

vals and at a heavy fee, so as to limit the number of agents and ensure the genuine nature of their work. The rate of fees charged for finding employment should also be strictly supervised, and it would be well to make them chargeable entirely to the employers, who would probably be more able to keep them at a reasonable rate, and who would at the same time be disposed under such a system to regard joint agencies and public agencies in a more favourable light. Along with this action for restricting the activities of the commercial agencies, it would be well to promote the creation of joint offices and the development of public agencies, which, if assured of the complete co-operation of all parties concerned, would certainly very soon attain that degree of efficiency on which the supporters of the commercial agencies at present base their defence of these institutions.

## Labour Conditions in the Timber Industry in Argentina, Brazil, and the Dutch Indies

A pamphlet<sup>1</sup> recently published by the International Union of Wood Workers draws attention to the labour conditions of workers employed in certain tropical forests. A summary of this document, with some extracts, is given below.

In *Argentina*<sup>2</sup> most of the marketable wood is found in the northern part of the country, in a wide but sparsely populated district called the Gran Chaco. Woodcutting operations are mainly in the hands of European capitalists, and very primitive methods are, it is stated, still in use. The most important company is "Forestal, Ltd.", with its head office in London.

The right to work the forests is usually granted to Argentine farmers, who are required to sell all wood obtained to the owners of the forests. The workers (*mensus*) employed in the timber undertakings (*obrajes*) of the forest lands in the Gran Chaco number about 20,000, among whom are to be found Spaniards, Italians, Indians, Negroes, etc. The Indian element represents only about 5 per cent. of the total.

There is a great scarcity of drinking water in the Gran Chaco district; spring water, which is very brackish, cannot even be used to wash clothes.

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<sup>1</sup> *La misère ouvrière dans les ténèbres des forêts tropicales*, published by the International Union of Wood Workers. Secretary: C. Woudenberg, Alberdingk Thijmstraat 30, Amsterdam, Netherlands. April 1928.

<sup>2</sup> It is stated that the information which follows is based mainly on a report of the Inspector of the Federal Labour Department, a report of the Department of Labour and Statistics of the Province of Santa Fé issued in 1925, an article published early in 1927 in the Socialist weekly *La Verdad* and reproduced in Spanish in *Nos Comunicados* for May-June 1927, and a detailed report which the author of the article published in *La Verdad* forwarded to the Secretary of the International Union of Wood Workers.

So far no steps have been taken by the public authorities to drain the marshes, irrigate the land, or provide supplies of drinking water. Such water has to be brought great distances in water carts, its price being consequently so high that the poorer classes of the population have often to content themselves with polluted pond water, "swarming with microbes and vermin".

Each *obraje* consists of three or four wretched huts (*ranchos*), which are often 20 or 25 kilometres away from the nearest railway station. "These huts, in which large families live in revolting promiscuity, have only one room, which is used as bedroom, dining room, and kitchen. The four corner posts are tree trunks, the walls are stopped with straw and mud, there is a straw roof, and a floor of beaten earth. The wind and rain blow freely through the badly built walls. Closets are entirely wanting, as is furniture. Rich is he who owns a decrepit bedstead. The others sleep on the floor."

Doctors and druggists are to be found only at very great distances, and, as no travelling medical services have been organised in the district, workers overtaken by sickness or accident are obliged to have recourse to the services of a witch doctor (*curandero*). In consequence the death rate is extremely high, and, according to official statistics, seven-tenths of the population are suffering from tuberculosis or venereal disease.

Illiteracy among the population is as high as 70 or 80 per cent., immorality is widespread, and crime has assumed alarming proportions.

Work in the forests is paid by the job. Part of the gang of the *obraje* is employed in felling trees. For a working day of eleven or twelve hours, during which the workers, armed with only an axe, have to fell the hard-wood quebracho trees, which grow to a height of 40 or 50 feet, the daily wages rarely exceed 4 or 5 pesos.

The felled timber is transported on heavy ox wagons to the nearest railway goods station, the journey there and back taking thirteen or fourteen hours. Roads are bad, being merely paths cut through the forest with an axe. "After rain, the heavy wagons sink over their axles in thick mud, from which they are extricated only by an immense physical effort on the part of the driver. Work in the timber undertakings is so strenuous that the natives, despite their uncommon powers of endurance, rarely live longer than forty-five years."

Wages are paid only once a month. In the southern part of the Province of Santa Fé, the average nominal wage of a woodcutter is 5 pesos a day; a waggoner's monthly wage is 130-150 pesos, and that of a timber-yard worker 100-120 pesos.<sup>1</sup> It is also to be noted that the workers are employed only twenty days a month, and that wages are paid only for work actually performed. Further, the vast distances make it impossible for the worker to do his own shopping, and this has led to the establishment of the system whereby the employer does the buying for his workers at the nearest town. Serious abuses have arisen in this connection. According to official data, the farmers in the Santa Fé Province make a profit of 40-50 per cent. on the goods purchased for the workers.<sup>2</sup> In the Province of Santiago del Estero, where wages

<sup>1</sup> One paper peso is worth about 1.80 gold francs.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. DIRECCIÓN GENERAL DE ESTADÍSTICA Y TRABAJO: *Los Obreros de la Industria Forestal*, p. 23. Santa Fé, 1924.

are lower, a profit of 20-30 per cent. is made.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the cost of foodstuffs has risen enormously, but nevertheless the quality is very low, and a pound weight is not worth more three-quarters in reality. All this tends to reduce the real value of the woodcutter's wage, and it is considered that, instead of earning 150 pesos a month, his actual remuneration does not exceed 50-60 pesos.

When it is remembered that in Buenos Aires a monthly wage of 240-300 pesos (that of a cabinet maker, according to the present collective agreement) is considered a minimum wage, the life of the Gran Chaco workers can easily be imagined. Lastly, contrary to section 1,623 of the Civil Code, wages are generally paid in bills or vouchers (*vales*) instead of in cash.

There are also a number of other abuses. For example, the workers cannot calculate the amount of wood they have cut, and are often defrauded of part of the wages due to them. Again, some employers charge excessive prices for goods and medicines supplied to their workers, who are often ignorant of the exact value of money.<sup>2</sup>

The pamphlet of the Wood Workers' Union further draws attention to the chronic under-feeding of forest workers, whose only food is bread and lard, and who drink only maté, "a national beverage which, though refreshing, has no nutritive value".

In such conditions, it is hardly surprising that the social life of the population is reduced to a very low level. The workers are undermined by alcohol and debauchery, and depravity is general. As has already been stated, a large proportion of the population is suffering from venereal disease and tuberculosis.

In *Brazil*<sup>3</sup>, the timber industry is most important in the southern States of the Republic, which produce about two-thirds of the total timber output of the country. In 1925 Brazil exported 114,983 metric tons of wood. In the States of Paraná and Santa Catharina a timber trust was formed at the beginning of 1926, which includes about 200 timber merchants and sawmill owners. The Southern Brazil Lumber and Colonisation Company, which was promoted with American and French capital, is the centre of the trust. It has its head offices in New York, and employs over 1,500 workers in its three modern saw mills, which turn out 20,000 planks a day. There are also a number of other undertakings, especially in other States, so that the total number of sawmills in the country may be estimated at not less than 1,200, and the number of workers employed in the timber and sawmill industries at 40,000. These workers belong to ten or twelve different nationalities; they are mainly Brazilians of mixed blood, but also include Negroes, Japanese, and many immigrants from Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe. Compared with the class of workers employed in Argentina, the immi-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *La Confederación* (official organ of the Argentine "free" Labour Confederation), Aug. 1927.

<sup>2</sup> For further information on this subject cf. *La Libertad*, 24 Oct. 1927.

<sup>3</sup> The situation of Brazilian workers was described in certain issues of the *Bulletin* of the International Union of Wood Workers, notably in that of September 1925. The description given in that issue, says the author of the pamphlet, reflects the present situation very accurately.

grants in Brazil would appear to include a number of more highly civilised workers, who, the pamphlet states, have fled from poverty in their native country merely to fall into greater hardships in Brazil. Conditions are worst among the workers actually employed in the forests, who live in huts built of palm leaves, on the bare soil, and exposed to the "vermin and reptiles of the forest". Particularly dreadful is the situation of those employed in the marshy forests near the rivers, where malignant fevers end by completely destroying their health. The conditions of sawmill workers are somewhat better, although still unsatisfactory. These workers live in bare huts, built of tree trunks and rough planks. Fever is common among them. In the absence of doctors, sick persons are treated with all kinds of herbs growing in the forests. Bad food further aggravates the unhealthy conditions prevailing in the undertakings. It should be added that foodstuffs are provided by the employer at "fabulous prices", and that, owing to shortage of transport, provisions of prime necessity are often wanting for several weeks on end.

The large sawmills often lease the timber felling to a subcontractor, who pays his workers by the job. An ordinary woodcutter, working nine hours a day, earns barely 6 milreis<sup>1</sup>, while sawyers receive about 9-10 milreis for a nine to ten hours day, and labourers a daily wage of 5-7 milreis. It is to be noted in this connection that in the large towns prices are distinctly lower than on the forest lands.

As in the Argentine Republic, the workers are often the victims of dishonest practices. Being unable to calculate the amount of wood hewn, they are often defrauded of part of their wages. On top of this, employment is common in the smaller undertakings, which have no proper transport facilities, and are badly informed as to conditions on the world market, and so often experience difficulty in getting rid of their stocks. In these undertakings the workers are often unemployed for several days, while at certain periods, on the contrary, they have to work sixteen hours a day, even on Sundays.

The International Union of Wood Workers is of opinion that similar abuses probably exist in other countries of Central and South America. According to the Socialist daily *El Socialista* of 17 June 1926, and *Comunicados* for July 1926, several timber companies in *Nicaragua*, with headquarters in Belice, are stated to have "bought" from the chiefs of the Mosquitos tribe 400 Indians at 40 pesos a head. Further, the International Secretariat of Wood Workers received about the same date a report from the Labour Confederation of *San Domingo*, in which it was alleged that agricultural and forestry workers of that island earned only quarter of a dollar per day for ten to twelve hours' work.

Bad as conditions are in Argentina and Brazil, they are, declares the author of the pamphlet, even worse in the *Dutch Indies*, where Chinese wood workers, employed in the swampy forests of the east coast of Sumatra, lead "an infernal life". As, however, the pamphlet issued by the Wood Workers' Union has used the "extremely full details"

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<sup>1</sup> One milreis is worth about 0.60 gold francs.

contained in the report published in 1927 by Mr. Pastor<sup>1</sup>, labour inspector in charge of the supervision of wood-cutting undertakings since 1 January 1925, and as the *International Labour Review* has already published a summary of this report<sup>2</sup>, it seems sufficient to refer the reader to this summary.

The report of the International Union of Wood Workers recognises that since 1 January 1925 the labour inspectors have done their best to improve the conditions of the coolies, and that fruitful results have already been achieved. It points out, however, that the three inspectors responsible for this work are unable, despite superhuman efforts, to make a thorough inspection of all parts of the vast and almost inaccessible territory in which the "panglons" are situated. The Union fears that the measures taken for the protection of coolies still leave much to be desired, and considers that these measures should be reinforced by the help of the "trade union and political organisations of the working class".

The pamphlet which is being analysed concludes with a number of recommendations calculated to improve the position of the forestry workers in the countries considered.

According to these recommendations, hours of work should be reduced to eight in the day and forty-eight in the week, the more so as forestry work in the tropical zones is not seasonal work. The strict observance of a weekly day of rest and the introduction of a minimum period of holidays with pay should also be prescribed.

Legislative measures should also be taken to fix a minimum wage, either for timber workers alone, or as part of a general minimum wage scheme. The keeping of pay sheets should also be enforced, under the supervision of the labour inspectors. Where workers are paid by the job, they should be taught some simple method of calculating the amount of timber felled, and stricter measures should be introduced to abolish the payment of wages in bills or vouchers and the provision of foodstuffs for the workers by the employer. When, for technical reasons, the food required by the workers has to be bought collectively — i.e. by the employer — the labour inspectors should supervise the fixing of prices. The employer should likewise be forbidden to run, or have an interest in, stores, dance saloons, and gaming houses in the vicinity of their undertaking. Care should be taken to see that the workers are not tied to the undertaking by a system of "debts". Fines for unsatisfactory work should be abolished, as should the custom of making deductions from wages for days on which the worker is unable to work.

The employer should further be compelled to provide the worker and his family with suitable living quarters conforming to legal prescriptions. Where food is supplied for the workers, its quality and the composition of the meals provided should satisfy certain minimum standards.

The public authorities should insist as far as possible on the improvement of the technical conditions of forestry work. In Sumatra, the construction of rail instead of log tracks should be encouraged, as should

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<sup>1</sup> DUTCH INDIES. KANTOOR VAN ARBEID: *De Panglons*, by G. PASTOR. Publication No. 3. Weltewreden, 1927. 151 pp. 1.50 florins.

<sup>2</sup> Vol. XVII, No. 6, June 1928, pp. 871-873.

the use of movable cranes for loading logs in Brazil. Accident prevention should form the subject of strict legal regulations. All lumber camps should be provided with a first-aid chest containing specified medicines and bandaging materials, and the managers of the camps should receive special instruction from competent persons in first-aid measures in case of accidents. It should be forbidden to employ workers who are too young or otherwise unsuited for the hard work of the lumber camps.

The public authorities should organise travelling medical services, and take steps to improve general conditions of health by draining swamps, providing drinking water, etc.

In the countries considered labour inspection is insufficient; the number of inspectors should therefore be increased.

Finally, it is recommended that the right of association and the right to strike should be recognised without reservation, and the employer's power of dismissal restricted in order to avoid the risk of reprisals in case of industrial disputes.