

PEONAGE IN GERMANY.

By W. Z. Foster.

Saxony has seconded the act of Prussia of 1909 regarding Polish and Ruthenian workers. Also in other German states, at the instigation of the Prussian government, the institution of the compulsory legitimation card system is being considered. The forcing of workers to equip themselves with legitimation cards was first applied to workers coming from eastern European countries, but it is now applied to all foreign workers. Each of these workers, naturally the professional idlers and international swindlers are excepted, must apply to one of the numerous border offices, and after the examination of his papers receives a legitimation card, for which he must pay from two to five marks. The border offices have been established by the Feldarbeiterzentiale (Agricultural Workers Employment Office), a private company. The fees collected go into the treasury of this company. If it is unheard of to confer such official functions on a private company, it is in this doubly so, because this Feldarbeiterzentiale sends its agents into foreign countries to secure workers for Germany. The agents receive a given sum per head for workers secured. We have, therefore, to do with a company which is trafficking in human beings and exercising official functions. The yearly report of the Feldarbeiterventiale shows what a large number of foreign workers have been lured into Germany by the agents. There were in 1908-9 593,348 and in 1909-10, 642,933 legitimation cards issued. Of these in 1908-9 40.6 per cent and in 1909-10 39.9 per cent workers for the industries, 9,869 were excluded from the legitimation on account of breach of contract, the rest on other grounds. The foreign workers under this control system are delivered, bound hand and foot, to their employers. Only with his consent can they hire out to another employer. Participation in strikes for these workers is equal to being expelled from Prussia, a condition which is a disgrace to the German empire.

The workers' representatives in the Reichstag tried to abolish this disgrace. Their resolution asking the Bundesrat (senate) to put an end to the system was accepted by the Reichstag March 31, 1909. However, the Bundesrat has not yet taken a position in the matter. The General Commission of the Labor Unions, through its representative, laid before the meeting of the International Secretariat at Paris the facts of this compulsory legitimation, and the organizations represented made themselves duty bound to bring pressure to bear upon their governments so that they would protect the rights of their citizens from this system of German states. (From the report of the General Commission to Dresden Congress, 1911.)

This peonage system is but a fuller development of the system of legitimation papers in vogue all over Germany, also France, Australia, etc. Everybody must have his papers, containing his record, and be registered like so much merchandise. When one changes his residence on quitting the old place, he must make out a long string of papers, telling who he is, where he was born, where he is going, etc., etc., and on arrival at the new place he must do the same. The giving of false information to the police is severely punished. This system is rigorously carried out and it proves a powerful aid to employers when they want to blacklist some militant worker. However, the German workers seem to accept the whole system as a matter of course, as one of the necessary evils of capitalism, as I have never read or heard of a protest against it. Perhaps "the Socialists want a strong government," as Slobodin says, and look on this legitimation system as an indispensable fact. If the three million Socialists, instead of appealing to the Bundesrat to abolish the foreign peonage, would strike at the root of the evil by sabotaging their own papers, they would give the legitimation system a jolt it would never recover from. This would mean a few men going to jail of course, but the German government would have an impossible task to force its blacklist legitimation system on 3,000,000 workers determined not to have it. However, there is but little danger of any such direct action methods being applied by them to the government. Anything that concerns it they leave to be settled by the handful of lawyers and doctors in the Reichstag, whose power, of course, is much greater than that of 3,000,000 determined workers.