



Wages, Albert Camus

Wages

People who are dying of hunger generally have only one way to survive: by working. I beg your pardon for stating such an obvious fact. But the present situation in Kabylia proves that knowledge of this fact is not as universal as it might seem. I said previously that half the Kabyle population is unemployed and three-quarters of the people are undernourished. This discrepancy is not the result of mistaken arithmetic. It simply proves that those who are not out of work still do not have enough to eat.

I had been alerted to the fact that wages in Kabylia were insufficient; I did not know that they were insulting. I had been told that the working day exceeded the legal limit. I did not know that it was close to twice that long. I do not wish to be shrill, but I am obliged to say that the labor regime in Kabylia is one of slave labor, for I see no other word to describe a system in which workers toil for 10 to 12 hours per day for an average wage of 6 to 10 francs.

I will enumerate wage levels by region without further commentary. First, however, I want to say that although these figures might seem extraordinary, I can vouch for them. I am looking right now at the time cards of farmworkers on the Sabaté-Tracol estates in the region of Bordj-Menaïel. They bear the date of the current two-week pay period, the name of the worker, a serial number, and the nominal wage. On one card I see the figure 8 francs, on another 7, and on a third 6. In the time column, I see that the worker who earned 6 francs worked four days in the two-week period. Can the reader imagine what this means?

Even if the worker in question worked 25 days per month, he would earn only 150 francs, with which he would have to feed a family of

several children for 30 days. Can anyone read this without feeling outrage? How many of you reading this article would be able to live on such a sum?

Before continuing with my narrative, let me state some facts. The wages I just mentioned are from the region of Bordj-Menaïel. I should add that the sirens at Tracol Farms sound during the high season (which is now) at 4 A.M., 11 A.M., 12 noon, and 7 P.M. That adds up to 14 hours of work. The communal workers in the village are paid 9 francs a day. After a protest by native municipal councilors, wages were increased to 10 francs. At Tabacoop, in the same region, the daily wage is 9 francs. In Tizi-Ouzou, the average wage is 7 francs for 12 hours of work. Employees of the commune get 12 francs.

Kabyle farmers in the region employ women to do weeding. For the same 12 hours of work, they are paid 3.5 francs. In Fort-National, Kabyle farmers are no more generous than their European counterparts, paying workers 6 to 7 francs a day. Women are paid 4 francs and given a flatcake as well. Communal employees receive 9 to 11 francs.

In the region of Djemaa-Saridj, where the soil is richer, men are paid 8 to 10 francs for 10 hours of work, and women get 5 francs. Around Michelet, the average farm wage is 5 francs plus food for 10 hours of work. The communal wage is 11 to 12 francs, but back taxes are withheld from the worker's pay without notice. The amount withheld is sometimes equal to the total wage. The average withholding is 20 francs per week.

In Ouadhias, the farm wage is 6 to 8 francs. Women get 3 to 5 francs for picking olives, while communal workers receive 10 to 11 francs less withholding for back taxes.

In the Maillot region, workers get 9 to 10 francs for an unlimited number of hours per day. For olive picking, the compensation has been set at 8 francs per quintal of olives harvested. A family of four can harvest an average of 2 quintals per day. The family therefore receives 4 francs per person.

In the Sidi-Aïch region, the wage is 6 francs plus a flatcake and figs. One local agricultural firm pays its workers 7 francs without food. Workers are also hired by the year for 1,000 francs plus food.

In the plain of El-Kseur, a colonized region, male workers are paid 10 francs, females 5 francs, and children who are employed to trim vines are paid 3 francs. Finally, in the region that stretches from Dellys to Port-Gueydon, the average wage is 6 to 10 francs for 12 hours of work.

I will end this depressing list with two remarks. First, the workers have never rebelled against this mistreatment. Only in 1936, at Beni-Yenni, did workers involved in building a road, for which they were paid 5 francs per day, go on strike, winning a raise to 10 francs a day. Those workers were not unionized.

Second, I want to mention that the unjustifiable length of the working day is aggravated by the fact that the typical Kabyle worker lives a long way from where he works. Some must travel more than 10 kilometers round trip. After returning home at 10 at night, they must set out again for work at 3 in the morning after only a few hours of heavy sleep. You may be wondering why they bother to go home at all. My answer is simply that they cling to the inconceivable ambition of spending a few quiet moments in a home that is their only joy in life as well as the object of all their concerns.

There are reasons for this state of affairs. The official estimate of the value of a day's labor service is 17 francs. If employers can pay a daily

wage of only 6 francs, the reason is that widespread unemployment has put workers in competition with one another. Both settlers and Kabyle landowners are so aware of this that some administrators have been reluctant to increase communal wages in order to avoid angering these employers.

In Beni-Yenni, owing to circumstances about which I will say more in a moment, a program of public works was inaugurated. Unemployment decreased sharply, and workers were paid 22 francs a day. This proves that exploitation alone is the cause of low wages. None of the other reasons sometimes advanced to explain the status quo makes sense.

Settlers allege that Kabyle workers often change jobs and that they therefore pay them “temporary” wages. But in Kabylia today, all wages are temporary, and this wretched excuse merely covers unpardonable self-interest.

Before concluding, I must say a word about the widespread idea that native labor is inferior to European labor. It is of course a product of the general contempt that settlers feel for the unfortunate natives of this country. As I see it, this contempt discredits those who profess it. I say that it is wrong to say that the productivity of Kabyle workers is inadequate, because if it were, the foremen who keep close watch on them would take it upon themselves to improve it.

Of course it is true that at some work sites one sees workers who are unsteady on their feet and incapable of lifting a shovel, but that is because they have not eaten. It is a perverse logic that says that a man is weak because he hasn't enough to eat and that therefore one should pay him less because he is weak.

There is no way out of this situation. Kabylia cannot be saved from starvation by distributing grain. It can only be saved by reducing unemployment and monitoring wages. These things can and should be done immediately.

I learned today that the colonial authorities, anxious to demonstrate concern for the native population, will reward veterans with medals signifying their military service. May I add that I write these lines not with irony but with a certain sadness? I see nothing wrong with rewarding courage and loyalty. But many of the people who are dying of hunger in Kabylia today also served. I wonder how they will present the bit of metal signifying their loyalty to France to their starving children.

The end