state — even if, as is the case, he pays no interest on it — and thus is not free to move about the country according to his employment requirements. The ideal advanced by the paper is the construction of workers' rural villages, self-administered; apparently some form of collective property holding with sublets to individual workers is indicated. In Central Europe, where historically and economically so much stress is laid on small property holding and on the educative advantages of ownership, based on ownership of a cottage, the implied criticism may be noted as illustrating the point of view of a workers' group in Germany. Incidentally it may be remarked that the writer in the *Reichsarbeitsblatt* denies that there is any intention to favour the construction of industrial dwellings rather than the construction of separate cottages; but he accepts the point of view, which is the point of view criticised by *Vorwärts*, that the worker's ownership of his home is a step upwards on the social ladder.