

Labour Conditions in French West Africa

Several writers have recently called attention to labour conditions in French West Africa.

A study of the present state of economic development in Senegal, French Sudan, the Ivory Coast, and French Guinea was made by Mr. Emile Baillaud, General Secretary of the Marseilles Colonial Institute, who was sent on a Mission to French West Africa last winter as a member of the governing body of the Niger Office.

With regard to problems of labour supply, Mr. Baillaud considers ¹ that the time has come to hold an enquiry similar to that carried out in the Belgian Congo in order to determine how the development of French West Africa and the distribution of the available labour in those territories are to be regulated. The necessary investigations should, in his opinion, be carried out "not by some particular official but by the joint efforts of the various interests concerned". According to Mr. Baillaud's observations, this matter is of special importance for French Guinea and the Lower Ivory Coast. "In Guinea itself it does not seem that the actual recruiting of labour constitutes a difficulty for the banana cultivation carried on there. As to the Ivory Coast, the planters reckon they require about 20,000 workers, half of whom can be recruited in the forest districts. The other 10,000 would have to be found in the Sudan; this figure does not appear to exceed the recruiting possibilities of the Upper Ivory Coast alone, but certain precautions are necessary. . . . For these two colonies a joint committee of officials and planters' representatives should have no difficulty in determining the actual requirements. The future development of the plantations appears to be more a question of credit than of labour supply."

The *Colonies-Science* Association has instructed Mr. Henri Labouret, Director of the International Institute for the Study of African Languages and Cultures, to carry out an enquiry into Native labour during a mission he is about to undertake in Guinea, Senegal, and the Ivory Coast. Mr. Labouret considers it necessary to make an objective and methodical study in each colony, comparing all points of view; he will act in close co-operation with the administrative authorities and hopes to collect accurate information relating to the wages, the needs, and the standards of living of the different categories of workers and the advantages in kind which they enjoy. This study will also cover the various legislations in force, the methods of recruiting, migration movements, the nutrition and health of the workers, their output, etc.

In a communication made on 22 April 1936 to the Association for International Economic Reorganisation, Mr. Labouret discussed

¹ Emile BAILLAUD: "L'organisation économique de l'A.O.F.", in *Les Cahiers Coloniaux*, July-Aug. 1936.

certain aspects of the labour problem in French West Africa.¹ His remarks on this occasion may be considered as an introductory chapter to the enquiry he is about to undertake.

Mr. Labouret begins by examining the question of the migration of labour which has long been customary in French West Africa, and the main feature of which is the annual influx of agricultural workers from the provinces of Western Sudan and Upper Guinea who come to work in Senegal and Gambia during the ground-nut season. These workers are commonly known as "*navétanes*". The official statistics state that from 60,000 to 70,000 seasonal workers leave their own country at the beginning of the rainy season to cultivate ground nuts.

The most striking feature of this movement is the form of the contract concluded in Senegal between the *navétane* and his employer. "When the former arrives in the district where he intends to work, he gets in touch with a planter and concludes a verbal agreement with him. The planter places at the worker's disposal a plot of land varying in size but rarely exceeding one hectare. He also provides the worker with the quantity of seed required to sow the plot and with food and lodging until the harvest time. In exchange for these advantages, the *navétane* undertakes to work on the employer's land for two or four days a week, or, it may be, every morning. He is free to use the rest of his time as he wishes. The harvest from the plot given to him for the season belongs to the worker on condition that he repays his employer double the weight of seed received as a loan.

"This form of partnership, which is somewhat akin both to the hiring of services and to tenant farming, is worthy of attention, for it shows the conditions on which the Natives of Western Sudan are willing to work; it is in fact a form of service based on custom. Experience shows that any system resembling it on the European concessions is favoured by the Native workers. Thus, for some years past, planters in districts irrigated by the middle Niger have adopted a system of share farming based on local custom, which gives every satisfaction. . . .

"In normal years and at the prices current before the depression, the *navétane* could hope to earn from 1,600 to 2,000 francs for about five months' work, which represents an average wage of 12 francs a day. Whenever the probable earnings fall below this level, the Sudanese seek work elsewhere than in Senegal or remain at home."

Less is known about "oriental migration" than about "occidental migration", because it is less easily observed, although it involves a much larger number of workers. The most important movement of this kind — it is estimated that before the cocoa slump of 1930 over 200,000 persons were concerned — starts from the territories of the former province of Upper Volta and goes towards the southern part of the Gold Coast Colony.

"The British authorities recognise that the economic development of their territory on the Gold Coast is mainly due to the labour coming

¹ Henri LABOURET: "Le problème de la main-d'œuvre dans l'Ouest-Africain français", in *Politique Etrangère*, June 1936.

from the neighbouring French possessions. Since the beginning of the century, over 150,000 cocoa farms, covering 1,400 square miles of land, have been cleared and planted; the port of Takoradi has been built; a very complete network of carriage roads has been constructed; while every year the gold and diamond mines provide employment for over 25,000 workers.

"The British administration has grasped the importance of attracting these workers and it has issued orders to ensure that they are well received along the caravan routes. Migrant workers are sure to find good lodgings in the villages, where they do odd jobs for the women folk such as fetching wood and water and pounding millet and yams. Small jobs of this kind help them to live until they reach Kumasi. On arrival in that town they go to the market-place, where a kind of unofficial labour exchange is held, and there learn from their compatriots where there is work to be had. Some of them immediately take jobs in the towns as labourers, without a contract, by the month or by the day. Before the depression the daily wage for unskilled workers varied from 1s. 6d. to 2s. 6d. a day, the latter rate being the commoner.

"The budget of these seasonal workers has never been studied and it is impossible to give any definite figures for it. It is certain, however, that these migrants return every year to their native districts with large quantities of goods bought with their savings and on which they pay heavy customs duties. They also bring back with them large sums of money, which, according to the Secretary-General of the Upper Volta, amounted to over 15 million francs in 1930.

"Anybody visiting the Gold Coast Colony cannot help noticing the large number of French Sudanese employed in all private and public workplaces in this colony. Yet, before the depression, settlers and traders on the Ivory Coast complained that they were unable to find the Native labour required for their establishments.

"Financial red tape and certain administrative blunders are not the only grievances put forward by the Sudanese against the Ivory Coast. They also affirm that wages are higher in the neighbouring British colonies. Their remarks on this point seem to be justified. A local order (section 8) issued at Koulaba on 1 December 1926 fixed the minimum daily wage of an average worker at 2 francs, in addition to standard rations valued at 1.35 francs.

"On the Ivory Coast the rates were a little higher and they have constantly increased since 1914. The rise in the average monthly wage of an unskilled worker is as follows: 1914, 30 francs; 1917, 60 francs; 1919, 90 francs; 1924, 125 francs; 1929, 160 francs, or, in the last case, 5.33 francs a day, plus standard rations and in some cases a snack, valued at 1.90 francs, or altogether 7.23 francs a day.

"The difference was great between these figures and those given for the Gold Coast Colony. Europeans on the Ivory Coast long refused to increase wages on the ground that the Natives' requirements were small and if they were paid twice as much they would do only half as much work, and the result would be to increase the depression. Without discussing this over-simple reasoning, which rather dis-

regards the facts, it is interesting to note the attitude of the Natives in the interior who, after all, supply the labour. All of them are quite familiar with the wage rates in the various parts of the Federation and in neighbouring districts. They know that a *navétane* can earn 12 francs in Senegal in prosperous years, and that their compatriots working in Kumasi or Tarquah in the cocoa plantations, gold mines, diamond mines, and manganese mines are paid at about the same rate. They consequently go to the districts most favourable to them and abandon the Ivory Coast, which has a very poor reputation."

Certain other grievances are also put forward by the Natives, chiefly in connection with the contracts required by the legislation at present in force. "The contracts certainly provide both parties with guarantees that are far from negligible. The European employers use the contracts to retain their staff for a certain number of months and thus ensure the continuity of their output. They consider, however, that the present provisions do not meet all requirements and ask for guaranteed three-year engagements as provided for in Ordinance No. 11 in force in the Gold Coast Colony. It should, however, be pointed out that while that Ordinance authorises three-year contracts (15-month contracts for mine workers), its provisions are never applied. The local authorities, assisted in some cases by local residents, sometimes make sure of the services of Natives living in the northern districts of the Kru Coast by means of written engagements for at most a year but usually for six months. This system, too, is not very widespread, such a precaution being unnecessary to engage and retain workers of whom in normal times there is always a large supply.

"Conditions are different in French territories, which explains the attitude of the European employers. But the Natives, many of whom have worked in the Gold Coast Colony, are opposed to long-term contracts and are strongly in favour of verbal agreements renewable every month, payment by the week or fortnight, and no deductions from wages. This is the system employed in practically all undertakings in the neighbouring British colony.

"What has been said above shows that the Natives of French West Africa willingly accept agricultural work far from their place of origin. It also proves that the Sudanese have a lively sense of the value of wages. Before the depression, wages were in the neighbourhood of 12 francs a day both in the east and the west. In all districts where the rate was lower, on the Ivory Coast for example, the employers had great difficulty in procuring the necessary supply of labour.

"Labour legislation in French West Africa is fairly comprehensive and appears to be rigorously enforced in respect of the recruitment of workers, their transport, the installation of the workplaces, food, medical attendance and health, conditions and hours of work, and organisation of supervision. This legislation is, however, based too strictly on rules established for European undertakings, and requires some amendment as regards recruiting, contracts of employment, and deferred pay."