

ITALY AND THE ITALIAN PEASANT

A valuable survey of the position of the agricultural worker of Italy by Mr Carl T. Schmidt appeared in the *Manchester Guardian* of 24th June. The author is a Fellow of the Social Science Research Council of New York City, and instructor in economics at Columbia University. The article is based upon a study made in 1935-36.

He points out that Italy is still essentially an agricultural country in spite of the industrial advance of the last generation and half the population get a living direct from the soil.

How the Land is Owned

"Unlike the small landowning peasantry of France and Germany, however, the Italian agricultural population consists in the main of dependent workers—share-croppers, share-tenants, small holders who must supplement the inadequate output of their minute plots of land by working for hire, and wage labourers. The majority of the cultivators are separated from ownership of the soil. Large proprietorship contrasts with an excessive division of land. The economically independent farm-owners, including absentee proprietors, probably do not number more than half a million. More than two-thirds of all the farm land is owned by less than 4 per cent of the 'landowners.' Working on a materially ungenerous land, with effective control of the means of production vested in absentee owners, the agricultural population of Italy gets a precarious living at high human cost."

Although a nominal eight hour day or 48 hour week was established by decree of 15th March, 1923, it is liable to many exceptions. The limit is only an annual average. In the winter when there is not much work to do the workers may only work six hours. In the summer they may work 10 hours a day. Those who can find work only in the summer thus work additional hours without extra pay. This is important because of the great growth of rural unemployment. Additional hours without pay may also be required because of technical or weather contingencies.

Fall in Wages

"With the stabilization of the lira in 1927 began a period of drastic wagecuts, actively sponsored by the Government, that continued into 1935. According to official statistics, the average wages of male farm labourers throughout the country declined 37 per cent during 1927-35. In the individual provinces and occupations the reductions have varied considerably—from 20 to 60 per cent, roughly—but in every instance they have been serious. Because prices of consumption goods declined only slowly, the purchasing power of wages fell to a level at least 15 per cent below what it was at the advent of Fascism. In 1935 the downward movement of wages was suspended, and the rising cost of living led to moderate advances in late 1936 and early 1937. These advances, coming only after prices of consumption goods had been rising for nearly two years, have done no more than compensate for the higher living costs.

"But these observations relate only to nominal daily wage rates. Actual annual earnings have declined even more, for there has been enormous growth in rural unemployment. After 1926 the number of jobless farm workers mounted rapidly, reaching a maximum of 333,000 in January, 1934. Only in the last two years has it fallen somewhat, mainly in consequence of mobilization for the Abyssinian war.

"Nor has effective relief been given the rural un-

employed. In October, 1919, Italy became the first country in the world to develop a system of compulsory unemployment insurance covering all wage-earners in industry and agriculture. However, because of alleged difficulties in administering the scheme in agriculture, rural workers have been deprived of unemployment benefits since the end of 1923. But mounting unemployment has obliged the Government to provide a measure of relief by undertaking an extensive public works programme—road-building, land reclamation, construction of public buildings, and the like. These works, however, have meant an absorption at any one time of not more than 20 per cent of all the unemployed in industry and agriculture."

"Deproletarianization"

The aim of the Fascist regime is said to be "deproletarianization," the creation of "genuine peasants, attached to the soil."

In fact, "the Fascist era has seen an extension of share-cropping and tenancy and increasing difficulties for peasant owners. . . . Peasant proprietorship has actually been decreasing during the last 10 years. The widely heralded 'social duties' of land-ownership have remained more rhetoric. Hardly any farms have been expropriated in the public interest, and the reclamation programme has not resulted in the splitting up of the big estates. Progress in 'fixing workers to the soil' has been mainly in the direction of paying wages in kind and extending the share-cropping system, which, of course, cripple the mobility and bargaining strength of the workers. The cropper cultivates under the direction of the employer, has no independence in choice of crops or methods of work, and is subject to the employer's discipline. That is, he is a dependent worker, paid in kind instead of cash, with no guarantees of income or working hours, and more firmly bound to the employer than is the wage worker. The approach to serfdom is too close to have escaped even the attention of Fascist writers. Yet the syndicate leaders are pressing for further adoption of share-cropping contracts, which are described as 'a safeguard against the risks of sudden convulsion and upheaval'."

Colonizing Abyssinia

Much publicity has been given to schemes for settling rural workers and their families on reclaimed lands and in the African colonies. "So far, however, this has been of slight significance. Only 8,857 families were settled in internal zones during 1930-36, and rural migration to the colonies has been quite negligible.

"Thus, the peasant masses remain separated from control of the land, but with even less hope than formerly of rising in the economic scale, at home or abroad. However, the regime has now undertaken to show them the way to a new Promised Land. The war on Abyssinia from its beginning was depicted as a war for land and labour, for 'proletarian Italy.' Conquered Abyssinia is to give liberty, land, and bread to the Italian masses. Very likely the Government will make a show of peasant colonization by subsidizing a limited number of settlers in a highly favourable region—a project that must yield great publicity value. But enormous difficulties of climatic, military, and, above all, economic nature would seem to stand in the way of extensive peasant colonization. Land will be taken from the natives, certainly, but its control and its fruits in all probability will pass into the hands of big concessionaries, colonization and plantation companies, and financial institutions."