

Disabled Persons' Co-operatives in Czechoslovakia

by Rudolf Tyl

Over the last few years there has evolved a new attitude towards the disabled. Rehabilitation no longer means a course of therapy, but full reintegration of the disabled to daily life, and this is increasingly the attitude of those in charge of vocational rehabilitation workshops, of rehabilitation technicians, doctors and also organizations of disabled persons. The International Labour Review¹ recently published an article on this subject and—by kind permission—we are pleased to reproduce it here, for it describes the efforts being made so effectively in Czechoslovakia to enable the disabled to carry on an occupation.

Such initiative truly reflects the same humanitarian spirit as the Red Cross which constantly struggles to ensure that the human being, whoever he might be, shall preserve his dignity. The Review itself has on several occasions devoted articles to the problem of the protection, training and rehabilitation of the disabled². (Ed.)

The Czechoslovak Socialist Republic is a country with a high standard of social security, particularly as regards the welfare of the disabled. Conditions are provided that enable the handicapped to enjoy full social security rights on equality with other citizens. They are also in actual practice guaranteed full civil rights: the right to work, to rest after work, to health protection, to material security in case of illness and old age, and to education. Free preventive and therapeutic medical care is available to practically 99 per cent. of the entire population and includes not only actual treatment but also medicines, medical and prosthetic aids, etc.

There are pensions for the most seriously handicapped people, such as the blind and persons with major orthopaedic defects,

¹ Geneva, February 1966.

² In particular, see *Revue internationale*, August 1946, April and May 1949, and March 1961.

irrespective of whether the disability arises in connection with the person's employment or in an earlier part of his life, or whether it has existed since his birth. The calculation of the disability pension especially favours the younger age groups. The social security pattern includes not only pension insurance but also full social welfare care—care for citizens with a reduced working capacity, institutional care and supplementary care, carried out by local government authorities known as National Committees. Vocational rehabilitation is co-ordinated with therapeutic and social rehabilitation as their logical sequel. Rehabilitation also includes education and training within the framework of the national system of schools, and other educational facilities, where children and juveniles with sensory and physical defects are prepared for their future occupations.

Employment for the disabled

This fact, however, does not free the State from the responsibility of providing employment opportunities for the handicapped. More and more disabled persons are taking up employment because of the general shortage of manpower in the country and of the fact that, as a matter of principle, a disability pension under the appropriate legal regulations is not subject to any deduction when the recipient is in employment.

After the Second World War it was necessary to find work for many persons of productive age who had been injured or disabled. Furthermore, employment had to be found every year for young disabled persons graduating from a number of training and educational centres. In view of the specific conditions necessary before disabled persons can join in the labour process, a suitable sector of production had to be chosen in which such conditions could be created for handicapped workers.

In the second half of 1949, therefore, appropriate steps were taken for the employment of invalids in the workshops of the co-operatives, which form an important part of the national economy in Czechoslovakia. At the beginning of 1950 the first producer co-operatives for disabled persons came into being, their rules of employment having been suitably adapted to the difficult task of employing the disabled.

Growth of disabled persons' co-operatives

To illustrate the progress of the scheme, let us take as an example the development of the largest people's producer co-operative, the *Drutěva* in Prague (the name is an abbreviation of the Czech for "co-operative society of physically disabled persons"). The beginnings were very difficult. Neither workshops nor branches of production were suited to the employment of disabled persons, particularly those with a high percentage of disability. There was also a lack of experience. However, the *Drutěva* took over the complete production of brushes and baskets by blind persons, as well as the workshops for the disabled that had been established before the Second World War by disabled persons' associations. This was the basis on which the co-operative started. Its workshops were situated not only in Prague but also in Brno and in other towns throughout the Republic. The attraction of good working conditions and, particularly, the possibility of obtaining home work (which is given out on a large scale to invalids) led to an increase in the co-operative's membership to 1,400 persons.

Since the management of a co-operative with many workshops at different places was very difficult, it was found necessary to divide them between three new co-operatives. The principal one remained in Prague, while a second similar co-operative with the same name was set up in Brno, famous for its fairs, and the third in Jablonec nad Nisou (Northern Bohemia). This aroused interest in the other regions of the Republic, and as a result several more co-operatives of disabled persons were established under the aegis of the Central Union of Producer Co-operatives. This development was encouraged by the special conditions and advantages created for co-operatives of this type, particularly as regards the allotment of investment capital, priority in supply of material, price policy, allocation of workshops, selection of suitable branches of production, and exemption from co-operative income tax.

At present there are 46 disabled persons' co-operatives in operation in the Republic; they have nearly 15,000 members—11.5 per cent. of the total membership of the producer co-operative movement.

The producer co-operatives of disabled persons specialise in metal-working, furniture, toys and baskets, machine and hand-

knitting, weaving, clothes (including children's wear and the mending of underwear), leather goods (including repairs), gifts and souvenirs, small items of glassware, Christmas-tree decorations, artistic ceramics, various card-board products, etc. Thirteen of these co-operatives offer services such as the safe custody of various objects; parking lots; repair and tuning of musical instruments; the repair of fountain pens, lighters, toys, umbrellas, garments and underwear; and various photographic services.

The regulations governing disabled persons' co-operatives are similar to the rules of other producer co-operatives, but contain additional provisions with regard to their character and specific purpose. The cost of a member's share in the disabled persons' co-operatives is substantially lower than in the other producer co-operatives.

The preferential treatment enjoyed by disabled persons' co-operatives in the allocation of capital has been very advantageous to them in capital construction. The *Drutěva* co-operatives in Prague and Brno were the first two to start the construction of new premises. In 1961 new workshops were put into operation, which brought about a gradual concentration of production and consequently higher productivity of labour and better economic results. A new workshop in Prague is to be completed in the near future. The construction of new workshops has resulted in a further expansion of the two largest co-operatives of disabled persons, so that at present the Prague *Drutěva* has over 1,500 workers, while that at Brno has about 800. Such progress is not exceptional, for a number of other co-operatives have also built new workshops. The blind are catered for by highly specialised co-operatives that have dormitories for their members, and the largest co-operatives in Prague, Brno and Bratislava provide separate workshops for blind workers, with specially favourable working conditions and facilities for cultural and social life.

The products made by the disabled workers of the Prague *Drutěva* have become very popular with all sections of the population and there is a considerable demand for womens' knitted wear, womens' and men's sweaters and cardigans, cashmere scarves, leather goods, fashion accessories, sports wear and other goods bearing the *Drutěva* mark. The annual fashion shows organised by the Prague

Drutěva attract great interest and virtually set the fashion in knit-wear garments. The high standard of the articles produced by the largest disabled persons' co-operatives depends on the use of the most up-to-date machines in workshops that are very well equipped technically.

Homeworkers

Homeworkers, who are specially trained and who account for about 50 per cent. of all the worker-members of disabled persons' co-operatives (as in the Prague Drutěva, for example), also have an excellent standard of work. For the most seriously handicapped homeworkers the raw material is brought to their door and the finished product taken away by the co-operative's own transport. Other homeworkers are expected to call personally at headquarters to collect the material they need and to bring the finished product back to it. During the hours when the homeworkers call for these purposes the spacious hall of the new building of the co-operative in Prague resembles a busy day at the stock exchange or in a bank. The homeworkers do not only receive the necessary materials: all other essentials, such as instructions, patterns, etc., are also carefully prepared for them beforehand.

There is no doubt that the seriously handicapped have received great assistance from the home work organised by these co-operatives. Such persons, since they work at home, can adapt the speed of their work to their physical condition, may perhaps be able to put aside their orthopaedic aids, and divide the working day according to their needs. This form of employment is particularly advantageous to people whose mobility is limited and who would find it difficult to get to the workshops. Well-organised home work undoubtedly has a favourable influence on the workers' efficiency and especially on their psychological condition.

Welfare facilities

Great attention is paid by disabled persons' co-operatives to cultural and social activities. The co-operatives provide libraries and works clubs, where the cultural and social life of the members is organised. The members are encouraged to join together in

cultural groups for such things as photography, chess, sports, tourism, etc. The Prague Drutěva, for example, has set up a members' club and a cafeteria where the workers can have their meals. Considerable interest has also been attracted by its musical ensemble, its blind members' choir and its sports group for tourism and camping. The costs incurred in connection with these activities are defrayed out of the co-operative's special fund, to which a certain percentage of the profits is regularly allocated.

Special attention is paid to periodic medical check-ups and health care in general. Preventive medical examinations are carried out regularly and on their basis various measures are taken: treatment, transfer to another branch of production, recommendation of a shorter working day, reservation for spa treatment, etc. Medical care comes under the state health administration. Several disabled persons' co-operatives have recently been selected to be the centre of a complete health service.

Holidays may be spent either in the co-operatives' own establishments or elsewhere. Usually there is a programme of cultural events, and medical attention is always available. The cultural programmes are arranged so as to enable all the holiday-makers to take part in them. These vacations last for a fortnight. For blind members special holiday programmes are organised in the capital of the Republic.

Recruitment and training

The recruitment of disabled persons for the co-operatives is carried out in close co-ordination with the social welfare departments of the Councils of National Committees which decide, on the basis of medical examination and recommendation, whether or not the disabled person concerned is fit for employment. The decisive criterion is the percentage and the nature of the disability of the individual. The place of work is chosen to aid physical rehabilitation and to prevent any deterioration of health.

To improve the care of the disabled in general, the Research Institute of the State Social Security Board carries out systematic studies of the influence of certain kinds of work on their health. The findings of such research serve as a basis for standardising certain jobs suitable for disabled workers. Special arrangements

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at the places of work are recommended, including appropriate adaptations of equipment and the use of special materials and tools.

Some of the larger disabled persons' co-operatives have their own apprentice training centres, in which they educate and train juveniles for their own needs. For example, the Prague Drutěva has an apprentice training centre for dressmaking. The education of apprentices selected from among disabled juveniles is organised at special apprentice training centres that have hostels. The co-operative itself organises various courses: general training, safety at work, new working methods, etc. Attendance is voluntary and free of charge.

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All problems concerning disabled persons are considered jointly by the boards of co-operatives at all levels and the nation-wide Union of Czechoslovak Disabled Persons. This collaboration is particularly fruitful in finding new branches of production suitable for handicapped workers, ensuring that the necessary workshops are available, recruiting new workers for the co-operatives and organising social activities for their members. This joint action will be further expanded in the future because the Central Union of Producer Co-operatives is taking over 45 workshops operated by the Union of Czechoslovak Disabled Persons with almost 3,000 employees, most of whom are seriously handicapped and cannot be employed at normal places of work. These workshops are to be merged with several co-operatives in which special attention is to be paid to the social aspects of the employment of the handicapped. By doctor's recommendation, disabled persons will have shorter working hours, individual working norms, special health care, rest periods during working hours, transport to and from the place of work, etc. Deficits incurred by the co-operatives will be defrayed by the State. This arrangement enables even the most severely handicapped person to join the work process.

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