

THE SITUATION IN THE BELGIAN CONGO.

The Suppression of the Labour Movement.

In July next, the Belgian bourgeoisie, which is now making great preparations for the celebration of the centenary of its seizure of power, will celebrate the forty-sixth anniversary of the founding of the "Independent Congo State", the first form of its seizure of an African territory which is eighty times as great as the mother country and has a population of ten millions.

The Congo at present occupies first place in the production of radium and cobalt, second in the production of diamonds, and fifth in the production of copper. Since its occupation by Belgium the value of its exports has increased from 1,980,000 francs in the year 1887 to 172,628,170 francs in 1928.

But the Congo is of value to the Belgian capitalists not so much as a source of raw materials but as a market for the products of Belgian industry and for the investment of capital. As a matter of fact, the goods imported from the Congo constitute only about 1½ per cent of the total imports of Belgium. On the other hand, the "Société Générale de Belgique" derives fabulous profits from the exploitation of the mines, railways, waterways, plantations and factories in the Congo.

The Belgian Congo is in fact one of those colonies in which capitalist concentration has reached its highest stage; This concentration is proceeding not only horizontally, but also vertically. An example: The textile company "Texaf" is endeavouring to get full control of cotton production in the Congo. It intends to plant, gather, prepare, spin, weave, dye and sell on the spot, and for this purpose is building huge works in Léopoldville.

This industrialisation is accompanied by the rapid proletarianisation of those Negroes who have so far been spared by starvation, plague and massacre. It is likewise accompanied by forced labour on the part of the Negroes, who are taken from their villages, in order to be locked up in the factories, or to toil on the railways which are in course of construction. The precondition for industrialisation was the introduction of forced labour, with all its terrible consequences: sickness, death, and depopulation. All these things, by the way, were mentioned by Vandervelde in the Belgian Parliament, who, however, only condemned the abuses(!) and not the causes.

The position of the native workers is generally very bad. By means of deception and everything that can veil the factor of compulsion, the Negroes are herded together in compounds, where they are very closely guarded in order to prevent their escaping before the expiration of their "agreement". "Desertion" is punishable by law.

Of course there exist very fine work regulation. There are even labour inspectors. But where, is the official with sufficient courage to venture by applying these regulations, to challenge the all-powerful Société Générale, which practically owns the Congo?

A category of skilled workers is gradually being formed, and in several localities there are to be seen the beginnings of organisations. In Boma there has already existed for some time a trade union of the "Boys". In all the big centres mutual insurance societies against the fines imposed on the members are being formed. The shortage of labour as a result of the depopulation of the country, and the simultaneous extension of industry facilitates the development of class-consciousness among the workers. At the same time the spirit of resistance of the native population to the demands of imperialism is growing.

Revolts frequently break out against the actions of the recruiting agents. In the big centres the number of those who refuse to pay taxes is growing.

This situation is causing great uneasiness to the colonial authorities who are trying to meet it with cruel repression. In Leopoldville the police recently carried out a regular "purging" of the native quarters. All the houses of the Negroes were surrounded and searched. 500 to 600 Negroes were arrested on suspicion, subjected to severe examination, which ended in imprisonment, deportation or expulsion.

At the end of last year a rumour was spread that a "Bolshevik organisation" was at work in Thysville, the centre of Kibangism, a political-religious movement. A small army of officials, police and soldiers hastily left the capital in order to carry out an "investigation" on the spot. House searches and arrests took place, but nothing was found and all those arrested had to be released.

All this clearly shows the extent of the confusion among the officials who have the task of keeping the Congo under the yoke of the bank people of the "Société Générale" and its branches, who are also backed by certain leaders of the Belgian social democracy.

But none of the repressive measures will be able to prevent the growth of the labour movement and of the anti-imperialist movement in the Congo.

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