

NURSING

“The employment, the working conditions and the living conditions of nursing personnel” was the seventh agenda item for the sixty-first session of the International Labour Conference in Geneva last June. The International Labour Organisation has in fact been concerned since 1930 with nursing-staff working conditions. In that year a recommendation was adopted on working hours in hospitals. In 1958, the ILO resumed its work on this question and two years later published a study which it had undertaken in co-operation with the WHO.

The ILO, as far back as 1967, urged the drawing up of an international regulation for the benefit of nurses. The document gave rise to considerable discussion, for the outlook of the employers was very different from that of the nurses. Both attitudes are described in the Revue suisse des infirmières (Bern, 1976, No 8-9) which also summarizes the present situation as follows:

The idea of an *agreement* is precluded by the fact that too much detail is necessary to improve conditions of work and life for nurses—the danger being that very few countries would ratify and even fewer would apply it. That, among other things, is the argument of the employers. Among the government members views differ. The workers were in favour of an agreement. Finally, it was decided to include the same item number seven on the agenda of the next conference in 1977 for a second discussion with a view to the adoption of a recommendation. The Bureau instructed to draw up the report for this next meeting was invited to include in the report, after a second consultation with governments, suggestions on the content of a possible agreement. As can be seen, the way is long.

The summary record shows from the outset a determination to specify the important role of nurses in health. Co-operation among governments, workers and employers is submitted as a necessity. The attitude of nurses shows the two trends which were given expression

during the discussion: on the one hand, assimilation to other professions—on the other hand, to supplement general working standards by special measures applicable to nurses, in view of the particular conditions in which they carry out their duties. The scope and policy of nursing services and personnel are clearly defined, with three categories: the registered nurse, the nursing auxiliary and the assistant nurse.

Teaching, training and the exercise of the profession are dealt with in separate chapters which constantly stress the concern to protect the profession and those who engage in it. For instance, part VII emphasizes the participation of nurses in the framing of policies and the making of decisions which concern them. The chapter entitled "Career" concludes that life-long education is essential.

Pay: This should be settled preferably by means of collective agreements. It should be related to needs, qualifications and responsibilities comparable to those of similar professions. The employer should provide certain perquisites such as working clothes, but these benefits should not be compulsory.

Working hours and holidays. In countries where it is not yet in force, the 40-hour working week, with a working day of no more than 8 hours, is an objective to be sought as quickly as possible. The same applies to the 48 hours of rest, paid annual leave for four weeks and special rewards for work during long hours or inconvenient times.

Health protection. This chapter reviews existing regulations on medical service at work, health checks, pre-natal care, and vocational diseases and accidents. In all these functions too, nurses and their representatives should be asked to co-operate.

Social security. This should be at least of the same standard for nurses as it is for other workers, but should also take into account the particular nature of their work. Nurses should, inter alia, be able freely to choose their doctor when the social security scheme allows, and should have the benefit of confidential files.

Special working arrangements. In this chapter temporary or part-time work is considered as a system contributing to nursing efficiency and to the efforts being made to counter the tendency for trained personnel to leave the nursing profession.

Special provisions relating to students. Here, the same freedoms are advocated as for other students except for educational needs; practical work, depending on the level of training, organized in terms of the training needs and not to meet normal staffing needs; information on working conditions, the career, and the means of promoting the economic, social and vocational interests of nurses.

International co-operation and methods of application are the two final chapters. They give expression to the desire to standardize nurse training without lowering qualifications, to promote exchanges between countries (training at different levels, work in a foreign country) and to encourage qualified nurses to return to their countries of origin and there to improve nursing organization.

Fresh consultations are now about to begin. They will lead to a further conference which should produce a recommendation so worded that it will be accepted by all and applied by 126 countries.
