Medical Aspects of the Protection of Indigenous Workers in Colonies

by

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Under war conditions as under peace conditions, the protection of the health of indigenous workers in colonies is extremely important, both from the point of view of the efficiency of production and from the point of view of the well-being of the Native population. Indeed, the question is even more urgent in time of war, because production is being speeded up in colonial territories so as to increase the supply of raw materials and foodstuffs for the countries affected by the war and make good certain shortages in home production. It is therefore essential to ensure that the progress made in recent years by various colonial Governments in the regulation of working conditions among indigenous workers should not be nullified, but should, on the contrary, continue and be intensified.

The International Labour Office therefore considered that an article recapitulating the basic rules for protecting the health of indigenous workers would be desirable at the present time, and it felt that no more qualified person could be found to write that article than Dr. Mottoulle, Deputy Director General in Africa of the Mining Union of the Upper Katanga, member of the Belgian Native Protection Board, member of the International Colonial Institute, and member of the Committee of Experts on Native Labour of the International Labour Organisation. The name of Dr. Mottoulle is closely linked up with the remarkable work accomplished by the Mining Union of the Upper Katanga in solving various problems concerning the health of its workers. The article which Dr. Mottoulle consented to write for the International Labour Review *therefore possesses to the full that authority which is the fruit of long practical experience of medical work among African workers.*

SINCE the beginning of the present century, all the colonial Governments have paid great attention to the health of their indigenous populations ; all have realised how important it is for the mother country to have in its colonies a large and healthy population. The legislation which all of them have established for the protection of indigenous workers is most complete and most carefully thought out when the public authorities have realised most fully the relationship of cause and effect between appropriate legislation on hygiene and labour conditions and the economic well-being of the colony.

When a new European war is involving a tremendous increase in the consumption of raw materials from colonial territories, the Governments of the home countries will require their colonies to increase considerably their output of these materials, and it is to be hoped that they will at the same time recognise the necessity, for economic as well as for humanitarian reasons, of avoiding any relaxation of the protective measures for indigenous workers under the pretext that the needs of production are extremely urgent. On the contrary, it is to be hoped that a considerable proportion of the profits from this increased output will be devoted to increasing the well-being of the workers concerned.

Although the general basic principles for protecting the health of workers—whether coloured workers in Asia, Oceania, or Africa, or members of the white races—are the same everywhere, every system of protective legislation must adapt these principles to local differences of climate, race, custom, etc. Hence the rules for the protection of indigenous workers in the various colonies cannot but be complex. The present study is concerned mainly with the protection of the health of African workers, as being the group with which the author is most intimately acquainted.

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Any enlightened system for the protection of the workers' health presupposes a thorough knowledge of the environment, habits, and needs, of the population in question ; consequently an employer who is anxious to safeguard the health of his indigenous workers must select the measures he will apply in the light of the physical and mental characteristics of those workers and the climate and working conditions under which they will be employed.

As will be seen later, the protection of the workers' health cannot be considered adequate unless account is taken of the moral and social well-being of the worker and his family.

It is for the Governments to instruct employers in their territories as to the measures to be taken for protecting the health of their workers, and to instruct the workers as to their duties of collaboration in the work of protection.

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It may be well first of all to consider briefly why the problem of the protection of the workers' health is different in the case of an indigenous worker from what it is in the case of a European worker, and also according to whether the worker is employed in his country of origin or at a distance, on agricultural work or in mining or industrial work, or, finally, by an indigenous or another employer.

Generally speaking, the European worker has received adequate nourishment from his early days; his parents or society have attended to his physical, mental and moral development, although of course in varying degrees, and from his youth up he has been trained to continuous manual labour under a certain discipline.

The African worker, leaving his village to enter the service of an employer for the first time, has reached working age without any preparation fitting him for such work; if it is work of a European type it is all the more difficult and fatiguing for him because the conditions are completely new and unknown; his education has been obtained entirely from the great open book of nature. Physically, he is generally an individual who has survived by natural selection after passing through considerable hardships in his childhood and adolescence; those who were less fit have succumbed. His constitution will be more or less robust according to whether he belongs to a people settled on a fertile river bank or to a people living in the plains, the forest, or the desert. The banks of rivers or lakes are rich in starchy and oily products, cattle, game, and fish, so that a complete diet can be obtained, with the result that those living there are usually of good stature. On the other hand, those who live in the plains or in the forest, where the soil is poor and the population is often subject if not to famine at least to want, which may be attributed more

often to their own lack of foresight than to the ravages of locusts, wild animals, or abnormal drought, are usually of puny appearance. The latter group require greater medical attention than the former to prepare and train them for employment.

Whatever his origin may have been, the indigenous worker who comes for the first time to offer his services to a European employer is in no way prepared for steady, disciplined work; the only efforts to which his muscles are used are those of dancing, hunting, fishing, or woodcutting. The work that will be required of him by his employer will be of a kind to which he is unaccustomed as regards both quality and quantity and will therefore be extremely fatiguing. Consequently, the worker will require a period of training, the length of which will depend on his origin and strength, the nature of the work, and his place of employment; otherwise the employer will meet with serious disappointments as to what the health of the indigenous worker can stand.

From the psychological point of view, the indigenous worker of the African Continent, from Morocco to Natal and from the Sudan to Namaqualand, has one failing which distinguishes him clearly from the European worker. In spite of the African's complete ignorance of many European notions, his intelligence may be said to be on the same footing as that of a white worker; his affections can rise to the same noble sentiments as our own; on the other hand, his will-power is always unreliable and he remains a creature of impulse. As a consequence of this inferiority, the African worker is thriftless and changeable and is far from being a conscientious worker when in employment. This explains why the public authorities sometimes think it necessary for the sake of the health of the indigenous worker to keep him in a state of tutelage, since they consider that it would be dangerous to emancipate him too quickly.

When the indigenous worker engages his services near his village of origin for agricultural work, very few precautions are required to safeguard his health, the main point being to make certain that he secures adequate food. His dwelling, his food, and his type of life, will suffer little change, and he will have the moral support of his family and the indigenous community, both of which are very important factors in the maintenance of his health. Moreover, as he is remaining in

his own country he will naturally be vaccinated against the diseases that are endemic to that district.

When the worker accepts employment very far from his village of origin, more extensive precautions must be taken. The employer must, as far as possible, give him the same chances of remaining healthy as he has in his own village. He must supply him with accommodation and clothing suited to the new climate and provide him with his usual diet, but in sufficient quantity to fit him for the work required of him ; he must enable him to be surrounded by his family and have the necessary social distractions, vaccinate him against the new diseases to which he will be exposed in his new place of employment, and gradually accustom him to physical effort.

The health of the industrial worker requires even more extensive precautionary measures than that of the agricultural worker as regards food, hours of work, workplaces, and the risk of accidents and occupational diseases.

The authorities have reasonable opportunities of inspecting working conditions when the workers are engaged by European employers, but the same is not true in the case of indigenous employers. The latter are becoming more numerous in all colonies and, unfortunately for their workers, the enforcement of protective measures is made difficult by the ignorance of the employers, the fact that they are scattered over wide areas, the instability of their businesses, the mobility of their labour supply, etc. The problem is no easy one. It would not be wise to prohibit or even discourage a Native from offering his services to another Native if he desires or requires to do so, nor would it be wise to prohibit Natives who have reached a certain degree of development from engaging in remunerative work with the help of those they employ. But the authorities must tighten up their supervision over the conditions of employment of the workers thus engaged, more particularly with regard to accommodation, food, hours, medical care, workmen's compensation, the employment of women and young persons, and general hygiene.

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This brief survey of certain aspects of the problem of the health of African workers may be followed by an outline of the rules which every employer should bear in mind if he wishes to provide himself with a healthy and efficient labour supply.

The simplest method will be to mention the rules which are essential under those conditions which call for the greatest precautions—namely, arduous industrial tasks carried out by workers recruited at a great distance from their place of employment. The stringency of these rules can be relaxed progressively as conditions of employment approach more closely those of agricultural work in the worker's village of origin.

If the worker is to be employed at a distance from his home, the first point is that he must be recruited and brought to his place of employment. The fundamental conditions for healthy recruiting are freedom of engagement and a guarantee of the worker's fitness for his work.

The conditions of the worker's journey must ensure adequate physical comfort and moral well-being. Compulsion of any kind is harmful from the moral point of view and adversely affects both the health and the output of the worker. In the early colonial days compulsion was sometimes thought necessary in order to train the Native to engage in remunerative work and thus collaborate in the improvement of his own conditions, and this was sometimes referred to under such euphemisms as " administrative suasion ", but at the present time, even in Central Africa, the pretext of education or collaboration in colonial development cannot reasonably be used as an excuse for such methods for the benefit of European employers. In fact, in order to eliminate the element of compulsion and keep up the morale of the worker, which is important for his health, the industrial employer should endeavour to take account of the tastes and preferences of the workers in allocating tasks to them, although on the other hand he must not allow himself to be victimised by the fickleness of taste for which the Native is notorious.

The worker's fitness for work should, wherever possible, be determined by a doctor at the moment of recruiting or at least before he begins work. If no doctor is available, recourse may be had to one or other of the recognised indices of physical strength (relationship between the weight, height, and chest measurement). The indices of Pignet, Méo, and Lefrou, are all equally good, the first being simplest for practical purposes. Any European can reckon out the index without difficulty, but it must be remembered that the result is only an index ; certain anomalies in the ratio of height to weight

might lead to errors if the theoretical figure were accepted at its face value, and employment might therefore be forbidden to a worker who would be passed by a doctor as perfectly fit for it. It would therefore be well for the public authorities to correct the index used by prescribing a minimum weight below which a worker should not be considered fit for industrial employment. In the Belgian Congo, this minimum weight is fixed at 50 kg. (110 lbs.).

The authorities should enumerate the diseases or physical or mental defects, such as tuberculosis, leprosy, insanity, etc., which definitely render a worker unfit for employment of any kind; they should also enumerate the diseases or defects which make the worker unfit for certain strenuous or dangerous industrial tasks but do not render him incapable of light work; these include deafness, dumbness, the loss of an eye, atrophy of a limb, hernia, etc. It is only reasonable that a Native worker suffering from one of these defects should still be permitted, if he so desires, to improve his position by engaging in remunerative employment.

The authorities must exercise special supervision over the conditions of employment of women and young persons. The employment of women during pregnancy or while nursing their children should be prohibited; no young person should be employed before the age of sixteen years, and thereafter only as an apprentice and as far as possible with someone of his own family. Night work should be prohibited for women and for young persons.

On the other hand, it is desirable not only to permit but to encourage women and children, irrespective of their age or constitution, to accompany the head of the family when he accepts employment in European industry at a great distance from his village of origin, provided always that the employer guarantees sufficiently comfortable conditions for the transport of the family, adequate food, and protection against bad weather and disease, and provided that the family can live together normally in the worker's place of employment. The presence of his family in the place where he is employed is a very important source of moral strength for the African worker and a very valuable safeguard against disease. Numerous statistics compiled by large undertakings, such as the Mining Union of the Upper Katanga, show that the morbidity and even the mortality rates are much higher among un-

married workers than among those accompanied by their families. As will be pointed out later, the presence of the family tends to make the worker's employment more stable, and that stability is in itself a factor favourable to health, for morbidity and mortality rates are always higher among workers during their first year than among those who have been in their employment for a longer period.

This brings us to the question of the measures to be taken to acclimatise workers and secure their stability in employment.

A worker can be acclimatised to a district and to certain new conditions of life by helping and training his organism to overcome the harmful influences to which he is exposed in his new surroundings.

The first essential is that he should be provided with accommodation and clothing of good quality. His clothes must protect him against bad weather, cold, rain, and, in particular, the extreme changes of temperature which occur so frequently in Africa between day-time and night-time; there is also the change of temperature between underground work and surface work in mines. The worker's dwelling must be built of sound materials so as to preserve a fairly uniform temperature and keep out damp, as well as to prevent the spread of vermin, which often transmit disease.

He must receive an adequate supply of food of good quality. Before mingling with the other workers, the new arrival must be disinfected and all external and internal parasites (lice, scabies, worms, the germs of malaria, framboesia, syphilis, etc.) must be removed by medical action; he must then be vaccinated against the diseases to which he may be exposed in his new environment (smallpox, typhoid, epidemic meningitis, diphtheria, yellow fever, etc.). All these points, which are a matter of general hygiene, must be regulated by the public authorities in accordance with local requirements.

An indigenous worker who has never previously been employed in European industry suffers great fatigue at the outset because of unnecessary and clumsy movements. His organism suffers from this fatigue and his output will remain low, although he may be very willing to work. He must therefore be gradually trained to the work; the necessary movements must be taught without impatience and certainly without any violence; this training should be given preferably by an understanding European overseer, who can sympathise

with the weakness and lack of skill of a new arrival, and not, as is often done, by an older worker, for the Native generally shows little sympathy for the weaknesses of his fellows. Fluctuations in the weight of the new worker are a valuable index of the way in which he is standing up to the period of acclimatisation and initiation to his work—a period that has proved fatal to so many workers in Africa because the precautions mentioned were not taken or were wrongly applied. The length of the period of preparation for normal work varies according to the race and constitution of the worker and the conditions under which he has to be employed ; it may be two months, six months, or even a year.

Continuous expert medical supervision over indigenous workers is the best guarantee for their acclimatisation ; the experienced doctor is best qualified to say when the worker has become acclimatised and can be transferred to the ordinary working shifts.

As the period of initiation into industrial employment is so dangerous for the health of a new worker from a distant part of the country, it is surely desirable, for humanitarian reasons, not to multiply the number of persons exposed to this risk by constant recruiting and engagements. Fortunately, the high cost of recruiting workers at a distance, as has often to be done in Africa in order to meet the requirements of European industries, combines with this humanitarian reason as an incentive to the intelligent employer to secure the greatest possible stability in his labour supply. A stable supply of labour means healthy and efficient workers.

The present writer does not consider it necessary for the authorities to lay down rules for a policy to secure stable labour, but they should establish certain legislative barriers to prevent abnormal recruiting, which interferes with the life of the Native communities. The employers realise sufficiently clearly the advantages of retaining their trained workers to find and apply the most suitable methods of doing so. They must bear in mind that if the African worker is to settle he must have not only a certain degree of material comfort for himself and his family (reasonable accommodation, food, medical attention, and wages) but also a suitable social environment, certain distractions, and, surprising as it may seem, the guardianship of an employer who understands him and who takes steps to counteract the naturally improvident tendencies

of the worker. The success of the policy of stability will be ensured if the employer cares for the children of his workers from their infancy through their period of school attendance, as apprentices, and as workers.

In this connection, mention may be made of the Mining Union of the Upper Katanga, which has established quite an advanced system of social institutions in tropical Africa for its indigenous workers. The system includes ante-natal clinics, maternity homes, child welfare and milk distributing centres, special messrooms under medical supervision for children between one and five years, special messrooms and a school medical inspection service for children from five to fifteen years, apprenticeship for boys from fifteen to eighteen years, workrooms for girls from fourteen to eighteen years, sports clubs for young persons and adults, musical societies and bands, a boy scout organisation, a savings bank, advances for dowries, and, finally, the organisation of tribal assemblies to keep the worker in touch with the community from which he came.

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In the above survey of the measures to be taken to protect the health of the African worker, the author has laid special stress on those which are of a humanitarian, family and social character, rather than on the strictly medical and hygienic aspects of the question, because he considers that the former are of great importance and very often neglected. The principles of sound hygiene in Native compounds, as regards accommodation, clothing, food, protection during work, and prophylaxis against disease, have been dealt with in masterly fashion by a number of writers—one might mention by way of example Pearson and Mouchet (*The Practical Hygiene of Native Compounds in Tropical Africa*, 1923) and Orenstein (*A Review of the Hygiene Organisation of the Witwatersrand Gold Mines*, 1930)—and any attempt to cover the ground in this article would be redundant and would extend far beyond the space at the author's disposal.