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THE WORK OF THE AGRICULTURAL SERVICE OF
THE INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE

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THE International Labour Organization was set up at the same time as the League of Nations after the War. It is composed of the International Labour Conference which discusses and adopts international conventions and recommendations regulating labour conditions; of the International Labour Office which is working as a secretariat of the Conference and as a central research institute for social and labour questions; and, finally, of the Governing Body which decides upon the work of the International Labour Office and on the agenda of the International Labour Conference.

From the very beginning there has been an agricultural service inside the International Labour Office formed by a group of the staff of the Office devoting their time to studies on agricultural labour questions. This staff has never been very great, but, as certain technical questions such as social insurance, accident prevention, and statistical questions are also handled with regard to the agricultural aspects by other sections of the Office, the total efficiency of the Office in regard to agricultural questions is really bigger than the size of its agricultural service would indicate. It may also be of interest to the Conference to know that the Office has a special section for co-operative questions, which also handles co-operation in agriculture. The work of the agricultural service is determined by the same factors which determine the work of the Office as a whole. These factors are of two kinds. As I said in the beginning, this Office has also to work as a central research institute for social questions and is prepared to reply to demands for information from everybody, taken in the largest sense of the word. The Office gets demands and inquiries from students, from private organizations, from public bodies, and from Governments. It is of course the last kind of inquiries which are most important to us. As examples I may mention that some time ago the Office got the draft of the Labour Code of a South American State sent over for study and comments. With regard to agricultural subjects we are preparing an extensive memorandum on reconsolidation of land for an Indian committee, and just before leaving I had completed a report on Minimum Wage Regula-

tion in Agriculture for an official Swedish committee studying this question.

This kind of inquiry involves a good deal of work for the Office. Others are of a different kind and can be answered immediately and sometimes also have to be answered immediately. I remember once getting a telegram from our branch office in London asking for information about wages of agricultural workers in East Prussia. This information was to be used by the Minister of Agriculture two days later to reply to a question put to him in the House of Commons by a member who had been upset by the arrival of wheat in an English harbour from East Prussia and who assumed that this was only possible owing to the low wages paid in agriculture in that part of Germany. These inquiries and demands for information involve that the Office must follow, in a regular way, the development of labour conditions everywhere.

But the long-time trend of activity is determined by the work of the Conference. The Office has to prepare the reports submitted to the Conference, which form the basis of its discussion. The preparatory work does not start only when the Governing Body has decided to put a certain item on the agenda of the Conference. It is also the duty of the Office to keep the Governing Body informed in order that it may make the right choice of items for the agenda. With regard to agricultural questions the choice is to some extent dependent on the social questions selected in industry. There has nearly always been a tendency to have the same questions examined for agricultural workers, as are handled for industrial workers, and this tendency has been growing. This means that sometimes questions concerning agriculture are discussed which would perhaps not have been selected if attention had been paid exclusively to the order of importance of social problems within agriculture itself.

By a rapid survey of the activities of the agricultural service since the Office was started I may illustrate what I have said. The first International Labour Conference met in Washington in 1919, but no agricultural questions were on its agenda. However, a resolution was passed asking that the same questions discussed in Washington should as soon as possible be examined with regard to the application to agriculture of the decisions taken. This took place in 1921 in Geneva during the third International Labour Conference. For this conference the Office had prepared a very considerable document called the Technical Survey of Agricultural Labour Questions which gave practically all the information available on agricultural labour conditions in the first post-War years. The Conference adopted

conventions referring to agricultural labour questions, dealing with the age of admission to work in agriculture; the right of association of agricultural workers; the compensation for accidents suffered by agricultural workers; and several recommendations dealing with living-in conditions in agriculture, technical education, social insurance, night work of women and children, &c. With the exception of the question of wages and hours, nearly all questions were covered which were of immediate interest to agricultural labour, and in the following years the agricultural service could generally devote its time to research studies proper. It may, however, be added that the decisions of the Conference in 1921 were perhaps a bit too numerous and taken too hastily to obtain a satisfactory result. Work of revision has now been started which involves new studies into the questions indicated to find out whether better solutions can be found. As many of these questions are of special character concerning child labour and female labour, they are partly handled by other sections of the Office in co-operation with the agricultural service.

During the period of research the agricultural service got time not only to follow the development of labour questions proper but also to study special aspects of the changes taking place in the agricultural structure which are of importance to its work. Thus the Office service studied agrarian reforms which had been carried out in eastern European countries and also in certain central European countries. These of course have a fundamental importance to its work because, through these agrarian reforms, the relations between the numbers of independent farmers and workers are often radically modified. The service studied also the question of farm labour science, which at that time was new, in order to find out to what extent these new ideas would be of importance to agricultural labour. Some research studies were also carried out at the expressed desire of the Conference, e.g. a study on the representation and organization of agricultural workers, which not only gave an opportunity to study the history of trade unionism in agriculture but also to make an attempt to describe and classify the various types of agricultural workers found in the different countries. Further mention may be made of a study of collective bargaining in agriculture. It was the general impression at the time when this study was made that, social legislation in agriculture being rather slow and in fact no considerable progress having been made since the first post-War years, it would be an advantage to attempt to improve labour conditions in direct negotiations between employers' and workers' organizations.

Towards the end of this period of research work, studies were undertaken in co-operation with the International Institute of Agriculture into the important problem of the rural exodus. Two study journeys were undertaken by an official of the agricultural service and one from the International Institute of Agriculture, and two joint reports on the rural exodus in Germany and Czechoslovakia have been published. From 1927 to 1933 the Conference handled a number of insurance questions concerning sickness, old age, death, and invalidity insurance, which applies to industrial workers as well as to agricultural workers. The service, however, took no part in this work because the same principles were to be applied to both categories of workers, and the questions were therefore entirely handled by the section of the Office dealing with social insurance questions. However, two series of conventions, one for industrial workers and one for agricultural workers, were adopted separately for reasons which time will not allow to be indicated here.

Towards the end of this period, however, new questions came up regarding fee-charging agencies and unemployment insurance, where again the service was called upon to prepare the sections on the agricultural aspects of the problem to be included in the documentation submitted to the Conference. With regard to fee-charging agencies there proved to be no difficulties in applying the same regulations to agriculture as to industries, but with regard to unemployment insurance the Office itself had to recognize that, in spite of the unemployment which at that time, in 1933, was prevailing even among agricultural workers, unemployment insurance in agriculture was not sufficiently developed to allow the Office to take the responsibility of recommending international regulation of this question. Agricultural workers were therefore excluded from the convention adopted, while the Conference charged the Office with a new study of unemployment in agriculture, especially of the remedies to fight this evil. The insufficient staff of the service, together with the fact that some time had elapsed before the more definite instructions could be given by the governing body with respect to this work, brought it about that it has only recently been begun. Meanwhile time has changed so much that the Office has decided to extend its study from being a study of unemployment in agriculture to be a general study of the employment situation in agriculture. This employment situation is at present characterized in certain countries by rural over-population, but in other countries fairly highly industrialized it is characterized by lack of agricultural labour especially of young workers, while older farm workers cannot

always find employment. It is to be expected that this study will bring interesting results.

As the result of recent activity of the Conference in regard to other workers, the agricultural service has also been charged to study the question of holidays with pay, which the industrial workers' representation on the Governing Body and in the Conference wants to have examined and, if possible, regulated for agricultural workers as it was at the last Conference for industrial workers. This question is perhaps not exactly of the same importance to agricultural workers in view of the fact that such questions as wages and hours are still unregulated from an international point of view.

In its studies the agricultural service has not only to take into consideration structural changes in agriculture but also the economic conditions of this industry, which will ultimately determine the possibility of social measures to be taken for the benefit of agricultural workers. With the development of the agricultural depression crisis, the service has therefore had to pay more and more attention to these subjects and has followed closely the crisis legislation which has been so important during later years. It is impossible, and also not necessary, for the service to follow all the technical details of this legislation. But there are aspects of it which are especially interesting; for example, the effects of such legislation on the employment possibilities in agriculture, which may be reduced not only by international agreements concerning sugar and wheat production but also by national efforts to cut down the production of crops and live stock. At the same time the service is studying differences in treatment given by crisis legislation to smallholders and to large estates. The agricultural service and the International Labour Office have, of course, to deal in the first place with the question of agricultural labour, but it has to be remembered that in many countries the conditions and the standard of living of smallholders are so close to those of agricultural workers that smallholders are often inclined to take up paid labour and to compete with landless agricultural workers. In the long run, therefore, it is not possible to expect any real improvement in the conditions of agricultural labour which is not followed by concurrent improvement in the standard of living of smallholders. It is for these reasons that the agricultural service, next to observing the conditions of agricultural labourers, is very much interested in the standard of living of smallholders.

Much of the research work of the agricultural service is done for internal use, and the agricultural service cannot of course expect to

publish anything interesting on the economic situation in agriculture which is so much better and effectively followed by the International Institute of Agriculture. But from time to time, we achieve results from our research work which we believe will be of general public interest. These results are published in the periodicals and publications of the Office. The Office has a weekly publication called *Industrial and Labour Information* which contains all brief news on social and labour developments. The Office publishes a monthly review, *The International Labour Review*, which contains articles of a more scientific character, and to which not only the staff but also outside collaborators contribute. I may especially draw your attention to a very interesting article by Professor Ashby on the position of farm workers in England, published one and a half years ago. Finally, the Office publishes studies and reports, a series of which is devoted to agricultural questions. It is in this series that the studies of the representation of agricultural workers, on collective bargaining in agriculture, on agricultural labour law in Central European countries, and also the joint studies of the International Institute of Agriculture and the International Labour Office on rural exodus have been published.

You may get the impression from this survey of our activity of the agricultural service that it is lavish in results and wide in scope. This is unfortunately not the case, and the reasons therefor are two. First, this kind of study is extremely difficult, especially from an international point of view; the documentation is very scarce. Even from a national point of view, the information available on social and labour conditions in agriculture is often enough rather mixed. The number of times I have opened a survey of several hundred pages on agriculture in a given country or region, looking for information on agricultural labour and on conditions of smallholders and farmers, and the number of times I have been disappointed, I cannot count. You will find, in books of several hundred pages, sixty pages or more devoted to live-stock, while the human beings who are occupied in agriculture have been dealt with in two pages. The studies indicated therefore involve a very considerable amount of research work, and demand a lot of time before even small papers and reports can be published. Secondly, the agricultural service has always suffered from insufficient staff; other questions to be handled by the Office have been furthered in the first place. The organization of industrial workers is more important, and in a general way the social problems of industry are paid more attention by Governments also. This has made it necessary

for the Office to devote as much as possible of its means and staff to these studies and to leave aside and postpone the studies with regard to agricultural labour questions. There are signs that in more recent years some understanding of the importance of social questions in agriculture has been rapidly growing. At this Conference Professor Sering pointed out the other day that the study of land tenure in various countries carried out under his direction will be devoted to bringing out the social aspects of this problem, and, from other remarks made during the discussions, I am confirming my impression that I am right when I believe there is a growing interest in social questions in agriculture. I hope, therefore, I am right when I look forward to close co-operation with farm economists in this field.