

# REPORTS AND ENQUIRIES

## The Third Session of the Permanent Agricultural Committee

*In accordance with a decision taken by the Governing Body of the International Labour Office at its 108th Session (Geneva, March 1949) the Permanent Agricultural Committee<sup>1</sup> held its Third Session at Geneva in September 1949. The discussions at this session and the main points of the resolutions which were adopted unanimously are summarised in the following article.*

The Third Session of the Permanent Agricultural Committee of the International Labour Organisation took place at Geneva from 1 to 10 September 1949, under the chairmanship of Mr. E. G. Gooch, member of the British House of Commons and President of the National Union of Agricultural Workers. The Vice-Chairman was Mr. J. F. Booth, Chief of the Economics Division of the Canadian Department of Agriculture. The meeting was attended by representatives of the Governing Body of the International Labour Office, the United Nations, the Food and Agriculture Organisation, the World Health Organisation and international agricultural organisations and by experts from all over the world.

Four questions relating to the conditions of work and security of employment of agricultural workers had been placed on the agenda by the Governing Body in the light of recommendations made by the Committee at its Second Session. They were the following :

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<sup>1</sup> This advisory committee of the International Labour Organisation was set up by the Governing Body in November 1936. For a brief description of its origin and an account of the preceding session, see *International Labour Review*, Vol. LVI, No. 4, October 1947, pp. 428-436 : "The Second Session of the Permanent Agricultural Committee".

- (1) Hours of work in agriculture.
- (2) Security of employment and occupation in agriculture : special problems of the agricultural populations in underdeveloped countries.
- (3) Medical examination of children and young persons for fitness for employment in agriculture.
- (4) Extension of social security to the agricultural population.

Reports had been prepared by the Office on each of these questions to serve as a basis for discussion.

#### OPENING OF THE SESSION

The session was opened by the Director-General of the International Labour Office, who stressed the importance attached by the Office to the social and economic problems connected with the living and working conditions of agricultural workers, and the need of keeping in close touch and collaboration with other international bodies concerned with the solution of agricultural problems. He pointed out that the study of agricultural problems was assuming increasing importance among the activities of the Organisation, and that, in particular, the agenda of the various regional conferences held in Asia, Latin America and the Near East all included items relating to the living and working conditions of agricultural populations. The agenda of the Asian Regional Conference to be held in January 1950 was also to include the question of agricultural wage regulation. Moreover, the Governing Body, following the recommendations made by the Committee at its last session, had placed on the agenda of the next session of the International Labour Conference a general survey of the problems of agricultural labour as well as the two specific questions of minimum wage regulations and holidays with pay in agriculture.

The ensuing discussions made it clear that the Committee remained fully aware of the difficulty of drawing a sharp line of division between the various categories of agricultural workers—paid, independent or semi-independent—since all categories were often affected by the same living and working conditions, whatever their legal status on the land. The Committee therefore came to the conclusion that the term “ agricultural worker ” should be taken in its widest sense.

#### HOURS OF WORK IN AGRICULTURE

The Committee had already considered the question of regulating hours of work in agriculture at its first two sessions. It had accepted the principle of such regulation and suggested “ that an

attempt should be made to establish standards permitting the fixing of a limit to the total hours of work in agriculture over the year, taking into consideration seasonal and climatic conditions governing agricultural production ”.

The report submitted by the Office on the question described the progress made since the end of the first world war in shortening the agricultural working day. It also brought out the fact that there had been a considerable expansion in national regulation as a result of legislation and collective agreements, so that it now appeared possible to achieve international regulation.

During the discussion, members of the Committee belonging to the different groups once again stressed the necessity of regulating hours of work in agriculture, and pointed out that, thanks in particular to mechanisation and more efficient use of labour, very interesting results had been obtained both in field operations and in transport, which had reduced manpower requirements and thus permitted a shortening of the working day.

Certain members drew attention to the difficulty of applying general regulations in some countries and thought it advisable to permit exceptions in the case of small farms. The Committee agreed, however, that certain fundamental principles must govern any attempt to shorten the working day in agriculture. They are as follows :

(a) The regulations should apply to all undertakings with the exception of those where only the farmer and members of his family are employed.

(b) The regulations should apply to the whole of the territory of a country, with such regional or local adjustments as may be necessary.

(c) Employers and workers should be effectively consulted—through their organisations, if any—and should take part, to the greatest extent possible, both in the framing and in the application of the regulations.

(d) Exceptions should be kept within limits.

(e) The regulations should be sufficiently flexible to enable them to be widely applied.

(f) The regulations should provide for a working day which is not excessively long in comparison with that of workers in other sectors of the economy. They should aim at preventing the best workers from leaving the land and, while promoting increased production by means of efficient farm organisation, at securing a higher standard of living for the worker on the land and enabling him to realise the cultural progress to which he is entitled.

In conclusion, the Committee decided to request the Governing Body to place this question on the agenda of one of the next sessions of the International Labour Conference for action to be taken on the international level.

In support of this request, the Committee adopted a resolution laying down the principles which it considered should govern such regulation. It affirmed that the form of the regulations should be left to the discretion of each country, provided that their application is effectively ensured. Finally, it agreed to the principle that the annual limit of hours of work should be set at 2,400 hours, the maximum weekly limit at 54 hours and the maximum daily limit at 9 hours, with the possibility of varying the distribution of such hours according to the different periods of the year.

#### SECURITY OF EMPLOYMENT AND OCCUPATION IN UNDERDEVELOPED COUNTRIES

The Committee at its Second Session had examined in its broad lines the question of "security of employment and occupation in agriculture", bringing out the importance as well as the complexity of the problems involved. Its debates on this item had emphasised the relationship of the question of security of employment and occupation to the efficiency and economic welfare of the population dependent upon farming, and had resulted in the selection of a number of points for further consideration by the Committee and for study by the Office.

Among the points selected was that of the "special problems of the agricultural populations in underdeveloped countries". The Committee had been impressed by the fact that in these countries as much as 70 or 80 per cent. of the population was engaged in farming, and that the pressure of population on the land created problems which were different from those prevailing in developed countries. Theirs was the problem of daily existence, of limited production and low consumption. From the point of view of world consumption and international trade, the developed countries had a stake in raising the standard of living in underdeveloped countries, and the Committee had recommended that a basis for international assistance should be sought in collaboration and consultation with other appropriate international bodies. These points were taken into consideration by the Office in its preliminary report on the nature and principal aspects of the special problems involved and the possible methods of approach.

The Committee took note of the plans for technical assistance to underdeveloped countries which were being studied at present as part of the programme of action of the United Nations and the specialised agencies. It came to the conclusion that a constructive approach to the problem under consideration should include the introduction of better techniques, vocational education, the general improvement of agricultural equipment, the shifting of surplus rural population, land settlement schemes, and industrialisation; further, measures to ensure the provision of supplementary outlets to under-employed and seasonal workers through the regularisation of pro-

duction and the promotion of rural industries and handicrafts ; and, lastly, the improvement of tenure and ownership, wage regulation and better conditions of work, the improvement of marketing and trade, the application of co-operative methods, and adequate capital investments. Consequently, the Committee expressed the view that, in collaboration with other agencies, the International Labour Organisation should in its studies and action devote particular attention to the questions of employment and manpower (occupational adjustments in agricultural population, land settlement, migration, seasonal employment, etc.), general and vocational education, land relationships, wages, co-operation and housing.

In conclusion, the Committee adopted a resolution embodying its recommendations to the Governing Body in respect of the studies and action which the Organisation might undertake on the various points mentioned above. Moreover, in view of the complexity of the problem, it expressed the view that this item should be retained on the agenda of the next session of the Committee for further consideration of its various aspects.

#### MEDICAL EXAMINATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PERSONS

The question of the medical examination of children and young persons for fitness for employment in agriculture was discussed by the Committee for the second time. In 1947 it had taken the view that its discussion was merely of a preliminary nature, and that further study of the question by the Office was necessary to enable the Committee to make useful recommendations. The report submitted by the Office to the Committee at this session was prepared in the light of the resolutions adopted in 1947 ; it discussed the need for medical examinations for young workers in agriculture and the practical steps taken in various countries.

After hearing the views expressed by various members and in particular those of the representative from the World Health Organisation, who dwelt on the need for preventive measures, the Committee found that it was in full agreement with the principle of health examination of young workers in agricultural employment. The discussion brought out clearly the absolute necessity of a system of medical examination, especially for certain specialised workers and for family workers, if the ravages of malaria and tuberculosis among these populations are to be successfully overcome. One expert pointed out that at present the incidence of tuberculosis is higher among country children than among those living in towns and that this state of affairs is due to the lack of medical supervision.

The Committee was fully aware of the difficulty of carrying out such examinations, especially in countries where health services are not greatly developed ; however, it considered that by utilising existing school health services, maternity and child welfare services, national health insurance schemes and the like, it would be possible

to set on foot a system of medical supervision for young people already engaged, or intending to engage, in agriculture. It urged, that every possible means should be taken to protect the health of these young workers. Among other measures, it proposed that the medical examination should be repeated periodically, that the teaching of hygiene and accident prevention should be included in school curricula and that any regulations drawn up should take account of differences in the conditions of life in various countries.

In conclusion, the Committee adopted a resolution on the basic principles which should be followed in extending health examination for fitness for employment to children and young workers in agriculture, and a second resolution requesting the Governing Body to examine the possibility of placing this question on the agenda of the International Labour Conference, in order that measures may be adopted on the international level.

#### EXTENSION OF SOCIAL SECURITY TO THE AGRICULTURAL POPULATION

During its Second Session in 1947, the Committee had taken note of the conclusions reached at the meeting in Havana in 1939<sup>1</sup> as a result of examination of the question of extending social security measures to the agricultural population, and had attached considerable importance to the detailed study of this problem with a view to possible international action. It had also urged that the studies of the Office should take into consideration the special risks to which the agricultural worker's means of livelihood are exposed (fire, hail, death of livestock, etc.).

The study of the question was resumed at this session on the basis of three reports prepared by the Office, dealing respectively with systems of social security, the part played by co-operative societies and mutual aid organisations in social and occupational security in agriculture, and protection of the farmer against natural risks endangering his crops and farm.

The discussion which took place on this subject, and in which various experts took part, brought out various general principles and led to the conclusion that the extension of social security to the agricultural population was in the general interest, both from the economic and from the social point of view, and that the agricultural worker should benefit in this respect from treatment equivalent to that enjoyed by urban groups. Although encouraging progress has been made in the last few years, the Committee never-

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<sup>1</sup> The Second Session of the Permanent Agricultural Committee, planned for 1939, was adjourned on account of the war. However, the Office, desirous of continuing its work in this field, convened a partial meeting at Havana in November 1939, at which members of the Committee who were then on the American continent participated. Cf. *International Labour Review*, Vol. XLI, No. 3, March 1940, pp. 269-276 : "Meeting of American Members of the Permanent Agricultural Committee".

theless maintained that vigorous action should be taken, both on the national and on the international level, in view of the fact that large sections of the rural population throughout the world still have either no protection or only very limited protection against the social risks and natural production risks to which they are undoubtedly exposed.

The Committee recognised that incapacity for work, old age, death of the family breadwinner, employment injury, lack of medical care, family charges and losses of crops and livestock constitute serious threats to the too frequently low standard of living of agricultural workers, share farmers, tenant farmers and smallholders, as well as members of their families, and considered these risks to be a grave danger to the world economy in general as well as to the health and prosperity of the agricultural population.

Several members of the Committee pointed out that the International Labour Conference had already adopted Conventions concerning the risks of accident, sickness, invalidity, old age and death in agriculture, and a Recommendation urging that the benefits of social security systems applicable in various countries to industrial and commercial workers should be extended to agricultural workers, but that these Conventions had been ratified by too few States and that an effort should be made to increase the number of ratifications.

The Committee was also of opinion that agriculture was more exposed than any other industry to certain serious and unpredictable risks which not only threatened the harvest and livestock but sometimes imperilled the very existence of the farm itself. It was therefore considered necessary to establish a system of insurance for at least some of these risks.

In conclusion, the Committee adopted a detailed resolution containing a certain number of general principles which could serve as a basis for action taken on the international level. In this resolution, which takes into account the diversity of agricultural conditions in various countries, it stressed the urgency of preparing schemes for affording a minimum degree of social security for agricultural populations, and of measures to put them into effect as soon as possible. The Committee held that not only persons working for others, but also persons working on their own account and their families should benefit from these schemes. It emphasised that agricultural workers should enjoy the same protection as that afforded to industrial and commercial workers in the country concerned. While considering that equal protection should be afforded in respect of all the ordinary risks, the Committee agreed that an order of priority might be established with reference to the principal factors in the agricultural economy of each country, and expressed the opinion that if a choice had to be made, priority should be given to the introduction of measures for medical aid and cash benefits in the event of employment injury, sickness and maternity.

The Committee recommended the establishment of compulsory social insurance schemes and suggested that in the meantime encouragement should be given, in certain countries, to a voluntary system which could be developed by appropriate stages into a complete official scheme. It also expressed the view that complete protection might be achieved by using as a basis existing or future co-operative or mutual aid organisations. In addition, in countries where an official system of social security already exists but does not cover persons occupied in agriculture, the possibility should be considered of using the co-operative and mutual aid organisations as a means of extending the benefits of social security schemes to such persons.

As regards the protection of farmers against natural risks which threaten their undertaking, the Committee proposed that adequate means of protection against these risks should be considered; in order to permit the application of such measures, studies should be undertaken by the competent authorities in each country, in consultation with co-operative and mutual aid associations where they exist, as well as with other private organisations, particularly in respect of the definition and limitation of risks and the financing of insurance. The Committee also thought that, before adopting any such scheme of insurance, it would undoubtedly be necessary to introduce it first on an experimental basis, taking into consideration local or regional customs.

Having thus examined the various aspects of the extension of social security measures to the agricultural population, and having established certain fundamental principles which might serve as a basis for international action, the Committee in conclusion adopted a resolution expressing the opinion that the time was opportune for such action and recommending to the Governing Body of the International Labour Office to place this question on the agenda of one of the early sessions of the International Labour Conference.

## CONCLUSION

This is not the place for a complete report of the discussions of the Committee at this session, or of the resolutions adopted. But it may be opportune to point out that some of the decisions taken confirm and crystallise views set forth at the first two sessions. Resolutions advocating concrete measures were adopted as regards the regulation of hours of work, the extension of social security and the medical examination of children and young persons for fitness for employment in agriculture, and the Committee recommended the Governing Body of the International Labour Office to place these three questions on the agenda of an early session of the International Labour Conference. At the Second Session of the Committee, the question of security of employment and occupation had already been the subject of discussions which enabled members to select certain



points for further study. On one of these points, that of the special problems affecting agricultural populations in underdeveloped countries, the Committee adopted a resolution recommending to the Governing Body that this question as a whole should again be placed on its agenda so that it might be able to continue its study of the various aspects of the problem.

The discussions which took place brought out clearly the increasing importance of social problems in agriculture. They showed that world economy and peace are in part bound up with the improvement of the living and working conditions of the agricultural population and that vigorous action is needed to achieve practical results as rapidly as possible.

It should be noted that the Committee has throughout borne in mind that various aspects of its agenda are of particular interest to the United Nations and other specialised agencies, and has insisted on the closest collaboration between the International Labour Organisation and these bodies.

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