

I N F O R M A T I O N (Social Policy)

RECONVERSION FOR AGRICULTURAL WORKERS

The Commission of the European Community has sponsored an enquiry into the reconversion of workers in the Six Community countries who give up agricultural work.

The first aim of the enquiry is to ascertain the facts. In the Community as a whole, nearly half the farm workers have left agricultural work in the period 1950-70. The number of workers affected was nearly 10 million. Over the 15 years 1950-65, the rate of reduction in each country was as follows : Luxembourg 42 %; Belgium 41.5 %; Germany 40 %; France 38 %; the Netherlands 33.5 %; Italy 29.5 %. Between 1965 and 1970, the rate of reduction per annum for the Community as a whole was 3.1 %.

The residual farm population is on the elderly side. In four countries the proportion of workers aged 40 or more is more than half the total -- the Netherlands 57 %, Italy 62 %, Luxembourg 35 %, Belgium 76 %.

In all the countries the drift away from the land is accompanied by changes in the structure of farming. The number of farms exceeding 20 hectares is the only group in the Community which is increasing; but there are still many farms of between 10 and 20 hectares.

In the years 1972-76, the agricultural changes are likely to release, in the Community as a whole, a number of farmers and farm workers estimated at about 2 million out of the present active farm population of some 10 million. Among the 2 million departures, a large number will be aged 55 or more. These, if farming has been their principal activity or in some conditions if it was a part-time occupation, will be able to obtain compensation of at least 600 units of account (1) provided they give up their farming activities and make over their land either to farms which are to be modernised or for non-agricultural purposes.

The structural reform of agriculture, however, implies that other and younger farmers will also be leaving the land. The annual number of these departures may be around 180,000. Some of them will receive a bonus, known as a structural contribution, because it is aimed at encouraging the re-division of the farms. The bonus will amount, on the average, to UC 1,680, equivalent to at least 6 year's rental value of their land. This inducement, however, does not in itself solve the problem for this category of worker. They will not be leaving farm work unless they find a new job, preferably in their own regions, from which they can obtain a bigger income than they have been getting from their farm work.

(1) The unit of account (UC) is equivalent to the pre-Nixon dollar currently (August 1972) equivalent to \$ US or pence sterling.

In the Community as a whole the number of jobs which will have to be created in industry or in the service trades between 1972 and 1976 for retiring farmers aged less than 55, is estimated at around 600,000. Of these, some 300,000 jobs will have to be created for farmers whose residence is in regions which are primarily agricultural, and in which industry and the service trades are not highly developed and have only a few new jobs to offer.

If a change on this scale is to be carried out in good conditions, both socially and economically, it is indispensable that public authorities should take a hand in it.

For farmers in the 55-65 age group there will, as stated above, be an annual retirement compensation. The others will have to find their ways into expanding trades or industries. Apart from the structural compensation bonus some of them will be receiving, they will be able to count on the help of training and re-adaptation organisations which will be well versed in the economic opportunities available. According to the first approximations, the Community re-adaptation aid policy, which replaces various national measures, will be within direct reach of between 20 and 30 % of the farmers who need to seek a new qualification.

The effective discharge of this work calls for the formation in the sub-regions, where the reconverting farmers live, of small teams whose job will be to study the re-adaptation schemes, provide the information needed by the people concerned and help them in securing a training in line with the known or probable outlets. In view of the difficulty of coordinating the availability of training with the demand for it on a sub-regional basis, a helpful step would be to set up a central body which could maintain as complete a repertory as possible of all the public and private training facilities, and would be able to deal with requests for information from all parts of the Community.

The farmers are not the only people to be asked to change their jobs. In all industries the current pace of technological advance is endangering the continuity of jobs. The farmers therefore, must be regarded as the first group to be submitted on a considerable scale to the experience of a change which will affect all social groups, and will soon have been felt by almost everybody. In this context there is no reason why the mobility of labour between industries should not be as much a matter for public intervention as health, education or environmental protection.

It is not the aim of the Community to take over the jobs of the national, regional or local authorities. It can, however, do two things for them. First it can submit to them development strategies and projects for regional development conceived in European terms; and secondly, it can put at their disposal part of the financial resources available through the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund and the European Social Fund.