

The International Labour Office therefore submitted separately the question of the reduction of hours of work in coal-mines, and forwarded its conclusions to the Tripartite Meeting for consideration.

The question was, after consideration, submitted to the 1938 session of the Conference. The Conference, *by 82 votes for and 29 against*, decided to place the question "Reduction of the hours of work in coal-mines" *on the agenda of the 1939 session of the Conference*.

The general question of hours was then considered.

The Committee of the Conference, composed in accordance with the Riddell-Tzaut system, consisted of sixty-three members (twenty-seven Government delegates and eighteen employers' and eighteen workers' delegates).

On the general question, the employers adopted the following attitude:—

- (1) To take part in the general discussion.
- (2) To present a demand to insert in the draft a question relative to the economic consequences that a reduction of hours of work would have.
- (3) To maintain an attitude of non-participation in any debate having for its object the framing of a Convention or the preparation of a questionnaire dealing with the reduction of hours of work.

The arguments submitted by the employers in support of the policy outlined in the preceding paragraphs were as follows:—

- (1) The question of the reduction of hours of work would amount in practice to that of establishing a forty-hour week. *This weekly limitation of hours had first been considered as a means of reducing unemployment, but it had now been brought up as a measure of social progress.*
- (2) The arguments used by the employers in the past against the establishment of a forty-hour week remained valid: the reduction of hours of work would increase the cost of production and selling prices, lead to a lowering of the standard of living of the workers, and to an increase in unemployment.
- (3) In the countries in which the forty-hour week had been applied—the United States of America, New Zealand, and France—experience appeared to have justified these arguments. With regard to France in particular, figures given by a former Minister of Finance showed that the number of persons wholly unemployed had increased from 371,400 in 1937 to 394,200 in 1938, an increase of 22,800. In New Zealand, where the forty-hour week was also said to apply, there was in fact no legal limitation of hours of work in industry in respect of adult males, but only legislation fixing the point at which overtime rates applied.
- (4) Hours of work might be reduced in future, but not as the result of regulation. It would happen when an improvement in economic conditions or technical progress enabled this reduction to take place without any increase in the cost of production and, consequently, without prejudicing consumers.
- (5) It was a mistake to attempt to increase the standard of living of the workers by giving them more leisure, because their standard depended on the profits produced through industry and trade. It was only when production was increased that it would be possible to give a larger income to those who participate in production in any country, and in this connection it was a great mistake to believe that mechanization alone could enable this increase to take place, because it could not take place in all industries.
- (6) It would not appear possible to ask these countries that had not ratified the Convention on the forty-eight-hour week to apply at present regulations prescribing a weekly limitation of hours reduced to forty a week.
- (7) It was necessary to take into account the unsettled conditions in Europe. All the information at hand, in particular regarding hours of work in Germany, should render the supporters of the generalization of the reduction of hours of work very careful. Any such measure would lead many countries to economic suicide. In Germany the reports of the Factory Inspectors for 1936, as published by the International Labour Office on 2nd May of this year in *Industrial and Labour Information*, showed that in the metallurgical and machine-building industries and the building and kindred trades working-days of ten hours were by no means the exception, and the reports gave examples showing that it was necessary to allow an extension of hours beyond ten a day especially for skilled workers, and that in exceptional cases the hours worked were from sixty-three hours and a half to seventy-two hours a week. *Further, with regard to Italy, at whose instigation the proposal for a forty-hour week was raised at Geneva in 1932, the publications of the International Labour Office showed that a sixty-hour week was permitted in all industries concerned with the production of war materials.*

The Conference decided, *by 92 votes for to 27 votes against*, to place *on the agenda for the 1939 session of the Conference* the question of the generalization of the reduction of the hours of work.