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Initial Results of Child-Care Aid Are Encouraging

On August 17, the minister of labor reported to the council of ministers on the initial and encouraging results of the new program of child-care aid, the establishment of which was decided by the Ninth Party Congress (cf. Nepszabadsag of November 29 and 4 December 1966) last December. Payments under the program began in May 1967 according to the rules laid down in government decree No. 3/1967 of January 29 and the subsequent executive decrees of the Ministers of Labor and Agriculture issued on February 26 (cf. Official Gazetteer No. 6 of 29 January and No. 11 of 26 February 1967).

The legislation provides that working mothers who give birth to a child after 1 January 1967 may apply for an unpaid leave of two-and-a-half years, during which they are entitled to a child-care allowance of 600 forint per month (500 forint for members of agricultural cooperatives -- see SR of 14 March 1967). Since expectant mothers receive a five-month maternity leave (which begins before the birth of the child), those who bore children after 1 January 1967 began applying for child-care aid by the end of April 1967, that is, at the time when they had to decide whether to return to work or remain at home for the next two-and-a-half years. According to the report of the ministry of labor, 2,200 mothers opted for the aid in April-May 1967, and the number increased to 6,000 by the end of June. By this time, the social insurance and security agency had already paid out some three million forint. The minister of labor also disclosed that in January and February 1967, more than 59 per cent of all eligible mothers chose to take the aid. But if one takes February alone, the share of mothers who decided to apply amounts to 78 per cent (cf. Magyar Nemzet of 9 April and 18 August 1967).

According to Hungarian communications media, expectant mothers greeted the introduction of the child-care allowance with

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great rejoicing and satisfaction. As a sign of nation-wide interest, the ministry of labor and the Trade Union Council has been receiving a large number of letters from prospective mothers asking for more detailed information on the pertinent provisions. Functionaries of the National Council of Women and the Trade Union Council forecast that the "great majority" of mothers will apply for the aid in the future (cf. Nepszava of 27 January, Nepszabadsag of 11 June and Magyar Nemzet of 18 August 1967). Nepszadsag of 28 February 1967 hailed the child-care allowance as the "greatest step" forward ever taken when compared with earlier child welfare measures and said it was apt to place Hungary among the leading nations of the world in this field.

The granting of child-care aid entails, of course, a sizable burden for the state budget. At the July 1967 session of Parliament, Premier Jeno Fock revealed that an expenditure of 400 million forint per year has been earmarked for this purpose. He added that the government would be quite happy if it could report the "overdrawing" of this budgetary allocation in the future (cf. Magyar Nemzet of 13 July 1967). In fact, the regime expects that the child-care allowance will stimulate a considerable improvement of the present appallingly low birth rate. In 1966, with 138,000 live births, it amounted to only 13.5 per thousand. The natural growth of the population was thus also alarmingly low, amounting to only 3.6 per thousand. In Budapest, there was actually a decrease of .5 per thousand. There were only 35 live births in the capital city for every one thousand women of child bearing age, while there were as many as 103 induced abortions! (Cf. a commentary of Radio Budapest broadcast on 30 April 1967.)

A few months after the introduction of the new child welfare program, the first promising signs of success were noted. The Catholic weekly Uj Ember enthusiastically reported on 13 August 1967 that one could see an increasing number of expectant mothers both in the provinces and in Budapest. According to the paper, the number of pregnant women in the first half of 1967 was ten per cent higher than in the corresponding period of 1966, while in Budapest the increase amounted to 12 per cent. In the first six months of 1967, there were by 4.2 per cent more new-born babies than a year ago.

Evidence gathered in the first months of the program shows that there are differing attitudes among the prospective applicants. Generally speaking, it appears that mothers with a monthly salary of up to 1,500 forint are much more inclined to accept the aid than those who are above that salary bracket. There is particular hesitation among mothers who are skilled workers and make around or above 2,000 forint. Female clerical workers and technicians also seem to show less interest in the aid. The reasons are obvious. A working mother who earns up to 1,500 forint a month has to put the child in a nursery or hire someone to take care of him (usually a grandmother). In addition, she has other expenses connected with her work (transportation fares, for example).

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When the 600 forint child-care allowance is added to them, the sum is actually more or less equal to her monthly salary. This is particularly the case if the mother has another very young child besides the baby. There are mothers who pay 300-400 forint to the grandmother who takes care of their child. Even the nursery costs about 100 forint a month, as do the transportation fares. Some mothers have calculated that by staying at home they can organize the purchase of vital items in a more efficient way and thus pay less for them. All in all, it is the opinion of a good many working mothers who are in the lower salary categories that the 600 forint monthly allowance actually amounts to much more (cf. Nepszava of 7 and 20 December 1966, 21 May 1967, and Nepszabadsag of 9 August 1967). In addition, the baby will also benefit. Mothers who usually begin their work in the early hours of the day will not have to take their children to the nursery, thereby disturbing their sleep and exposing them to the vagaries of the weather. The mother will remain with her child in the most critical period of its growth, a factor which will have a beneficial effect on its health and development (cf. Nepszava of 27 January 1967).

The introduction of child-care aid poses serious organizational and manpower problems for all occupational groups in which women play an important role. While, on a national scale, women account for only 39 per cent of the total number employed, in light industry they account for over 60 per cent, in the telecommunications industry for over 50 per cent, and in the instrument-making industry for over 30 per cent. The female payroll of the various service industries amounts to 55 per cent, while 60 per cent of the teachers and 20 per cent of the lawyers and judges are also women. The situation is particularly difficult in the case of such typical female occupations as nursing and other health work (cf. Figyelo of 8 March, Magyar Nemzet of April and Nepszava of May 1967).

The impact of the child-care allowance on the manpower situation is not as serious and disturbing as it might appear at a first glance. It has been calculated that in the past, working women remained at home, on the average, for more than one-third of their normal working time until their child reached two years of age. When their babies fell ill, the mothers had to take unpaid leave. This happened quite unsystematically and caused considerable disturbance in the places of employment. Managers found it hard to fill the gap when they were confronted with absences quite unexpectedly or at short notice. Under child-care aid, on the other hand, managers will have enough time to plan ahead, since they will know in due time how many of the expectant mothers will prefer to remain at home for the two-and-a-half year period.

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With respect to the replacement of mothers who opt for the child care allowance, there is one very favorable circumstance which is expected to help solve the problem - viz., the particularly large number of young people who left secondary school this year. As a result of the "baby boom" from 1953-1956 (cf. SR of 10 March 1967), the number of people of working age has increased by 33,000 this year in contrast to 22,000 in 1966. This has happened at a time when an increasing number of mothers are expected to remain at home. They will thus create jobs for a large number of young people whose prospective employment has been causing serious concern for the regime. Therefore, as was emphasized by the 8 March 1967 issue of the economic weekly Figyelo, the child-care allowance can be appreciated not only as a humanitarian measure aimed at easing the burdens of families with offspring, but also as a provision which promotes the interests of the whole national economy. As was pointed out in the 27 January 1967 issue of Nepszabadsag, child-care aid makes happy not only the mothers who are directly involved, but also young girls, for whom there will be more jobs. It is generally expected that there will be no problems in filling clerical or unskilled jobs. The real difficulties will arise when replacement has to be found for skilled workers and specialists (cf. Nepszava of 21 May 1967).

Since the regime seems to be determined to turn the child-care allowance into a demographic "success" (albeit not in the ill-considered way of the demographic "drive" of the Rakosi era!), good care is taken to iron out all kinds of distortions or "harmful" views which might place obstacles in the way of its proper functioning. It is being stressed that it is up to the mothers to decide whether they wish to avail themselves of child-care aid or continue to work. With the purpose of upholding this position of principle, Nepszava of 21 May 1967 criticized workshop foremen who tried to persuade all expectant mothers to apply for the child-care allowance, since that would make the organization of work simpler (which is per se a true argument, but inadmissible in the present case). The trade union daily also admonished the leaders of a few agricultural cooperatives in Somogy county that the granting of child-care aid should not be submitted to the assemblies for a vote because only the expectant mothers themselves had the right to decide to accept it or not. Finally, Nepszava reprimanded (without naming him) a Transdanubian district council secretary who stated, with regard to the expected number of women who would take leave under the program, that "we will think over the question of placing women in responsible jobs within the council apparatus in the future..." It is obvious that the regime is anxious to promptly counteract such views which might act as a brake on the favorable progress of child-care aid. Even without such unwelcome efforts to influence the will of expectant mothers, some of them seem to have doubts whether or not to take the aid. For example, there are women who fear that they might lose their jobs because those who are hired for temporary replacement might do better work. Nepszava of 21 May 1967 points out that such apprehension lacks foundation since the rules on child-care aid make it mandatory for the managers to take back mothers after the two-and-a-half year period has expired. Finally, there are mothers who fear that after an absence of so long a time, they might

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not be able to keep abreast of the requirements of the New Economic Model (cf. Nepszabadsag of 9 August 1967). This is certainly a telling example of the extent to which the forthcoming reform of the economic management system runs "threadlike" through the thinking of Hungarians.

Official Attitude Toward Rumanian National Holiday

Rumania's national holiday - the 23rd anniversary of Rumania's liberation - was marked in Hungary by the customary telegrams of congratulations from First Secretary Kadar, Presidential Council Chairman Losonczi and Premier Fock to their Rumanian colleagues, and festive commentaries in the Budapest daily papers. There was one significant omission, however. Contrary to the practice of previous years, Radio Budapest failed to broadcast a message from the Rumanian ambassador in Budapest to the Hungarian people.

While the reason for this departure from tradition is not known, one might conjecture that it was prompted by a certain cooling-off of Hungaro-Rumanian interparty and state relations due to the increasing efforts of the Rumanian Party and government to follow a "separate" course both in world politics and in the international workers' movement. This speculation seems to be substantiated by the text of the Hungarian leaders' congratulatory telegram, which, compared with last year's message, is both shorter and couched in more reserved terms. In 1966, the Hungarian leaders sent their "cordial" good wishes and expressed their "sincere" rejoicing over the successes which have been achieved by the Rumanian people "under the leadership of the Rumanian Communist Party." This year's congratulatory telegram omits the adjective "cordial" and "sincere" and, while hailing the achievements of the Rumanian people, makes no reference to the guiding role of the Rumanian Party.

There are also interesting differences in the concluding paragraph of the telegrams of 1966 and 1967. Last year, the Hungarian leaders expressed their conviction that the further development of "friendly" relations and of "mutually useful cooperation" would contribute to the "strengthening of the unity of the socialist countries and the international Communist movement," as well as to the safeguarding of peace. This year, Kadar, Losonczi and Fock expressed their conviction that the further growth and development of more efficient contacts between Hungary and Rumania would contribute to the strengthening of the world's progressive forces and of the cause of peace (cf. Nepszabadsag of 23 August 1966 and of 1967). One seems to be confronted here with much more than an exercise of style and the formulation of the same themes in different words. The formal changes which can be ascertained by comparing the texts of the two telegrams are actually only surface phenomena and indicative of deeper, more substantial changes in Hungaro-Rumanian relations, changes which seem to be due to Rumania's insistence on following her "own" road.

A study of the festive commentaries in the Budapest daily press clearly shows the Hungarian regime's endeavors to place the

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Rumanian regime's achievements in the construction of socialism in the "proper" perspective. While it is admitted that Rumanian Communists played an important role, by fighting on the side of the Red Army, in the liberation of their native country, this year's commentaries place a heavier emphasis than those of 1966 on the idea that whatever Rumania has succeeded in attaining during the past 23 years, one should not ascribe this to Rumanian efforts alone. Already on 23 August 1966, Nepszabadsag pointed out that Rumania was carrying out its work of construction "sheltered by the powerful protective shield of the socialist camp," while Magyar Nemzet of the same date mentioned that in addition to national efforts, "the deepening of the socialist international division of labor had also played a considerable part" in the achievements of Rumanian industry. Nepszabadsag of 23 August 1967 recalled that Rumania, once one of the most backward nations in the Balkans, had risen to the status of a country with a "developed" industry and socialist agriculture. One of the "pledges" of success, Nepszabadsag stressed, was that Rumania, in the spirit of proletarian internationalism, "had always had a share in the 'active solidarity' of the socialist camp. Nepszabadsag then went a step further and reminded Rumania that the "key to future successes" also lay in their belonging to the "fraternal peoples" with whom they came to develop a "profound cooperation." This "belonging" had to be safeguarded and strengthened. Magyar Nemzet of 23 August 1967 was even more outspoken on this point. It stated that the liberation of Rumania and its progress in the building of socialism were "inseparable" from the efforts of progressive mankind and the struggle of the Soviet Union, the "pioneer" of socialism. The daily paper of the People's Front mentioned that Rumania's leaders spoke "with justified pride" of successes and pointed out that every people can best contribute to the welfare of the great family of the socialist community by performing its work "in its own, well-conceived interest." But, Magyar Nemzet argued, the national holiday should remind Rumanians of the "indispensability" of internationalism. In August 1944, the uprising of the Rumanian people was able to succeed only because it was an "organic part" of the world-wide anti-fascist struggle, in the front line of which there stood the Soviet Union. Rumania's liberation created a community with the Soviet and other peoples fighting for progress. The message of 23 August 1944, when applied to present circumstances, is that one should contribute to the cause of human progress by creating a harmony between national goals and those comprehensive ones of the larger community. Magyar Nemzet concluded pointedly by wishing the Rumanian people much success in all endeavors aimed at the creation of such "harmony."