

THE SERFDOM OF LABOR

Deprived of his trade unions, collective bargaining and the right to strike, the German worker in the Third Reich became an industrial serf, bound to his master, the employer, much as medieval peasants had been bound to the lord of the manor. The so-called Labor Front, which in theory replaced the old trade unions, did not represent the worker. According to the law of October 24, 1934, which created it, it was "the organization of creative Germans of brain and fist." It took in not only wage and salary earners but also the employers and members of the professions. It was in reality a vast propaganda organization and, as some workers said, a gigantic fraud. Its aim, as stated in the law, was not to protect the worker but "to create a true social and productive community of all Germans. Its task is to see that every single individual should be able . . . to perform the maximum of work." The Labor Front was not an independent administrative organization but, like almost every other group in Nazi Germany except the Army, an integral part of the N.S.D.A.P., or, as its leader, Dr. Ley—the "stammering drunkard," to use Thyssen's phrase—said, "an instrument of the party." Indeed, the October 24 law stipulated that its officials should come from the ranks of the party, the former Nazi unions, the S.A. and the S.S.—and they did.

Earlier, the Law Regulating National Labor of January 20, 1934, known as the "Charter of Labor," had put the worker in his place and raised the employer to his old position of absolute master—subject, of course, to interference by the all-powerful State. The employer became the "leader of the enterprise," the employees the "following," or *Gefolgschaft*. Paragraph Two of the law set down that "the leader of the enterprise makes the decisions for the employees and laborers in all matters concerning the enterprise." And just as in ancient times the lord was supposed to be responsible for the welfare of his subjects so, under the Nazi law, was the employer made "responsible for the well-being of the employees and laborers." In return, the law said, "the employees and laborers owe him faithfulness"—that is, they were to work hard and long, and no back talk or grumbling, even about wages.

Wages were set by so-called labor trustees, appointed by the Labor Front. In practice, they set the rates according to the wishes of the employer—there was no provision for the workers even to be consulted in such matters—though after 1936, when help became scarce in the armament industries and some employers attempted to raise wages in order to attract men, wage scales were held down by orders of the State. Hitler was quite frank about keeping wages low. "It has been the iron principle of the National Socialist leadership," he declared early in the regime, "not to permit any rise in the hourly wage rates but to raise income solely by an increase in performance."¹⁰ In a country where most wages were based at least partly on piecework, this meant that a worker could hope to earn more only by a speed-up and by longer hours.

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Compared to the United States, and after allowances were made for the difference in the cost of living and in social services, wages in Germany had always been low. Under the Nazis they were slightly lower than before. According to the Reich Statistical Office, they declined for skilled workers from 20.4 cents an hour in 1932, at the height of the depression, to 19.5 cents during the middle of 1936. Wage scales for unskilled labor fell from 16.1 cents to 13 cents an hour. At the party congress in Nuremberg in 1936 Dr. Ley stated that the average earnings of full-time workers in the Labor Front amounted to \$6.95 a week. The Reich Statistical Office put the figure for all German workers at \$6.29.

Although millions more had jobs, the share of all German workers in the national income fell from 56.9 per cent in the depression year of 1932 to 53.6 per cent in the boom year of 1938. At the same time income from capital and business rose from 17.4 per cent of the national income to 26.6 per cent. It is true that because of much greater employment the total income from wages and salaries grew from twenty-five billion marks to forty-two billions, an increase of 66 per cent. But income from capital and business rose much more steeply—by 146 per cent. All the propagandists in the Third Reich from Hitler on down were accustomed to rant in their public speeches against the bourgeois and the capitalist and proclaim their solidarity with the worker. But a sober study of the official statistics, which perhaps few Germans bothered to make, revealed that the much maligned capitalists, not the workers, benefited most from Nazi policies.

Finally, the take-home pay of the German worker shrank. Besides stiff income taxes, compulsory contributions to sickness, unemployment and disability insurance, and Labor Front dues, the manual worker—like everyone else in Nazi Germany—was constantly pressured to make increasingly large gifts to an assortment of Nazi charities, the chief of which was Winterhilfe (Winter Relief). Many a workman lost his job because he failed to contribute to Winterhilfe or because his contribution was deemed too small. Such failure was termed by one labor court, which upheld the dismissal of an employee without notice, "conduct hostile to the community of the people . . . to be most strongly condemned." In the mid-Thirties it was estimated that taxes and contributions took from 15 to 35 per cent of a worker's gross wage. Such a cut out of \$6.95 a week did not leave a great deal for rent and food and clothing and recreation.

xx As with the medieval serfs, the workers in Hitler's Germany found themselves being more and more bound to their place of labor, though here it was not the employer who bound them but the State. We have seen how the peasant in the Third Reich was bound to his land by the Hereditary Farm Law. Likewise the agricultural laborer, by law, was attached to the land and forbidden to leave it for work in the city. In practice, it must be said, this was one Nazi law which was not obeyed; be-

tween 1933 and 1939 more than a million (1,300,000) farm workers migrated to jobs in industry and trade. But for industrial laborers the law was enforced. Various government decrees beginning with the law of May 15, 1934, severely restricted a worker's freedom of movement from one job to another. After June 1935 the state employment offices were given exclusive control of employment; they determined who could be hired for what and where.

The "workbook" was introduced in February 1935, and eventually no worker could be hired unless he possessed one. In it was kept a record of his skills and employment. The workbook not only provided the State and the employer with up-to-date data on every single employee in the nation but was used to tie a worker to his bench. If he desired to leave for other employment his employer could retain his workbook, which meant that he could not legally be employed elsewhere. Finally, on June 22, 1938, a special decree issued by the Office of the Four-Year Plan instituted labor conscription. It obliged every German to work where the State assigned him. Workers who absented themselves from their jobs without a very good excuse were subject to fine and imprisonment. There was, it is obvious, another side to this coin. A worker thus conscripted could not be fired by his employer without the consent of the government employment office. He had job security, something he had rarely known during the Republic.

Tied down by so many controls at wages little above the subsistence level, the German workers, like the Roman proletariat, were provided with circuses by their rulers to divert attention from their miserable state. "We had to divert the attention of the masses from material to moral values," Dr. Ley once explained. "It is more important to feed the souls of men than their stomachs." *W*

So he came up with an organization called Kraft durch Freude *KDF* ("Strength through Joy"). This provided what can only be called regimented leisure. In a twentieth-century totalitarian dictatorship, as perhaps with older ones, it is deemed necessary to control not only the working hours but the leisure hours of the individual. This was what "Strength through Joy" did. In pre-Nazi days Germany had tens of thousands of clubs devoted to everything from chess and soccer to bird watching. Under the Nazis no organized social, sport or recreational group was allowed to function except under the control and direction of Kraft durch Freude.

To the ordinary German in the Third Reich this official all-embracing recreational organization no doubt was better than nothing at all, if one could not be trusted to be left to one's own devices. It provided members of the Labor Front, for instance, with dirt-cheap vacation trips on land and sea. Dr. Ley built two 25,000-ton ships, one of which he named after himself, and chartered ten others to handle ocean cruises for Kraft durch Freude. This writer once participated in such a cruise; though life aboard was organized by Nazi leaders to a point of excruciation (for him), the German workers seemed to have a good time. And at bargain

rates! A cruise to Madeira, for instance, cost only \$25, including rail fare to and from the German port, and other jaunts were equally inexpensive. Beaches on the sea and on lakes were taken over for thousands of summer vacationers—one at Ruegen on the Baltic, which was not completed by the time the war came, called for hotel accommodations for twenty thousand persons—and in winter special skiing excursions to the Bavarian Alps were organized at a cost of \$11 a week, including carfare, room and board, rental of skis and lessons from a ski instructor.

(Sports, every branch of which was controlled by the "Strength through Joy," were organized on a massive scale, more than seven million persons, according to the official figures, participating in them annually. The organization also made available at bargain rates tickets to the theater, the opera and concerts, thus making available more high-brow entertainment to the laboring man, as Nazi officials often boasted. Kraft durch Freude also had its own ninety-piece symphony orchestra which continually toured the country, often playing in the smaller places where good music was not usually available. Finally, the organization took over the 200-odd adult education institutions which had flourished during the Republic—a movement which had originated in Scandinavia—and continued them, though adding a strong mixture of Nazi ideology to the instruction.

In the end, of course, the workers paid for their circuses. The annual income from dues to the Labor Front came to \$160,000,000 in 1937 and passed the \$200,000,000 point by the time the war started, according to Dr. Ley—the accounting was exceedingly vague, being handled not by the State but by the Finance Office of the party, which never published its accounts. From the dues, 10 per cent was earmarked for Kraft durch Freude. But the fees paid by individuals for vacation trips and entertainment, cheap as they were, amounted in the year before the war to \$1,250,000,000. There was another heavy cost to the wage earner. As the largest single party organization in the country, with twenty-five million members, the Labor Front became a swollen bureaucracy, with tens of thousands of full-time employees. In fact, it was estimated that from 20 to 25 per cent of its income was absorbed by administration expense.

One particular swindle perpetrated by Hitler on the German workers deserves passing mention. This had to do with the Volkswagen (the "People's Car")—a brainstorm of the Fuehrer himself. Every German, or at least every German workman, he said, should own an automobile, just as in the United States. Heretofore in this country where there was only one motorcar for every fifty persons (compared to one for every five in America) the workman had used a bicycle or public transportation to get about. Now Hitler decreed that a car should be built for him to sell for only 990 marks—\$396 at the official rate of exchange. He himself, it was said, took a hand in the actual designing of the car, which was done under the supervision of the Austrian automobile engineer Dr. Ferdinand Porsche.

Since private industry could not turn out an automobile for \$396, Hitler ordered the State to build it and placed the Labor Front in charge of

Auto
VW
Cars

the project. Dr. Ley's organization promptly set out in 1938 to build at Fallersleben, near Braunschweig, "the biggest automobile factory in the world," with a capacity for turning out a million and a half cars a year—"more than Ford," the Nazi propagandists said. The Labor Front advanced fifty million marks in capital. But that was not the main financing. Dr. Ley's ingenious plan was that the workers themselves should furnish the capital by means of what became known as a "pay-before-you-get-it" installment plan—five marks a week, or if a worker thought he could afford it, ten or fifteen marks a week. When 750 marks had been paid in, the buyer received an order number entitling him to a car as soon as it could be turned out. Alas for the worker, not a single car was ever turned out for any customer during the Third Reich. Tens of millions of marks were paid in by the German wage earners, not a pfennig of which was ever to be refunded. By the time the war started the Volkswagen factory turned to the manufacture of goods more useful to the Army.

Swindled though he was in this instance and in many others, reduced, as we have seen, to a sort of industrial serfdom on subsistence wages, and less prone than any other segment of German society to subscribe to Nazism or to be taken in by its ceaseless propaganda, the German worker, it is only fair to say, did not appear to resent very bitterly his inferior status in the Third Reich. The great German war machine that hurtled over the Polish border at dawn on September 1, 1939, could never have been fashioned without the very considerable contribution that the German workman made to it. Regimented he was and sometimes terrorized, but so was everyone else—and centuries of regimentation had accustomed him, as it had all other Germans, to being told what to do. Though it is perhaps unwise to attempt to generalize about such things, this writer's own impression of the workingman in Berlin and in the Ruhr was that while he was somewhat cynical about the promises of the regime he had no more hankering for revolt than anyone else in the Third Reich. Unorganized as he was and lacking leadership, what could he do? A workman often put that question to you.

But the greatest cause of his acceptance of his role in Nazi Germany was, without any doubt at all, that he had a job again and the assurance that he would keep it. An observer who had known something about his precarious predicament during the Republic could understand why he did not seem to be desperately concerned with the loss of political freedom and even of his trade unions as long as he was employed full-time. In the past, for so many, for as many as six million men and their families, such rights of free men in Germany had been overshadowed, as he said, by the freedom to starve. In taking away that last freedom, Hitler assured himself of the support of the working class, probably the most skillful and industrious and disciplined in the Western world. It was a backing given not to his half-baked ideology or to his evil intentions, as such, but to what counted most: the production of goods for war.