# REPORTS AND ENQUIRIES

## Labour Conditions in Martinique

by

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*In the following article Mr. Debretagne, who organised and is now head of the factory inspection service in Martinique, sketches the social development of that colony. The information he gives in his survey, which is based on first-hand personal experience, throws an interesting light on the nature of the steps taken by France to develop her West Indian possessions, and is of special interest in view of the celebrations arranged in honour of the tercentenary of the union of those colonies to France.*

### GENERAL REMARKS

Martinique, an island of volcanic origin, lies on the 14th degree of north latitude ; it is one of the Windward Islands in the archipelago of the Lesser Antilles, on the inner side of the arc of islands facing Central America which stretches from the Yucatan Peninsula (Mexico) to the Gulf of Paria on the north-west coast of Venezuela.

The volcanic origin of the island is shown by the nature of the rocks which form it and by its rugged conformation.

The soil is poor as a result of laterisation, as is commonly the case in tropical countries. But the abundant rainfall which is customary in that part of the world makes up for the absence of fertilising elements and gives an extraordinary luxuriance to the vegetation, except in the extreme south of the island, where the annual rainfall is barely a metre, although as much as seven metres falls on Mont Pelée.

Martinique is an agricultural country ; but as sugar cane is almost the only crop, the local manufacture of this product into sugar and rum has given birth to large industrial interests.

Of its total area of 1,162 square kilometres, the 40,000 hectares under cane in 1933 produced over 800,000 tons of cane, which gave 50,000 tons of sugar and 14 million litres of rum.

The population is approximately 250,000, with 40,000 in Fort-de-France, the chief town of the island. Apart from a few hundred Europeans and a settled white population of a few thousand, the island is almost entirely populated by a coloured race resulting from the union of white colonists and soldiers (a strong garrison was formerly maintained on the island) with blacks imported from Africa in the

days of slavery. This fusion has produced a race with hard-working and intelligent elements, many of whom hold high positions in France and in Martinique itself.

Martinique is one of the three French colonies where the social and political system in force is almost identical with the French system itself. This fact makes it possible to extend to the island most of the laws and regulations applying to the population of France. The organisation of society on the island, however, has not allowed certain provisions favourable to the workers to have their full effect.

## Industrial Relations

The distribution of wealth is very unequal. The whole of large-scale industry is in the hands of a few white families. The middle class is not very numerous; many of its members are completely dependent on the large-scale industry on which the whole country lives, so that it is less capable of holding the balance between capital and labour than it is, for example, in France. Certain institutions, such as the Agricultural Credit Bank, have, however, been set up to strengthen the position of the middle class.

Relations between employers and workers are generally regulated by agreement. But an unorganised working population and an abundance of labour allow the employer to change his staff at will.

The climate and the exuberance of nature encourage the workers to avoid all work not strictly necessary for the satisfaction of their elementary needs, This remark of course applies chiefly to the rural population, as for the town worker the questions of housing, clothing, and even of food are more insistent.

Nevertheless, the application of the essential features of the French Labour Code, the existence of probiviral courts, and an efficient labour inspection service provide facilities for the settlement of disputes which offer the parties the best guarantees of satisfaction, and recourse to these methods is frequent.

Contracts of employment, articles of apprenticeship, and collective labour agreements are becoming more and more usual.

Finally, relations between the sugar manufacturers and the small sugar planters are regulated by a joint body called the Advisory Committee on Labour and Agriculture, which is placed under the authority of the Administration.

## Industrial and Commercial Activities

The main industrial activities of the country are represented by 18 sugar mills, 170 distilleries, 3 pineapple preserving works, one factory making macaroni and similar products, 2 chocolate factories, a brewery, a tile and pottery works, lime kilns, cement block works, a number of engineering, carpentering, and cabinet makers' workshops, a large mechanical cooperage, and a few ship-repairing yards.

The sugar and rum industries give agricultural employment to an average of 25,000 persons, including 14,000 men, 8,000 women, and 3,000 children, while 8,000 persons, including 7,000 men, 700 women,

and about 300 children, are employed in the manufacturing processes.

About 75 per cent. of the cane used by the sugar mills comes from their own plantations, the remainder being obtained from small planters, about 6,000 in number, who work on their own account. The cane is harvested from January to June.

Undertakings engaged in the production of sugar include an agricultural part and an industrial part. The agricultural part consists of a number of plantations, the whole being managed by a crop director. Each of the plantations has its own manager, who has under his orders a number of overseers (*économes*) and foremen (*commandeurs*), varying according to the size of the plantation. The industrial part is controlled by a works manager ; under him are the chief engineer, whose duties are all-important, and various overseers and foremen.

Handicrafts are limited to the clothing and boot and shoe trades and personal services (hairdressing saloons, etc.), and to the trades belonging to the building industry (masonry, structural woodworking, carpentry, etc.).

Commerce is highly developed and the volume of trade with France and other countries was valued at 370 million francs in 1934.

## Protection of the Workers

In Martinique, as elsewhere, the advance of ideas and the violent reactions engendered by industrial disputes have led the public authorities to set up an administrative organisation to protect the working classes against their own lack of organisation and possible abuses on the part of employers. This explains why laws of an advanced nature for their time have been applied since 1910 in a colonisation country.

Since that date, when the labour legislation of France was codified, a whole series of labour laws have been introduced in Martinique. These include the provisions of the First Book of the Labour Code relating to articles of apprenticeship, the contract of employment, hire of services, payment of wages, deductions from and attachment of wages, truck shops, employment offices, the provisions of the Act relating to probiviral courts, those of the Trade Associations Act of 1884, the regulations of the Second Book of the Labour Code relating to the age of admission of children to employment, and to hours of work, prohibition of night work, and compulsory weekly rest for women and children in industry, the Act on the use of seats for women employed in retail shops, and the provisions relating to the health and safety of workers employed in all industrial and commercial establishments.

It is to be noted that these provisions are not absolutely the same as those in force in France and that they have been adapted to local requirements and customs.

In 1925, the laws on workmen's compensation for accidents in industry and commerce were extended to Martinique ; further details are given in a later section of this article.

Lastly, by three Decrees of 1 July 1933 [1], the International Labour

[1] *Journal officiel de la République Française*, 11 July 1933.

Conventions concerning the employment of women during the night in industry, the night work of young persons employed in industry, the rights of association and combination of agricultural workers, and the use of white lead in painting were made applicable to Martinique.

### General Conditions in Factories and Workshops

The general equipment of factories and workshops is fairly satisfactory. The progress made in the protection of machinery and transmission gear allows the large industrial establishments of Martinique to be classified in the same rank as corresponding undertakings in France. As regards ventilation in sugar mills, where the temperature is very high, the Labour Inspection Service has secured the introduction of many important improvements which have raised the general standard of healthiness. Moreover, the Service was materially helped by the necessity of renewing machinery, and whenever this was necessary its advice concerning the improvement of working conditions was taken, even when heavy expenditure was involved.

The installation of cloakrooms is spreading, but the inspectors have had and still have more difficulty in persuading the workers to use them than in getting the employers to build them. The question of washing facilities has not required such insistence, as the workers of Martinique are much given to washing. Lavatories are as little used as cloakrooms, as all the factories are situated in the country.

Country bakeries are sadly lacking in hygiene, while night work is allowed and even exclusively practised. In order to prevent thefts of bread and flour, the workers are usually locked in the bakehouse from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m., where they remain shut up in an airless and overheated atmosphere.

In the absence of any legal prohibition of night work, employers and workers have tried to conclude agreements about it, but some of the workers by their obstinate preference for night work have always brought about their failure.

### Safety and Workmen's Compensation

As already mentioned, compensation must be paid for accidents to workers in industry and commerce.

In agriculture, the only risks covered are those resulting from the use of machinery driven by mechanical power. At the same time, the regulations in force allow employers and workers in undertakings not subject to the law to place themselves voluntarily under the Act of 1898. Little use, however, is made of this privilege and as a general rule employers and workers tacitly adhere to the very elastic system of insurance in force in the country. Thus the habit of insurance is by degrees making its way into the customs of the country and the ground is being prepared for the extension of workmen's compensation legislation to occupations not yet covered by it.

Workmen's compensation has made great strides since 1930. During that year insurance companies paid out 250,000 francs for

cases of temporary incapacity and 27,000 francs for cases of permanent incapacity and fatal accidents. In 1934 the corresponding figures were 600,000 francs and 40,000 francs. In 1930 the claims paid covered 2,000 accidents ; in 1934 they covered 3,633 accidents. This does not, however, denote an increase in the number of accidents, but rather an improved organisation resulting from closer control and the development of insurance, two factors which lead the insured persons to notify accidents more promptly.

These few figures show the benefit already derived by the working classes of Martinique from the strict enforcement of the regulations on workmen's compensation.

Accident prevention has made great progress in certain branches of work ; for example, the number of accidents on railways, which was 65 in 1930, fell as the result of safety measures and adequate supervision to an average of 30 for the years 1931, 1932, and 1933, and to 17 in 1934.

## Employment of Women and Children

The employment of women and children is strictly controlled in industrial establishments.

Working hours may not exceed 10 in the day, with at least one hour's rest. This limitation has considerably reduced the employment of female and child labour in sugar mills, where the manufacturing processes are carried out in two shifts of 12 hours.

The minimum age of employment for children is 13 years, but is reduced to 12 years for children who have a certificate of primary studies.

In agriculture, where there is no supervision, the employment of children under 13 years of age is very widespread ; the children are organised in small groups and are employed in weeding, planting sugar canes, spreading manure, and, more generally, on all work which they are strong enough to perform.

The employment of women is also very widespread in agriculture and industry, where they are employed mainly as labourers, carriers, especially on public works where earth is removed by carrying it on the head, and in the coaling of ships. Commerce and the clothing industries employ a majority of women.

## Hours of Work and Weekly Rest

In principle hours of work are 8 per day. Although the Eight-Hour Day Act was promulgated in 1919, its application has not been made compulsory. It is, however, the general rule, especially in the capital of the colony. In the sugar mills, work is carried on in two shifts of 12 hours. There is an unbroken weekly rest period from Saturday evening until Monday morning for alternate shifts ; the shift which finishes on Saturday carries out the necessary general cleaning operations, when its daily hours vary from 15 to 18.

The maintenance and repair shops attached to the sugar mills work throughout the year, although the manufacturing processes last

only for a few months ; they work a 48-hour week between the harvests and at least 60 hours during the harvest.

In agriculture work is fairly regular from January to June, i.e. during the sugar-cane harvest. At other times the workers are not employed more than three or four days a week.

Work in the building industry is more intense between the harvests, as the manufacturers use the time when the mills are closed to carry out building and repair work. At the end of the sugar manufacturing period money also circulates more freely as a result of the sales effected.

In the various industrial and commercial occupations, work is carried on continuously throughout the week. Commercial establishments other than retail food shops generally observe the weekly rest.

## Wages

Wages are calculated by the day or the hour according to the occupation and are paid weekly. The system of payment by the job is also very widespread. Salaried employees are paid by the month.

The supervisory staff of agricultural undertakings and sugar mills also receive bonuses.

Up to 1932 these bonuses were rather of the nature of a wage supplement to cover the rise in the cost of living which had occurred especially since 1923, while basic wage rates had not been changed. They were paid twice a year, in June and at the end of December, and amounted to from four to six times the annual wage. This system, which was in direct contradiction to the stipulations of the Labour Code, had the further disadvantage of offering no guarantees to the staff, as the employers generally considered such payments to be a kind of favour.

Roused by the threat of seeing this part of their earnings seriously reduced, if not abolished, as a result of the economic difficulties which were beginning to make themselves felt, the supervisory staff succeeded in 1932 in having the bonuses incorporated in their salaries. Before this arrangement was made, it was a common occurrence for a manager or foreman to be discharged a few weeks before the payment of bonuses, with only his ordinary wages of 200-300 francs a month, instead of the 800-1,800 francs to which he would have been entitled as a month's wages and bonuses.

The average rate of wages for agricultural workers is 10 francs a day for men, 7 francs for women, and 4 francs for children.

Skilled industrial workers earn 20-40 francs a day according to their occupation and qualifications, unskilled male workers 11-15 francs a day, and unskilled female workers 6-9 francs. Women commercial employees earn 150-300 francs a month.

## Trade Unions

The trade union movement is in its infancy. The only organisations to flourish are the agricultural unions, which are required by law to manage the credit funds affiliated to the Agricultural Credit Bank. Industrial workers' trade unions are actively opposed by the employers,

who blacklist any worker who takes too active a part in the trade union movement. There is only one relatively important group: this is the Union of Coal Heavers employed in loading vessels owned by the Transatlantic Shipping Company, which use Fort-de-France, one of the larger ports of the Lesser Antilles, as a port of call for several of their lines. This Union formerly had about 800 members, but as since 1931 most of the ships calling at Martinique have been equipped to burn oil fuel, its membership has dropped to about 250. Altogether, in Martinique there are 25 agricultural trade unions, 5 industrial workers' unions, 6 employers' associations, and 3 mixed trade associations.

An employment exchange carries on extremely limited operations in an intermittent way.

## Labour Inspection

In the early days, labour inspection was merely entrusted to an engineer of the Public Works Department, and the enforcement of the various provisions of the Labour Code which were extended to Martinique in 1910 was at first largely theoretical owing to the complete absence of any efficient supervisory machinery. After the war, however, owing to the complexity of the regulations, especially after the introduction of the workmen's compensation laws in 1925, and to the economic development of the country, the necessity was realised of a well-organised inspection service of a permanent and active character, and under the direction of an expert. An inspector from the French services was accordingly called in. Since 1930 the Inspection Service has been in regular working order and now includes an inspector at the head of the Service, and office staff. A plan of reorganisation which provides for the appointment of an assistant inspector is at present under consideration.

As Martinique has no railway system, tours of inspection are made by means of a motor car belonging to the Service. As many establishments are in the depth of the country, certain parts of the tours have to be made on horseback.

Establishments liable to inspection are visited as often as possible; the larger undertakings are inspected several times a year, and whenever necessary for purposes of investigations. All industrial accidents notified as required form the object of an enquiry. Sugar mills are visited at night during the manufacturing season.

The labour inspector also supervises undertakings classified as dangerous, unhealthy, or noxious. An employment office for the colony which is at present being organised will also be placed under his orders. Another of his duties is to supervise the admission of alien workers, who may not be employed without a contract of employment countersigned by him.

## Food and Clothing

In the absence of index numbers and other statistics and of any details of family budgets, no accurate information can be given with

regard to the cost of living, but Martinique has the reputation of being dearer than any other island of the Antilles.

One thing is certain and that is that the workers live poorly. No one actually dies of hunger, but most members of the working class are underfed and many children go to school with a handful of manioc meal for their dinner. One municipality has therefore opened a school canteen, so as to provide a fairly substantial meal for the children, many of whom walk ten kilometres a day to attend school.

The usual food consists mainly of fruit and vegetables grown in the island : yams, manioc, breadfruit, bananas ; codfish, dried beans, and rice are also important articles of diet. The country worker eats little meat as he cannot afford it. The population living on the sea-coast fares better and eats a great deal of fresh fish.

The country worker is very poorly clad. Everyone, however, has decent clothing and footwear for special occasions, such as holidays, marriages, and funerals.

## Housing

Workers' dwellings in the country are very primitive and generally consist of a hut with walls of plaited sugar-cane straw or wood fibre. The floor is of beaten earth. The hut of the better-off worker is made of wood with an iron roof.

Over 5,000 workers are housed on the sugar plantations. These workers own their own huts, which are built on land belonging to the undertaking.

Rent is a very heavy item in the budget of the town worker, who has to pay 1,800-3,600 francs a year for a two- or three-roomed hut.

The rent usually paid by members of the middle class, salaried employees or officials, varies from 6,000 to 12,000 francs a year.

These high rents have very much encouraged the construction of private houses on the outskirts of the town, and dealers in building materials offer easy terms of payment to heads of families in stable employment.

## Unemployment

The economic depression which has upset the whole world is only now beginning to be felt in Martinique, as its main industry is rigorously protected on the French market. But the recent fall in the prices of sugar and rum has hit the country very hard, and the larger undertakings are contemplating a reduction of their agricultural and industrial operations to a strict minimum, and the postponement of plans for the transformation of factories, two measures which are likely to have serious effects on the labour market in view of the large number of workers in the country.

## Education

Education is well advanced. More than 20,000 children regularly attend the elementary schools, while 1,800 boys and girls attend the two secondary schools of the capital. But the country children rapidly

forget all they have learned and large numbers of young people of about 20 years of age are almost illiterate.

A teachers' training college ensures a supply of teachers of both sexes. A law school prepares candidates for degrees. A technical school provides vocational training for the iron and woodworking trades for about a hundred pupils.

A sum of nearly 2 million francs is included in the annual budget of the colony to provide scholarships, allowances, and other assistance for scholars and students. More than 700 pupils are maintained by the colony in educational establishments in France and in Martinique itself. A quarter of the budget of the island (about 20 million francs) is absorbed by expenditure on education.

## Welfare and Assistance

Assistance for the poor and the aged is organised in each commune. There are seven hostels, a military hospital which also takes in public officials, a preventorium, and two homes for the aged. Regular assistance is provided for large families. Expenditure on assistance amounts to 8 million francs a year.

A number of private institutions, including day nurseries, organisations supplying free meals and clothing to the poor, and three orphanages supplement public charity in the capital.

All the sugar firms and most of the distilleries supply, in addition to workmen's compensation, free medical treatment for the staff living on their plantations ; a doctor visits the sick once a week on the average.

Some of the sugar firms grant allowances to sick workers and assistance to those too old to work, often supplemented by a hut and a plot of ground. There are no definite rules for such allowances and assistance, which depend solely on the generosity of the employer and the prosperity of the undertaking.

## Conclusion

From the above brief summary it will be seen that the application of social legislation is very advanced in Martinique and that the organisation of the colony may be compared to that of a French department.

The fact that such social reforms as the 8-hour day and the weekly rest have gained a firm footing in the island without any direct legal compulsion is evidence of the stage of development reached by Martinique. This result has no doubt been achieved at the cost of some loss of those local characteristics which accord so well with a tropical climate and surroundings, and may therefore be regretted in some quarters. But it is none the less true that the experiment made by France has had results in the social field that are well worthy of attention.