

THE  
CONDITION  
OF THE  
BELGIAN WORKMEN  
NOW REFUGEES  
IN ENGLAND.

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# THE CONDITION OF THE BELGIAN WORKMEN NOW REFUGEES IN ENGLAND.

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Obviously in the hope of minimising the disastrous impression which the deportation of Belgian workmen into Germany has made upon the entire world, the *Kölnische Zeitung* has inserted in its issue No. 1224 of 2nd December, 1916, a communication from a correspondent in Zurich, which reproduces from the columns of the *Volksrecht*, a Socialist newspaper published in Zurich, certain sensational statements made by a Swiss lately returned from England.

According to the account of this Swiss, which the *Volksrecht* publishes under the title: *The Enslavement of Belgians by England*, the con-

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dition of the Belgian workmen who have taken refuge in England is not far removed from slavery. The British Government has systematically procured the removal of Belgian refugees from Holland and France into England, where they are treated after the fashion of coolies in the plantations of Ceylon and India.

Distributed, regardless of their wishes, among the munition factories, they are given wages which are inferior to those of the English workmen; they are, moreover, subjected to a rigorous and harsh discipline, their lightest mistakes or misdemeanours being visited with the most severe punishments. The Belgian workmen can only escape from this detestable existence by joining the army, and this many of them, preferring suffering and death to servitude, have at last done.

The *Kölnische Zeitung* professes to find these statements all the more interesting since they have been made by a Neutral and have appeared in a newspaper which "is not at all friendly to Germany."

The *Belgian Department of Records* has obtained in London definite information relative to the condition of the Belgian workmen who are in Great Britain. The material which it has collected completely disproves the assertion which the *Kölnische Zeitung* has repro-

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duced, and shows the true facts of the case to be as follows.

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### I. THE EMPLOYMENT OF BELGIANS.

No Belgian is forced to work in England. The unemployed workman may apply for assistance, as may all English workmen, to the various "Labour Exchanges." In connection with certain of these "Labour Exchanges," particularly those at Aldwych, Earl's Court, and Birmingham, representatives of the Belgian Labour Department attend for the purpose of giving their fellow countrymen, on the spot, all useful directions they may require, of procuring situations for them, and of helping them with their advice.

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**GUARANTEE AGAINST THE EXPLOITATION OF BELGIAN LABOUR.** The Board of Trade has been careful, in order to prevent the exploitation of Belgian labour, to impose upon all employers of such labour the necessity of obtaining an *authorization*, which is only given after the proposed employer has been

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examined as to whether he is able to offer satisfactory guarantees from the point of view of morality, and will bind himself to pay the wages required by the English Standard Time Rates of Wages.

\* \* \*

WORK IS OPTIONAL. Where the freedom of the workman to change his employment is concerned, the same regulations apply to Belgian as to English workmen. These regulations are designed to safeguard the general interests of the Allies by preventing not only wastage during the production of commodities, but also *sabotage*.

Should a workman quit his employment without a valid reason, his leaving certificate, which gives him his liberty, may be refused by his employer. The workman, however, is always entitled to bring his case before the appropriate Munitions Tribunal, which decides whether or no there is good reason to uphold the appeal. If the employer is found to be in the wrong, a leaving certificate is granted to the workman by the Tribunal. If the appeal is rejected the workman must wait six weeks before he is able to accept any new work. Generally speaking, the Belgian workmen who wish to change their

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place of employment, whether in order to improve their position or to do their own special work, always obtain their leaving certificate. English employers show themselves friendly to such designs.

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**WAGES.** The wages which are paid to Belgian workmen are the same as those provided for by the English Standard Time Rates of Wages.

A few figures will be enough to prove that the Belgian workmen are not being paid at famine rates.

Fitters, etc. : 10½d. an hour.

Turners : up to one shilling and twopence an hour.

Machine tenders : from one shilling to one and fourpence an hour.

Moulders : One shilling and twopence an hour.

The week's work averages 54 hours. Overtime is paid with an addition of 25 per cent. for the three first hours, 50 per cent. for night work, and 100 per cent. for Sunday work.

The labourers, at 7d. to 8d. an hour, earn as a rule between £2 10s. and £3 a week, including overtime.

Skilled workmen are able to make as much as £5 a week.

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According to special information received by the Belgian Department of Records, the Birtley National Shell Factory pays its Belgian workmen wages which have been fixed by an agreement made between the Belgian and British Governments. As regards the hours of labour, no difference whatever is made between Belgian and British subjects.

In private factories no difference is made between Belgians and English: all are paid the local standard rates of wages for the trades which they follow.

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**BELGIAN FACTORIES.** Many factories are controlled by Belgians and employ only Belgian workmen; particularly, The National Projectile Factory at Birtley; Pelabon; Kryn and Lahy, etc. The large English works such as Vickers, have departments directed by Belgians and served exclusively by Belgian labour.

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**REFUGEE CAMPS.** There are no concentration camps for Belgian refugees, but at Earl's Court and Edmonton there are Homes where such families as are without means of support are received, together with the old people and those workmen whose physique and mental condition make them unfitted for employment. Men who



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are out of work and their families may live in these Homes free of charge.

Here everyone finds lodging, food, and a peculiarly friendly and helpful welcome and supervision. Committees of charitable people concern themselves energetically with the welfare of their refugees. There are schools conducted by Belgian masters; at Earl's Court, two well-known Belgians have undertaken the inspection, under the authority of their Embassy.

Latterly work-rooms and work-shops have been arranged at Earl's Court for the purpose of carrying on certain forms of paid work.

Again, the domestic work of these Homes is done by refugees, who in return are given a small wage (8 to 10 shillings a week). Since the hospitality which the refugees enjoy is given to them, this payment is more in the nature of a gift than a wage.

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**MILITARY SERVICE.** Not only is no Belgian compelled to enter either the Belgian or the British Army, but, on the contrary, English employers request and obtain exemptions for skilled workmen in their employment.

Generally we may assert that the conditions of employment which apply to Belgian workmen in England are the same as those which apply to their English comrades. They enjoy

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the same privileges and advantages and they incur the same obligations.

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### II. THE BELGIAN LABOUR DEPARTMENT.

The existence of the Belgian Labour Department, under the direction of the British Government and the Belgian Embassy, is of itself sufficient to disprove the statements contained in the *Volksrecht*.

WHAT THE BELGIAN GOVERNMENT HAS DONE. With the object of assisting the Belgian working people who have taken refuge in England, the Belgian Government resolved, with the approval of the English Government, to institute the Belgian Labour Department in London, as an auxiliary department of the Ministry of Industry and Labour.

The object of this organisation is to safeguard until the end of the war the interests of Belgian workers, who have taken refuge in England and have found employment in industrial, agricultural and commercial undertakings.

In order to fulfil its purpose the Department has been divided into several sub-departments, the chief of which are:—

1. The Sub-Department of Investigations, which intervenes in favour of the workmen,

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when their demands have not been provided for by the Law. It undertakes enquiries that may be necessary for the information of other sub-departments. Thanks to its intervention, many disputes between employers and workmen have been prevented; and similarly a great number of disagreements, of all kinds, have been brought to a friendly conclusion. This sub-department is controlled by an engineer-inspector at the Ministry of Industries and Labour. Many engineers and a barrister serve upon it.

2. The Sub-Department of Labour Intelligence. This concerns itself with the business of procuring employment for workmen and professional men and with all questions relating thereto, particularly the placing and dispatching to their employment of the Belgian working people who are in the Allied countries.

It maintains regular communication with the Labour Bureau at Havre and with the Belgian Labour Department at Paris. Thus it is of considerable service to those Belgians who are living in England, but wish to obtain work in France, or vice-versa.

Thanks to the co-operation of the English Government with the Belgian Embassy and the Belgian Consular Authorities, the Labour Department has succeeded in simplifying greatly

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the formalities required to be observed by those who travel between England and the Allied countries. The Department's relations with the Board of Trade and the Ministry of Munitions are of the most satisfactory nature.

Representatives of the Sub-Department of Labour Intelligence—as has been mentioned above—are to be found at the service of Belgian workmen in many of the "Labour Exchanges." Their function is to act between the Belgian workmen, the Labour Exchanges and the English employers. They forward to the Labour Department in London all claims and demands which are made by the workmen. This sub-department is directed by a specialist in such work, the Director (before the war) of the Labour Exchange at Antwerp.

The number of places obtained directly by means of this sub-department amounts to about 950.

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**THE SUB-DEPARTMENT FOR LEGAL ASSISTANCE.**  
This sub-department deals with all matters which require the attention of a lawyer. It gives advice upon legal questions, both to the other sub-departments and to the workmen and employers

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who apply to it for assistance. It defends workmen gratuitously in the courts of law, and its special duty is to obtain compensation for injuries sustained in the course of the workman's employment. It also represents Belgian workmen before the Munitions Tribunals.

Up to the present this sub-department has taken action in 440 cases. Furthermore, it has intervened usefully in great numbers of arbitrations, agreements, trades union disputes, etc.

It is composed of several barristers of experience, and its head is a former *Bâtonnier* of the Bar of Charleroi.

This sub-department also undertakes the inspection of the workmen's dwelling places.

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Finally, THE SUB-DEPARTMENT FOR THRIFT is occupied with those problems which relate to benefit and co-operative societies. A savings bank is in active and regular operation under the supervision and guarantee of the Belgian Government.

The Labour Department has, furthermore, brought into existence a Company for Insurance against sickness: "L'Union Belge," which was created under the direct approval of the highest Belgian Authorities, and has been recognised

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by the British Government. This Company offers to Belgian workmen, subject in England to compulsory insurance against sickness, all those advantages which English companies confer upon insurers of English birth. The National Health Insurance Commission, with which the Union Belge is affiliated, lends to it its powerful assistance, and has very kindly promised to help the founders in all matters which may arise during the flotation.

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### III. THE OFFICIAL BELGIAN COMMITTEE.

The Belgian Government has not abandoned to chance the duty of deciding the lot of its subjects. There is in London an Official Belgian Committee, composed of leading people whom the Belgian Government has named, which is occupied with the general interests of the refugees.

It comprises a Sub-Commission of Labour, which concerns itself particularly with the consideration of questions that affect workmen, and which is composed of persons representative of all parties—especially there should be mentioned two well-known Socialist leaders,

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Messieurs de Brouckère and Eckelers. The Official Committee is in close touch with the War Refugees Committee, which has been created by the British Government and has several Belgians among its members.

This English Committee is enabled to distribute relief among the refugees by reason of the credits which the British Government has placed at its service. The British Government has, moreover, lately created a General Commissionership for Belgian Affairs, and has entrusted this delicate office to a distinguished Member of Parliament, Monsieur Peto, who keeps himself in close relationship with the Belgian Authorities in London.

\* \* \*

To conclude, apart from these official organisations which are concerned to watch over the welfare and conditions of work of the Belgian refugees, it is necessary to mention the innumerable undertakings for whose creation the individual initiative of influential Belgians and English people is responsible.

These devote themselves to the assistance of soldiers on half pay, of children and the sick. They busy themselves with the instruction of the refugees and with the distraction of their

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enforced leisure, relieving in every possible way the mental misery which their exile causes them. They even extend their activities as far as the Belgian front, where they look after the comfort of the soldiers.

These undertakings are to be found all over Great Britain, and they are in touch with all the principal gathering places of the refugees.

Again, Cardinal Mercier is represented in London by his auxiliary Bishop, Monseigneur de Wachter, who has appointed more than 200 chaplains entrusted with the administration throughout the country of what are veritable Belgian parishes.

The correspondent of the Socialist newspaper of Zurich, whose assertions the German Press has exhibited so much alacrity in reproducing, instead of being satisfied to repeat nonsense which no Belgian in England can read without contempt, would have done better to acquire a little information from the sources of Belgian activity in England and from the thousands of workmen who, thanks to their high wages, are already beginning to save a little store of money which shall help them in their task of rebuilding that Belgium which Germany has reduced to ruins.

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