Labour Conditions in Modern Poland

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Source: *The Slavonic Review*, Mar., 1923, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Mar., 1923), pp. 572-583

Published by: the Modern Humanities Research Association and University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/4201654

LABOUR CONDITIONS IN MODERN POLAND.

THE conditions under which industrial life went on in Poland before the outbreak of the war—and, indeed, down to the end of 1918—were known only very imperfectly to the British public. The political situation was tolerably clear: the people of Poland were divided into three parts, and each part held in a more or less arbitrary fashion by the three great empires of Russia, Austria, and Germany. It was realised also that some of the most important of the Continental industrial areas that had been springing up so rapidly during the half-century before the War lay in the Polish provinces; but of the life of the inhabitants of these areas, the life of the working men and working women, almost nothing was known.

A century ago industry in Poland was almost entirely confined to the villages. Spinning and weaving were carried on in the cottages over a wide area, but the product was for local consumption; coal was not much mined and little used. Even by 1850 the change was very slight, and, in fact, the great increase of industrial activity dates from about 1870 Łódź, with a population at the present time of over half a million inhabitants, was a village of eight hundred inhabitants in 1820; by 1855 they numbered only 4,000. The largest industrial areas were in Russian Poland; next in importance came those in the Polish part of Upper Silesia under German rule, whilst there was also the more scattered region of the oilfields in Austrian Poland.

Under these three Governments the conditions of industrial life differed widely. Russian Poland was the worst governed and worst administered of the three. German Poland shared the highly-developed system that had been established throughout the German Empire, but, owing to political antagonism, the whole social administration was entirely out of sympathy with the workers themselves. Austria tended to follow in the wake of Germany, but the organisation in Galicia (Austrian Poland) though less complete, was less bureaucratically rigid, and less actuated by national hostility to the Poles themselves, than was the case in Germany.

In Galicia and in Russian Poland the enfranchisement of the

serfs was not carried out until 1848 and 1863. This fact had a great influence on the industrial history of the country. It was immediately afterwards that the great burst of industrial development in Poland took place. The enfranchised peasants crowded to the towns, to be drawn into the vortex of the industrial revolution that was beginning to transform those areas. Far from assisting to deal with the problems that thus suddenly arose, the Russian authorities seemed to be bent on raising obstacles to the proper accommodation of the workers in the new urban areas, and it is known that they tried to make use of the occasion to foster discord between the propertied classes and their new employees. Not only was the Russian Administration notoriously backward in making any sort of effort to improve the lot of the poorer classes or to raise the standard of life, but the very laws which they imposed rendered any voluntary effort on the part of the workers, employers, or of the two in concert, illegal and punishable as a political crime.

The suppression of Polish schools was a well-known part of the Russian programme; but the conditions of industrial life at this time are best illustrated by the laws in force against trade unions. Down to 1906 all combinations of workmen for improvement of industrial conditions, for securing a reasonable standard of life, or for any other purpose were forbidden under the most savage penalties. Strikes, even of the most orderly possible character, were followed up by police arrests, and transportation of the convicted to distant parts of Russia. This state of things continued without any sort of alleviation until the revolution of 1905. In that year the pent-up feelings of the down-trodden classes broke out in concert with revolts in various parts of Russia itself. The Government, in its alarm, passed a new law permitting the existence of trade unions, but subjecting them in practice to the perpetual control of the Russian Minister of the Interior and his creatures—the police. No sooner had the political situation settled down and the revolts been suppressed, than this police control began to be used to hamper and stifle the trade union movement at every point; so much was this the case that many of the unions preferred to carry on in clandestine fashion, as they had done before the new law was in force. In other cases the unions found their sphere of activities curtailed in every possible way; and in course of time a large number were suppressed by the authorities for alleged infractions of the law. In this way, by one means or another, the whole of the trade union movement found itself in sympathy to the full with the

ever-increasing indignation and resentment against the oppressive and almost barbarous conditions of the old *régime*.

In the Polish provinces under German rule, though the unions were no longer prohibited by law after 1869, unions containing a large proportion of Polish workers were subject to constant persecution on the part of the authorities on the grounds that they were organised for political purposes. Use of the Polish language was forbidden at any of the meetings of the union except under police supervision. In Austria, the law was much of the same character; the discrimination against the Polish language was not in force, but every endeavour was made to strain the law to prevent payment of members from union funds during strikes. Police interference was at all times an unceasing obstacle, in the Polish provinces as in all the other Slav provinces of the Austrian Empire.

The same policy of the Russian bureaucracy that so eagerly suppressed every endeavour of the Polish workpeople to help themselves, rendered the administration exceedingly backward—not to say indifferent—in taking any measures for the social welfare of those they governed. Certain regulations were in force for the safety of workers in the larger factories and mines, but they remained a dead letter except in so far as the employers took action themselves in agreement with their working compatriots. Inspectors were few, hostile to the Polish workpeople, and always easily bribed. In Germany there existed an obligatory system of insurance, entirely regulated and controlled by the State, guaranteeing relief to the worker in case of sickness, accident, or inability to work for any other cause, including old age. Russia had no system of insurance, though the law laid down the principle of the liability of the employer, in certain of the more important industries, in case of accident.

All local government in the German and Russian provinces was in the hands of officials, German or Russian. Only in Austrian Poland were the Poles allowed even the most elementary responsibility. The Russian authorities, moreover, omitted to take any steps for the health and welfare of the towns and villages. They not only ignored their duties as regards roads, water, lighting, building and drainage, but actually forbade the collection of funds for supplying the most necessary services of a public and social nature. It is scarcely a matter for wonder that the towns of the Russian provinces bore a neglected appearance.

The war had a most profound influence on the industrial

life of Poland. With the exception of two German provinces, there is not a district that has not been swept by the armies of one side or another. In Galicia vast areas have been totally destroyed, as in France or Belgium. Elsewhere all possible factory equipment and plant was torn out and destroyed by the Russians or the Germans. The German Army leaders had instructions to destroy all possible means by which the industrial areas of Poland might become Germany's industrial competitors after the War. The only occupations that throve at this unhappy time were the manufacture of munitions of war and agriculture. Under the German occupation Poland was set the task of supplying the armies with war materials and food. As raw materials began to grow scarce, however, unemployment rapidly increased. By 1918 only a small fraction of the urban population could find employment. A terrible hunger began. The shortage of provisions, the presence of the Army in the country, and the continual fresh issues of depreciated paper currency on the part of the German authorities drove up prices to an unprecedented height. The price of bread rose thirty times between 1914 and 1918, the price of meat twelve times, whilst the resistance of the military government to the constant demands for increase of wages on the part of those who were fortunate enough to get work reduced the bulk of the population to actual starvation.

The weakening of the military rule in Germany at the beginning of November, 1918, led to revolutionary movement, as immediate as it was spontaneous, throughout the country. It was a revolt at once economic and political. In the South the industrial leaders headed the political revolt, and it was on this wave of enthusiasm that the new independent Polish Government was hastily formed in Warsaw. It included some of the elements of the Warsaw Council of Regency, the provisional government that had been administering civil affairs under the control of the German authorities. Associated with them from the first were the workers' leaders. The country was, however, practically in a state of siege. Food was so short that one of the very first efforts of the Administration was to get credit to purchase food-stuffs abroad. Unemployment actually increased in consequence of the sudden stoppage of the munitions factories. The volunteer Army absorbed a number temporarily, but it was difficult enough to provide for the troops and much more so to feed those left at home.

The burden of the work fell upon the new Departments of

Labour and Food Supply. The former more particularly dealt with the situation of the workers. There had been a Department of Labour in the provisional administration under the German occupation, but its activities were very limited. During the days of the occupation, however, plans were laid that were to prove of great value in the sudden activity after November, 1918.

The question of unemployment was the first to be attacked by the new Ministry. As early as December of 1918 Registration of the unemployed was commenced; and a number of employment exchanges were set up all over the country. By July, 1919, the number of unemployed on the books reached its maximum—a little over 450,000, out of a population at that time of about twenty-five millions. How was the demand for work to be met? The country was in ruins, and the Ministry turned at once its attention to the question of rebuilding. Some of the tasks taken on with the least delay were: railway repairs and the alteration of some of the lines from broad to normal gauge, repairing of bridges, road-building, the work of rendering the rivers navigable once more, demolition of military works, repairing the buildings and streets of the towns, and cutting timber in the forests. Whilst employment on these public works was organised every effort was made to take advantage of the offers of employment that reached the labour exchanges from private industrial concerns. In January, 1919, however, before these works could be commenced on a large scale, it became essential to issue relief in money or in food to the many thousands of needy and workless in the towns. Local committees were set up all over the country to administer the relief; at one time over 250,000 persons were drawing assistance in this way. The state of employment actually began to improve from the month of June, 1919; improvement at first was slow, but there has never been a very serious relapse of long duration. The number of registered workers out of employment since July, 1919, has been as follows:—

July, 1919	453,400
January, 1920	222,300
July, 1920	56,100
January, 1921	49,900
July, 1921	55,600
January, 1922	56,300
July, 1922	42,400
January, 1923	40,000 (approximately).

At the time when the struggle with unemployment was at its

height, the food problem was one of the greatest difficulty for the whole country. In peace time the Polish lands produce more than the grain, meat, milk, vegetables and other commodities required to feed their whole population (now 28 millions approximately). The winter of 1918 to 1919, however, found the country terribly denuded—partly by the recent demands of the Army of Occupation, partly on account of the decreased area under cultivation. Grain and other foodstuffs had therefore to be imported from abroad, largely from America, and the cost—though the Polish mark was still only at the very commencement of its depreciation—was enormous. Rations of flour, fats, potatoes, salt, soap and burning-oil were issued free to the workless poor, and sold at a low price even to those who were drawing wages and salaries. Much good work was done by relief societies, many of them financed entirely by British or American funds, or by the money of other foreign countries; but naturally the Polish Government bore a vast proportion of the burden, and these transactions were an enormous drain on the resources of the State, and justified only by the extreme urgency of the situation. Corn had to be purchased by the Government again in 1920, and prices of foodstuffs were controlled right down to 1921. But by that time the situation had changed, and the greatest danger was not so much shortage of food and lack of employment as the difficulty of adjusting wages to the ever rising prices resulting from the constantly falling value of the Polish paper mark.

At the present time the number of workpeople in industrial enterprises of all kind is a little less than one million. Before the War, the number was nearly 1,300,000. During the War and subsequently there was a marked return from the towns to the country. The number of wage-earners in agriculture and rural industries is now over 1,100,000—not including the very much larger population of peasant proprietors. From the first the workers had able and active leaders who have had very great influence on the course of action of the Government from the outset. Naturally enough, many of the first measures of the new Government were on the lines of reversing the regulations and methods of the old *régime*. The trade unions, freed from the repressive measures of the Russian police and the German military authorities, and no longer driven to hold their meetings in secret, came into the open at once. Their numbers increased with the development of their activities, and they played a large part in directing and administering the new arrangements under

which the labour exchanges were organised and a general scheme of social insurance and relief in cases of distress was established. At the beginning of 1919 a law was passed giving a formal legal standing to the unions. Societies are registered at the offices of the Inspectorate of Labour, a department of the Ministry of Labour. Registered societies have all legal rights, can enter into contracts, can sue and be sued, hold real property, receive legacies, make collective agreements, and so forth. The regulations of the union have legal binding force on its members. Further, the unions send delegates to the central advisory bodies attached to the Ministry of Labour.

One of the speediest of the victories of the workers in Poland under the new *régime* was the decree of the eight-hour day. This decree was issued by the new Government on 23 November, 1918, only a few days after the establishment of the Republic. It applies to all industrial establishments, mines, railways and commercial businesses. The regulation week of forty-six hours is adhered to throughout the whole country. Overtime is permitted in certain specified eventualities, subject to special regulations as to remuneration.

The part played by the labour exchanges in the early months of the new State has been referred to already. The bureaux were at first organised by the Ministry of Labour as occasion arose to fulfil their part in dealing with the crisis of unemployment and industrial unsettlement after the War. The regular ordering of the system was developed later. The legal basis came in January, 1920, when a law was passed sanctioning and codifying the organisation and the procedure which had been established up to that date. Under that law ninety main bureaux or exchanges have been set up, each working over a particular area. The central office is with the Ministry of Labour in Warsaw. Their activities are threefold: First, to bring together offers of employment and applications for employment in each district; secondly, through the Central Office, to exchange the supply and demands of work in their respective districts with the needs of other districts; thirdly, the acceptance of applications for employment abroad—these also are passed through the Central Office. This last duty is a remarkable one, and reminds us that Poland is a country which still sends out its workpeople in large numbers to other countries. Here is a most important field for the activity of the State in protecting its citizens by a process of collective bargaining on a large scale from the exploitation of a distant and comparatively unknown

labour market, thus offering protection from one of the worst evils from which the Polish poorer classes suffered before the War. An important feature in this system is the part played by delegates of the workers in the practical work of the bureaux and in the direction of policy in the Ministry of Labour itself. This influence is exercised through the councils or bodies of delegates that sit permanently both at the local bureaux and at the Central Office in Warsaw.

In addition to the State labour exchanges there are the so-called co-operative bureaux. These are for the most part the direct organisations of the unions. The Ministry of Labour keeps touch and endeavours to ensure co-operation between the State and the co-operative bureaux and other existing organisations of workers or employers with the object of centralising the work as far as possible. The following table, showing the number of places actually filled in different months since 1919, indicates the recent activity of the State employment bureaux :—

July, 1919	52,000
January, 1920	4,000
August, 1920	16,000
January, 1921	16,900
July, 1921	17,200
January, 1922	10,800
June, 1922	12,300
August, 1922	14,900

In Russian Poland before the War, and in Austrian Poland to a lesser extent, the regulations for securing the protection of the worker either as regards his wage contract, or his health and safety in his employment were very nearly valueless. There were in both countries definite limitations as regards children's labour; but in Russian Poland the regulations regarding safety in mines and factories were entirely insufficient. In German Poland, on the other hand, the protection afforded to the worker was tolerably complete, and a minute and careful regulation characterised the whole of industrial life. The whole system was probably too bureaucratic, and in any case suffered from a certain spirit of distrust of the workers themselves; but as regards its actual application in German Poland it was only too often used as a powerful instrument in the hands of officials who were intent, above all things, on " Germanisation " and the extermination of any relic of Polish as distinct from German feeling among any part of the citizens of the German Empire.

It was as early as 3 January, 1919, that a decree of the Polish Government set up a scheme of factory and mine inspection. The Russian and Austrian systems had been particularly unsatisfactory because even such regulations as were in existence could not be enforced owing to the lack of adequate machinery. The inspectors under the scheme as it is developed to-day visit industrial establishments of every sort, and take up all questions regarding the safety of the workers, accidents, and breaches of wage contracts; they also have power to settle disputes of a minor character. In the course of between four and five thousand official visitations in 1921 there were brought to light over sixteen thousand infractions of the regulations. Owing to the rapid rise in the cost of living, the inspectors are also much occupied in negotiating collective agreements for the settlement of the difficult problem of regulating rates of wages. An agreement for the whole textile industry in September last, and a similar agreement for the Warsaw metal trade in July, are examples of the work they have done in this direction. In both these cases, and in many others, the wages have now been fixed according to a definite scale varying with the cost of living. There is no law at present providing for compulsory arbitration in disputes except in the one important case of agricultural workers and one other form of employment of lesser interest. In practice, however, the inspectors are very frequently requested to arbitrate in cases of disputes of all kinds, and in cases of great importance the Ministry of Labour is now regularly called in to act as mediator.

In the important realm of social insurance, Germany was, before the War, ahead of all other countries of the World. The elaborate system of insurance covered sickness, accident, old age, widowhood, etc. In Austria for twenty-five years before the War a system of insurance against sickness and accident was in force. Russian Poland presented a great contrast to the position in Germany: no such scheme had ever been applied there. A law passed by the Russian Duma in 1912 was never in force in Poland; the employer was merely held liable in case of accidents.

To remedy the deficiency of the Russian law a project of compulsory insurance against sickness was worked out in Warsaw during the last days of the German occupation, but nothing could be put into practice till after the establishment of the new Government. It was by a very early decree—in the month of January, 1919—that the new scheme acquired its first binding

force. Local insurance offices are now distributed throughout the country with an office in each of the principal industrial centres. The control of all local insurance matters lies with local Consultative Committees, which work in conjunction with each of these offices. Two-thirds of the members of these Committees are elected by the insured persons. The Committee selects and appoints the executive staff, and also a local Arbitration Tribunal whose duty it is to decide cases of particular doubt or difficulty. The general control is vested in the Ministry of Labour. The benefits include free medical attendance as well as subsistence, together with allowances up to sixty per cent. of normal wages. All these payments are made to vary in accordance with the changes in the cost of living from month to month. With regard to accident insurance, the work of extending over the three parts of Poland a system similar to that existing in German Poland is in progress, but is not yet completed. Old age pensions were paid in German Poland before the War, but not in Austrian or Russian Poland; the new Government has not yet been able to extend the scheme to the Austrian and Russian provinces.

In describing labour conditions in modern Poland, it would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the problem of the regulation of wages in conformity with the constantly increasing cost of living. The point has already been mentioned in connection with the work of the labour inspectors. The rise in the cost of living in Poland is to be attributed—at any rate since 1920—to the constant depreciation of the Polish bank-note, the paper currency of the country. The causes of this depreciation concern financial, rather than social, history, but the continual fall in the value of the currency has given rise to a very difficult social problem. The average daily cost of living in marks for a family of four persons—two adults and two children—living in Warsaw, was at the end of December well over twenty times what it was two years ago, as the following figures show:—

December, 1920	358
July, 1921	823
January, 1922	1,500
July, 1922	2,522
October, 1922	4,109
December, 1922	7,390

Here, of course, there is no question of wages remaining stationary. Wages must rise—and rise rapidly; but the

question has been—how rapidly, and what machinery can be devised for regulating them?

This work in Poland is undertaken by the Central Statistical Department in conjunction with the Ministry of Labour. In Warsaw and in several provincial cities committees have been set up for the express purpose of studying the cost of living from day to day. It is by these committees that the cost of the daily budget of a family of four people is worked out. The committees are composed of representatives of the Government, the trade unions, and employers and business men. Each month the figures calculated by the committees are published both in the daily press and in Government publications, and these figures are used everywhere throughout Poland as the basis on which standard rates of wages are fixed. The figures do not have binding force on either side, but in very many industries it is accepted that wages are raised automatically in accordance with the cost of living as fixed by the committees. The following figures show the variations of wages and the official cost of living figures for 1921 and 1922 :—

	Daily Wage of a Qualified Workman in Metal Trade.	Daily Wage of a Bricklayer.	Daily Cost of Living of Family of Four.
	Marks.	Marks.	Marks.
January, 1921	470	592	450
April, 1921	716	868	552
July, 1921	859	984	823
October, 1921	1,631	1,920	1,557
January, 1922	1,631	2,260	1,500
April, 1922	2,022	2,520	1,076
July, 1922	2,910	3,296	2,521
October, 1922	4,604	6,800	4,109

The central Statistical Department and the Ministry of Labour also chronicle all industrial disputes of any importance. On the whole, it must be admitted that both sides have hitherto shown themselves desirous of avoiding prolonged struggles. Strikes are certainly not infrequent, and in view of the amazingly unsteady financial conditions this is not surprising, but they are very seldom of long duration. In the six months, January to June, 1922, forty-one strikes in the mining, mineral and metal industries were recorded officially by the Ministry of Labour;

eight lasted one week or more, and of these only three continued as long as a fortnight.

In the first four years of her history as a new state Poland has been remarkably free from serious industrial disturbances. The workers have been advancing at every point: they have succeeded in establishing an organisation securing, in full agreement with the employing community, the primary safeguards of social welfare, while they have also succeeded in securing a permanent place in the various departments of the new social organisation. Such were the conditions existing before the War, that a sweeping change of this character was a necessary and natural consequence of the revival of the Republic. Of obstinate opposition to this movement there has been none; it would have been useless, and indeed, fatal politically to the community. Not a little of the credit for the success of these changes is due to the policy and energetic action of the Ministry of Labour in Warsaw and its representatives, who have seized upon the fact that the depression, not to say the degradation, of the workers under the old political *régime* was one of the most pernicious and indictable results of the rule of Russia and Germany. The Department has worked in conjunction both with the workers and the employers to remedy the situation, and in the result—not merely in the actual measures that have become law, but in the broad and healthy principles by which they have been applied—they have performed something more than a mere experiment; they have laid the foundations of a strong and healthy social organisation in the Polish State.

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