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Source: *The Economic Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 64 (Dec., 1906), pp. 536-545

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the Royal Economic Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2221476>

Accessed: 25-06-2016 03:13 UTC

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The Economic Journal

CHEAP RAILWAY TICKETS FOR WORKMEN IN BELGIUM

My purpose in the present paper is only to describe an interesting economic and social phenomenon of my country, and also to point out some of its principal consequences. I avoid intentionally any comparison with other countries, as well as any consideration of the question of management of railways by the State or by companies. Of course these are of much interest, but I think it is worth while to study the cheap railway tickets for their own sake. We shall then avoid any political or school bias.

In Germany, in England, in France, in Austria, so-called workmen's trains exist with specially cheap fares: it is a feature of modern industry that labour is becoming more mobile. However, I suppose I do not overstate the fact when I say that nowhere is the regular transport of workmen so relatively large, so cheap, and so intensive as in Belgium. This is obvious even from superficial observation. Take the timetables of the Belgian railways; you are struck by the great number of ordinary trains early in the morning and late in the day. A journey on foot or on a bicycle through the villages of the provinces of Antwerp, Brabant, Hainaut, and Liège, or some moments spent early on Monday mornings in Brussels—South and North—in Liège, in the industrial villages of Hainaut will show to everyone the peculiarities of the regular moving population. Mr. Vandervelde, who has devoted many pages and speeches to the workmen's trains, once picturesquely described these villages, where, during the day, only women, children, or old people are to be seen. All the men have gone away to work. It would be exaggeration to pretend it is so in every village, but undoubtedly this is by no means an exceptional state of things.

As regards the actual number of tickets issued or of ticket-holders we have not got detailed statistics. At a sitting of the

House of Representatives, the Minister of Railways stated that the total number of men using the cheap tickets must be considerably over 100,000. The total industrial population being a little over 700,000 people—say 720,000—if the ticket-holders are about 120,000, we can say that they represent nearly 16 per cent. or a sixth of the total. These figures are only for the State railways, which represent nearly all our railways, or 4,000 kilometres. Besides these, private railway companies own about 500 kilometres, and these have also (at least, the French company of “Nord-Belge” has) the same cheap rates as the State railways. Our great national company of light railways (*Société nationale des chemins de fer vicinaux*), which has no less than 2,500 kilometres, also carries a great number of workmen at reduced prices, and, of course, for short distances the numerous electric and other suburban tramways are employed.

It would be tedious to note here all the changes which have taken place in the management of the trains. It will be sufficient to explain a few of the more important matters of administration.

(1) The cheap weekly “abonnements” are reserved for *workmen* in the strictest sense of the word. The official definition gives as the meaning of the term “workmen” “those who perform, under the authority of another person, an essentially manual work, and are paid per day or per piece.” Accordingly, managers of businesses, *entrepreneurs*, professional men, clerks, and all *employés* whose work is not purely manual (as tramcar conductors and drivers), surveyors and foremen, employers of any kind, itinerant dealers, domestic and rural servants, and also all workmen employed in an artistic calling are debarred from a use of the reduced tickets.

(2) The genuineness of the proper qualifications is ascertained by the formalities required to obtain the tickets. Applications have to be made eight days before using the tickets. They have to be backed by two certificates—one from the burgomaster of the “commune” of the applicant, and the other from the employer. They must certify that the applicant is really a workman, what kind of work he does, and the address of the works where he is employed. Every application undergoes a special inquiry by the station-master, who grants the ticket under his own responsibility, and it is sufficient to say that in case of detected fraud he has to pay the defrauded fares.

(3) There are three kinds of weekly tickets:—

(a) For one return journey per week, the departure being on

Monday or the next day after a holiday, and the return being on Saturday or Sunday. No limit of length is assigned to these tickets.

(b) For one single journey daily. These tickets are taken advantage of when the workman uses another means of transport than the railway for his return, and are not issued for distances exceeding 20 kilometres.

(c) For one daily return journey, it may be for six days, or even for seven days a week. These tickets constitute, of course, the great majority. According to the regulations, they are not issued for distances exceeding 100 kilometres, but I have reason to believe that there are sometimes exceptions to this rule. It often happens that men have some long way to walk on foot before catching their trains. Their railway journey sometimes takes them three hours and even more. We have therefore some startling exceptional instances of men leaving home at three or four o'clock in the morning, arriving at their work about seven, and, after twelve hours' work, reaching home between nine and ten o'clock, getting only five hours for sleep and family life. This is the case, for example, with some Flemish workmen coming every day from the neighbourhood of Grammont to the collieries of the centre of Hainaut or to Charleroi. Complaints have been very often expressed in Parliament with regard to the exaggerated length of journeys of this kind.

(4) In order to show the cheapness of the tickets, I have only to give some instances. The ticket for one single daily journey costs a little more than four-tenths to half a centime per kilometre for six journeys weekly. This is equivalent to above one-twelfth of a penny per mile.

The second kind of tickets (those for one weekly return journey) cost 17 centimes for any distance up to 5 kilometres, *i.e.*, the same price as the ordinary return tickets (3rd class). But as the distance to be travelled increases, the price per kilometre drops very rapidly, until for a journey of 370 kilometres the cost is reduced to one-quarter a centime per kilometre.

The tickets mostly used, those for one daily return journey, show also the surprising decrease from eight centimes per kilometre for one kilometre journey to one-quarter a centime per kilometre for a distance approaching 100 kilometres to and fro.

Now we have to inquire how the measure is appreciated and what are its main effects. It is beyond doubt that we have to do with a measure that meets real needs. Ask the workpeople and their advocates the Socialists, ask the employers and trades-

men, and they all say that the cheap workmen's tickets are an integral part of our economic life. Unfortunately, we do not know exactly what kind of workpeople use them, and in what proportion, or from what localities they come and go. Failing general statistics, I have tried to obtain particulars regarding what was under my observation. By a special inquiry I have succeeded in getting the figures relating to the town of Liège and its immediate suburbs.¹ If you are present in the main station on Monday mornings you will see an army of about ten thousand men leaving the trains with their double linen bags containing bread, some clothes, and their various tools. They have almost all the aspect of peasants; the majority are Walloons, but a large number are Flemings, and come from a distance. Some come from more than sixty miles away.

In this army the bulk of the people seem to belong to the class of unskilled labourers, as, for instance, the miners coming from Limbourg, from agricultural parts of Brabant and of Flanders, the navvies and other men employed in public or earth-works, also many unskilled workmen of the building trades. It would be quite wrong, however, to think they are exclusively unskilled. I counted many factory employees who must get high wages, and also women employed in dressmaking establishments. On the other hand, the factories and works in Liège also send many of their workmen to various parts of the country. If a factory engaged in the manufacture of machines or lighting apparatus has to supply a customer in another town with products which require some labour, they send their men from Liège. I found that from the 1st to the 15th of June, 1906, about 500 men (488) left Liège in this way every week. Amongst them were 215 factory employees and 180 belonging to building trades, especially painters. Of course, the town workmen going into the country are almost all skilled labourers.

¹ Between the 1st and 15th of June 1906, 5830 workmen using weekly tickets stopped in Liège and suburbs and returned home every day; 4095 others travelled once a week.

Distribution according to trade:

Miners.....	1,832
Factory men	2,871
Building trades.....	1,440
Navvies and unskilled.....	1,498
Dressmakers and milliners	360
Apprentices	242
Other trades	1,167
Railway workmen	520
Total	9,925

The same conditions are obtained in Brussels, Antwerp, and in the industrial region of Hainaut. Here the number of Flemings coming to the collieries and ironworks is so large that in certain districts the terms "travelling workman" and "Fleming" are conversely used. It is not rare to find works where the majority of workmen arrive every morning, or at least every Monday, by the train. Thus in Couillet ironworks, near Charleroi, out of 2,339 engaged in the blast furnaces and rolling-mills, 1,101 only, or 47 per cent., were inhabitants of the village and immediate surroundings.

I have been fortunate enough to obtain particulars regarding the workmen employed at our largest ironworks, the John Cockerill Company's works in Seraing, near Liège, which employs more than 9,000 people; 5,130, or 53 per cent. only, inhabit the village of Seraing. Of course, all the others do not use the railway to go to their work, and many live in the neighbourhood, but, nevertheless, it will be seen that the supply of labour for such large works depends now to a great extent on workmen's trains.

If I had to sum up the main economic effects of cheap workmen's tickets, I should say that the double purpose aimed at in 1869 is on the way to be fully reached. It would be difficult to find another country where employers can more easily get cheap labour, and at the same time where workmen (at least in some trades) have more opportunities for finding work.

As in other matters, cheapening of cost of transport cheapens the price of the commodity, but no other commodity has so much and so general an importance as labour. We have here an evident attempt to make Belgium one labour market. Of course, differences arising from training, from custom and habits, and from all the various psychical causes, exist, but we see distinctly already an homogeneity of the labour market.

This effect is specially felt among that class of workmen where competition is more general and intense—namely, the unskilled labourers. In the area of the labour market of Liège unskilled labourers form the great majority of travellers. The proportion must be even larger in workmen's trains carrying Flemish miners to Hainaut, and in the trains to Antwerp, where the surrounding country districts provide the bulk of stevedores, porters, and dockers.

I find a confirmation of this view in the fall which occurred in the tickets in 1901. Not only did the increased sales noticeable in previous years stop, but there was a positive fall of about 2 per

cent. in the number of journeys. In 1902 the level only rises to that of 1900. What was the cause of this? Simply that in 1901 a serious crisis spread over the country and touched especially iron and steel works, and, broadly speaking, all trades on a large scale. This is well shown by the annual statistics of mines, quarries, and metal works. From 1899 to 1900 these show a considerable increase, and a fall in 1901 and 1902 :—

1899	198,065	workmen
1900	204,201	„
1901	202,520	„
1902	203,659	„

If we take blast furnaces and iron and steel works only :—

1899	26,896	workmen
1900	25,295	„
1901	22,909	„
1902	24,276	„

That is to say that, in a time of prosperity especially, unskilled hands from the country are attracted by higher wages in the industrial districts. But they do not come to *live* in the towns; the cheap trains allow them to remain in their villages. When the crisis occurs they are, of course, the first to be dismissed, and they simply stay at home. Therefore, the poor country districts, like some parts of Flanders and the Campine, are the reservoirs of unskilled cheap labour for industry. The “reserve army,” to use the expression of Karl Marx, instead of coming and remaining around the works in town and industrial districts, continues to live in its country homes. One sees at once how competition acts on agricultural labour and industrial labour even in the case of districts far apart. I had two interesting instances of this recently. Questioning the manager of a large ironworks in Hainaut on the effects of the workmen’s trains, I received this startling answer :—“It is not a good thing for us; my own labour population is too mobile. When our demand for labour is great we have even to send special men into the Flemish districts to induce peasants to come here and to offer them good wages. If they lived here we should have them at a cheaper rate and always ready.” Another manager of Seraing confirmed the statement that at the present time when trade is good they permanently employ men to recruit cheap labour in the country. But this latter employer recognised what the first forgot—that

their reserve army would have never been so large had it not been for the cheap workmen's trains. He concluded that without them their works could not have grown to their present size.

If we pass now to the consideration of the effect of the cheap workmen's trains on rural depopulation we have to notice at once that, if they have not stopped the much-complained-of rush from country to town, they have certainly moderated it. Belgium, although a highly populated country, is not a country of large, congested towns. The birth-rate diminishes in towns and industrial centres, especially in the Walloonland districts, but grows at a fairly good rate in rural regions, especially in Flanders.

Our agricultural population does not diminish as in other countries; in 1880 it was 1,199,000; in 1895 (last census), 1,205,000. Perhaps since that date there is a little change, but it is to be doubted whether the rush to the towns has made rapid progress. Nevertheless, it is a fact common to Belgium and to other countries that agriculture wants labour.

At an agricultural Congress held at Namur in 1901 an agrarian member of Parliament, Mr. Delvaux, violently attacked the cheap workmen's tickets as being the cause of the dear labour in the country. He said these tickets acted as an attraction to the peasant to leave rural work, and he was not far from demanding the repeal of the reduction in railway fares. It was replied that, on the contrary, cheap railway tickets retain the people in the country, which otherwise they would have to abandon for town. The question of inducing the labourers to stay and work in the country is one of the wages which the agriculturalists can offer them. At any rate, the labourers are more likely to turn to agricultural work than if they had left the country altogether and gone to live in the town. Of course, as Mr. Vandervelde says, agricultural labourers conveyed to the town by cheap railways are temporarily lost to agriculture; it is often the first step to a complete separation, but it is not a definite divorce. It is difficult to say in what proportion these workmen have been obliged to live in towns or in the surroundings of the works, but no one denies that cheap tickets must have this important effect of allowing more people to live in the country.

First, owing to the cheaper rents, more workmen, who have to hire their houses, remain or go in the country. But many of the travelling workmen are even owners of their houses. There are amongst them two kinds of proprietors—first, old-established peasants, proprietors of a rural business, sons of little

farmers, for whom agriculture is no longer able to bring in enough ; secondly, those who have recently become proprietors, sons of agriculturalists, who are from the beginning industrial workmen, who will never be farmers, but who can live in the country and become owners of their homes owing to the great facilities which have been granted in Belgium during the last fifteen years.

It is well known that the Housing Act of 1889 accomplished marvels in Belgium. It permitted the great General Savings Bank (under the guarantee of the State) to devote a portion of its deposits to lending money to workmen who intended to build their houses. Thus the savings of small people return to small people to help them. The Caisse Générale does not lend directly to workmen ; it requires the medium of local "guarantee societies," which are responsible to the Caisse. At the same time a very ingenious and cheap combination of life insurance secures to the workman, his wife, or heirs, the ownership of the house in case of the death of the head of the family.

The law of 1889 was the beginning of a very remarkable growth of opinion. We can say that the political parties have endeavoured to promote the building of independent homes by workmen, with zeal and generosity. Now, 170 credit societies are recognised by the Caisse d'Epargne, which has lent through this medium more than 60 million francs. It is estimated that altogether about 160 million francs have been spent in fifteen years in Belgium for building workmen's houses, and that at least 60,000 families now enjoy the independent possession of their homes, owing to the operation of the Act of 1889.

Now I consider it is a well-established fact that the building of the new houses is carried on more largely in the country than in the towns. The reason of this is obvious—building is dear in towns ; it is cheap in the country. No doubt all this must attract the workman who intends to build to the country. On the other hand, the proportion of agricultural workmen who build their houses under the provisions of the Act of 1889 is very small in comparison with industrial workmen. These are, and must be, clients of the railways. Thus the cheap trains come to help the action of the housing movement in a manner that can only be approved of, since it checks the congestion of centres.

As a natural consequence of this situation, it is to be noticed that the price of land and of rents must have tended towards the same relative equalisation as has been observed in the case of wages. Rents in towns are not so high as they would have

been had it not been for the cheap trains, and in the country rents must have been maintained at a higher level than that which they would have reached otherwise.

I cannot help seeing in the cheap trains other things besides this considerable assistance to our splendid housing movement.

Go through our provinces, and you will be struck by the number of little, new, one-family houses. They are the tangible results of the law of 1889, and also of the consequent attention paid by everyone to this most important question. Now, we must confess that, broadly speaking, it is not without danger for a workman to build his own house. He is no more free to move from place to place to seek employment. Often the building of workmen's houses by employers is a means of binding them to him. Against this inconvenience may be placed the cheap railway tickets, which allow the owner-workman to be almost as free as the tenant-workman.

Let us now consider for a few moments some of the moral, political, and social aspects of the question.

I consider, also, the workmen's trains as a distinct means of enlarging the mental capacity and education of a large part of our remote rural population. Our people are, in some parts of Flanders and the Campine, very ignorant. Education is not compulsory in Belgium, and the proportion of illiterates is high. So, for a peasant who has never left his village, to go to work in a town is the opening of a new world. What are said to be the good effects of compulsory military service in France and Germany—namely, the mixing of the populations of distant districts, the knowledge of fellow-citizens of other races—is accomplished in a certain measure in Belgium by the workmen's trains. The Flemish peasants especially learn in this way to know the Walloon district. Railway travel is also an opportunity for reading, and the elements of reading and writing, learned in elementary schools, are so preserved from falling into neglect, which often occurs in the country population.

Last, not least, a political effect of some importance is to be noticed. Workmen's carriages are very good opportunities for the Socialists to spread their doctrines. In the midst of the smoke of pipes conversations spring up, jokes, songs, often repeated, are quickly learned, and all this leads, little by little, to political discussions and speeches. In fact, many Socialist leagues in isolated rural districts owe their origin to the daily or weekly journeys. It was a surprise to more than one candidate in so-called rural divisions to see the progress of the Socialist idea. It

was due to the change which had occurred in the occupation of these men: they lived in the country, but had become purely industrial workmen.

This action is so well known by the Socialist leaders that Mr. Vandervelde once greeted the Minister of Railways as the first Socialist propagandist of Belgium.

Although this effect is distinctly against the interests of the Government, there is no reason to think that the workmen's tickets could be suppressed or rendered more dear.

Socially and economically, we are face to face here with an elementary force—just that force which welds into a nation people who had hitherto been living separately and apart, a nation where personal reactions are more numerous and more intense. On the whole, it increases what may be called the “social density” in our commonwealth. We have every reason to believe that it is raising the standard of life of a great part of the people.

ERNEST MAHAIM