

Labor Situation in Belgium

By PROFESSOR ERNEST MAHAIM
Université de Liège, Belgium

IN order to understand the actual situation of labor in Belgium, some essential data and figures must be recalled.

Before the war, Belgium was one of the most prosperous countries of Europe. On a territory of 29,455 sq. km., a population of 7,571,387 inhabitants were living in 1913, *i.e.*, 257 persons per sq. km., a greater density than that of any other European state. From 1900 to 1910 (dates of the two last censuses) this population was increased at the annual average rate of 1.03 per cent, a higher rate than that of any country of Latin race or of the United Kingdom (0.91). This rate of increase was only surpassed by Germany, Holland, Switzerland and the Balkan states. The prosperity of Belgium is due less to natural advantages than to the activity of its inhabitants.

BELGIAN INDUSTRY BEFORE THE WAR

Belgian agriculture was, in many respects, the first of the world. If it is true that the cultivated area of cereals for human consumption is increasing, the yield per hectare is superior to that of France, Germany and Great Britain for wheat, rye, oats, sugar beets and potatoes. The land, however, is not particularly fertile. The Flanders, especially, have a particularly poor soil and if splendid crops are obtained, it is due to the continual labor of the peasants and to high manuring, for it is in Belgium that the agriculturist uses the greatest quantities of chemical manure per hectare.

With regard to the livestock, Belgium had a greater number of livestock per sq. km. than Great Britain, France, Germany or even Denmark. The breeding of certain sorts of draught-horses was unequalled.

Notwithstanding the superiority of its agriculture, Belgium should not have been in a position to feed its population, if it had not found in its trade and industry the necessary resources to buy abroad what it needed.

The trade of Belgium placed it fifth in the world in absolute value with only the United States, Germany, Great Britain and France ahead. In relative value, however, Belgium was first in 1912 with 655 francs of import, 522 francs of export or 1499 francs per inhabitant. The port of Antwerp disputed in 1912 the third place in Europe to Hamburg, London and Liverpool leading in Europe with only New York ahead in America.

Of course, the geographical situation of Belgium, as a country of transit between Great Britain, France and Germany, is of great importance, but the great prosperity of Belgium is especially due to the prodigious industrial activity of its people.

One must realize that the "active" population of Belgium reached 48.50 per cent of the total population in 1910, which was a greater per cent than in any of the countries of Europe, except in France, Austria, Italy and Swiss.

Of this active population, 1,700,000 persons, or 48.53 per cent had an industrial profession. The number of workmen was 1,300,000, of which

250,000 were in the textile industries, 190,000 in the metal industries, 150,000 in the mines and 140,000 in the building trade.

The industrial importance of Belgium could be measured by its large industries of exportation. Although its iron mines were practically exhausted, 2,301,000 tons of cast iron were produced every year, 335,000 tons of finished iron products and 2,000,000 tons of steel, the value of the total product being more than 500 million francs. Of this product nearly two-thirds was exported.

In the zinc industry, Belgium, formerly the most important producer in the world, supplied about as much zinc products as the United States and Germany.

The glass works, including both the plate-glass works and the "gobeleteries," were exporting to the whole world, in 1913, nine-tenths of their output, valued at more than 103 million francs.

The most considerable natural wealth of Belgium is the coal. In 1913 the mines still supplied about 23 million tons, which was at that time an insufficient quantity for home consumption.

The wool industry and, to a smaller extent, the cotton industry, gave rise to a large export trade.

Finally, the railway-net was one of the densest in the world, with 8,660 kilometers.

This brief summary of the industrial situation will be sufficient to justify the claim that Belgium was one of the industrial powers in Europe before the war.

THE BEGINNING OF UNEMPLOYMENT

The general well-being, it may be stated, was spread among all classes of society, even the working class. Of course, the wages were very low, but

it was not at all due to the inefficiency of the workman. This was proven in a very striking manner during the war, since the Belgian workmen employed in the ammunition works in England and France were found superior to any others. The low wages and the standard of life, perhaps inferior to those of certain other countries, were caused, on the one hand, by the cheapness of the cost of living, owing to free-exchange, and on the other to the economic habits of the population and the relative lack of organization of the workmen.

It was into this laborious and rich bee-hive that the German armies came August 4, 1914, breaking the faith of peace treaties, bringing with them, besides the unavoidable destructions caused by military operations, the brand of villages and towns and the massacre of inoffensive populations. In a few weeks the occupation was extended to the whole territory with the exception of a few sq. km.

From this time, all foreign trade was at a standstill, also the great industries of which the raw materials (raw-ore, metals, cotton, wool) came from abroad. The coal mines alone were allowed to give a part of their output—about 30 per cent—for home consumption.

During the first few months some industrial workshops of small importance, which had some stocks of raw materials on hand, kept on producing, but these were successively compelled to close down and from the middle of 1915 unemployment became general.

As Belgium had to import between two-thirds and three-fourths of its food, the population would have starved if the neutrals, namely the United States of America, had not intervened to protect it. It is known that through the "Great Friend of the Belgian People," Mr. Herbert

Hoover, the Commissioner for Relief in Belgium, food was sent which served to give help to the population out of work.

At the time of the armistice the number of unemployed people reached the huge figure of 2,300,000 persons. The suffering of the working class surpassed all that is imaginable. Those who were the happiest were the workmen who succeeded in going abroad. The exact number which left the country at this time is not known, but it must not be far from 75,000.

Those who remained in the country were forced to work either in the works requisitioned by the enemy, forging arms against their own countrymen, or to starve from hunger.

This was not sufficient. From 1916 the Germans pursued a criminal policy against Belgian industry; first, by requisitioning all that they could in the way of metals especially copper, textile goods and machinery, and second, by destroying the machines in the works. This was not less serious to Belgian industry than the deporting of the workmen in Germany. The number of workmen deported to Germany in slavery is estimated at about 160,000, of which only a part returned, after June, 1917. The number and the value of the machines carried off and destroyed is not yet known, but the sum is enormous.

The idleness, sometimes heroic, of the working class during the period of occupation could not fail to have a very great effect upon the minds of the working people. On the one hand, it certainly diminished the efficiency of the workman, whose efficiency was still further diminished because of the lack of proper nourishment. On the other hand, it had a very depressing effect. The workmen could go to work but with great difficulty.

GROWTH OF LABOR ORGANIZATIONS

As in all the other countries, wages advanced rapidly during the war. The by-laws of the Unemployed-Benefit, ruled by the National Committee, stated a short time after the armistice that the workman was entitled to refuse employment when it required more than nine hours per day and was paid less than one franc per hour.

The first *Congrès Syndical du Parti-Ouvrier et des syndicats Indépendants*, which came together after the war, meeting in Brussels January 12 and 13, 1919, agreed to a normal working day of eight hours and a wage of 1.25 francs per hour for the skilled workmen and one franc for the unskilled workmen.

This congress indicated already that during the war the number of workmen joining the unions had materially increased. Although the unions could not hold meetings they had not ceased to make progress.

Since the beginning of 1919 the number of organized workmen has increased to a marked extent and this increase has continued until the present time. About six or seven hundred thousand workmen are said to be members of the unions of the Working-Party (Socialiste). The increase has not been so rapid for the Christian unions, which should not have more than 200,000 members at this time.

As should be expected, this crowd of new members and this multiplicity of unions had, as a first result, the increasing of the disputes. And so it happened that from the middle of 1919, Belgium, a ruined country, devastated by the war, with unemployment general, was further disturbed by numerous strikes. Works, where only a few men were occupied to clean the places and put in order certain pieces, where no productive work was yet started, saw their staff go to strike. Many of the

workmen coming back into the country from England, France and Holland, where they had obtained very high wages, pushed their fellows to claim as much.

Further, cost of living remained exceedingly high and hope had been kept alive that once the war finished, the blockade removed, everything would be found in abundance and at cheap prices. The contrary was experienced and we saw that our own allies had to restrain themselves and were in want as well as we.

There is no good index number for the period of German occupation, but from January, 1919, we can watch the general level of prices. The index for January, 1919, was 639 (per 100 in April, 1914). In June, 1919, it fell as low as 344 where it remained about the same during a few months. After November, 1919, it increased at a very astonishing rate, reaching by March, 1920, the point 421.

WAGES AND THE COST OF LIVING

No doubt, the high cost of living is at the root of the deep feeling of discontentment of the working classes.

Since the first months of 1920, the strikes spread over all trades. Even the state officials, among them the postmen and officials of the ministry department, had their strikes, headed by their unions.

However, we must say that the trade disputes were short and relatively easily stopped. They were never so serious or so grave as those in France and in England. Joint committees of employers and employees with a government delegate as chairman, succeeded in a large number of cases in avoiding or stopping conflicts. Arbitration, sometimes forced upon the parties by the government, cut out many instances. Such national joint commissions exist now in many indus-

tries, namely, the iron industry, engineering, mining, glass industry, building, wood and carpentering industry, for the public works of gas and electricity, for the Port of Antwerp, in the textile industry, in flourmills and in bakeries. They are endeavoring to determine the conditions of labor with particular reference to hours of day work and the rate of wages, in all these trades for Belgium and some special districts. The organization is not yet systematic. It arises from the needs of the day and lacks as yet direction. On the whole, however, it has the same aim and duty as the Whitley councils in England.

Meanwhile, day by day, the general economic situation is growing better. Unemployment at the time of the armistice was almost complete. The statistics of the *Secours Alimentaire* stated 800,000 households and two million and a half persons as receiving relief. In February, 1919, these figures were still 741,592 households and 2,390,459 persons; in June, 316,836 households and 992,221 persons; in September, only 182,950 households with 583,589 persons; and in January, 1920, 113,884 households with 381,950 persons. The bulk of the assisted population is, properly speaking, not "unemployed;" they are either old-aged and diseased people, or very young ones, who have not had the opportunity to learn crafts during the war. But, practically, there is no increasing amount of unemployment in all the staple trades, with exception of the building trades, which remain almost at a standstill.

A part, and not a small one, of the working population has gone abroad. This is the case especially with the bricklayers, masons, plasterers and other building workers, who are emigrating into France, especially in devastated areas, where the wages are abnormally high. A lot of skilled

workers, particularly metal workers, are following them. The situation seems especially bad in several districts, where the country is practically empty of active labor, just at the time when it is most needed.

The industrial plants which have recovered most rapidly are those of smaller size. The big industries are still far from their normal production. Of the 54 high furnaces only 8 are fired. Production of iron and zinc remains much behind. The collieries have reached 85 per cent of their production before the war, but they must employ 15 to 20 per cent more workers, because the output per head has so seriously decreased.

This is the general complaint of all employers. Everywhere, the output not only per day under the eight-hour day, but the output per hour has also diminished. It seems to be an outgrowth of the general discontentment.

As regards the political situation, we do not have in Belgium true "bolshhevists," but the extreme wing of the labor party, which now lays its hope in socialization of workshops in gaining ground. I am of the opinion that

the cabinet is extremely fortunate to preserve its character of national union and have four socialist ministers. But the last labor congress, which held a meeting at Easter, gives reason to fear that it is not to continue for a very long time.

We have, however, all reasons for hoping for better conditions, were not the foreign exchanges so continuously bad. Since Belgium, deprived as it is of all necessaries, must draw from abroad about three-quarters of its food and rebuild its machinery before it can be able to export much, it is not astonishing that the dollar is more than threefold the pound sterling more than double their value. It means for Belgium the duration of high cost of living which forces the claims of the workers for higher wages. Thus it is that this country, which showed such a magnificent steadiness and activity in recovering from its ruins, is today involved in a vicious circle from which there seems to be no evasion.

I venture to state that if foreign exchanges could be stabilized for some months, the labor conditions in Belgium would be very excellent.