The German works council, an important factor in the maintenance of the industrial workers' morale, has become even more vital to Germany's economic stability because of the current abnormal conditions. It is the conscientious, effective works council that helps to sell the worker on the role he must play in the overall industrial recovery program, and to smooth out innumerable fretting obstacles which impair efficiency and production.

A works council is a local and autonomous body elected annually by the workers within a plant or business. The workers may be union members or not. They may belong to different trade unions. Although the council cooperates with the trade unions and even may be the trade union local on the job, it deals with many immediate problems which may not concern the union.

German works councils have a tradition of independence and democracy, and the trade unions had much to do with the development of these qualities. The councils are the bulwark against undemocratic efforts to build up authoritarian controls within the unions.

The Salamander shoe factory, situated on the outskirts of Stuttgart, is an example of an industry aided by a vigorous, active works council.

Salamander is a widely-known maker of quality shoes where in normal times a labor force of 7,000 produced an average of 25,000 pairs of shoes a day. The Salamander plant escaped with only slight damage during the war. However, the present labor force of about 4,000 workers averages only 10,500 pairs of shoes a day—about 40 percent of prewar efficiency—because of shortage of raw materials, lack of trained labor and inability to obtain repairs and equipment replacements.

By Nels Anderson
Expert Consultant, Information Control Division and Manpower Division

The plant management and the setup of the works council are about the same as those which functioned before the occupation, and there is a well-established record of good relations between them.

A management official, who had studied his business in American shoe factories, praised the workers, more than half of whom had been with Salamander 20 years or longer.

“They are good workers, but the troubles of the times are to much,” he added. “Management cannot do much about these difficulties. We can make and sell shoes, but we cannot make worker morale. We must depend on the works council for morale. Management works with the council as it can, and together we are able to make some of the difficulties easier.”

This official gave an example of such cooperation, which was proposed by the council to help women workers who live in distant towns. In three localities, rooms were equipped with shoe stitching machines. Each day the cut parts were delivered to these rooms and the sewed sections brought back.

From the point of view of efficiency, this arrangement was termed uneconomical, but it was good for morale. It has reduced absenteeism among many of the women workers.

Salamander workers belong to an old shoe and leather products workers trade union, which in 1912 won the right to have an elected committee to take the grievances of the workers to management.

There were many such committees in German industry. All of these became known as works councils under a German law of 1920—which required that councils be established in all enterprises having 20 or more workers. In 1930 there were more than 150,000 works councils in Germany.

From 1933 to the end of the war, all works councils in Germany were subordinated to the rule of the National Socialist Labor Front. Many ceased to exist, but the Salamander council did not die. Most of its members remained on the job and were unofficially recognized as the advisers of the workers. “We operated under the table,” explained one councillor who had been a member before 1933.

When the war ended in 1945, the council came immediately into the
open. It had been already operating for a year when Allied Control Council Law Number 22 was enacted in April 1946, establishing the democratic conditions under which the councils would operate. These conditions were in accord with the traditions of German works councils.

In normal times the functions of a works council were carried out according to the rules of custom in the enterprise, or by agreement between the council and the employer. Many of the functions were peculiar to the needs of the enterprise; others were related to matters common to all plants in the industry. The problems of a general nature were then as now resolved by agreements between the unions and the employer groups.

The principal general functions concern problems of wages and hours of work; sick benefits or retirement; hiring, training, promotion or discharge, and certain issues regarding working conditions. In these general interests the unions deal with the employers on a wider area, but the council negotiates with the employer on local problems within the conditions of the union contract.

Within the plant it has considerable latitude to put the rules into effect. Each case concerning the hiring, promotion, transfer, or discharge of a worker involves some special consideration. Each case of a worker receiving sick benefits, or of a worker retiring, must be handled on its own merits.

But the union agreements rarely cover all the problems that must be faced by the works council. Each plant is different and for that reason each council must develop its own program of operations.

This is the normal program, but few of these functions can be carried on today.

In normal times the serving of a midday meal to the Salamander workers was a simple matter, but this has become a difficult project because of food scarcities. Nevertheless, this meal is important for morale maintenance, and is continued.

The plant’s large dining hall, which is also a concert hall, theater, and general meeting place, is large enough to serve 3,000 workers in a half hour.

All members of the council must be on hand to collect the ration coupons and the 30 pfennigs for each meal. This is about half the cost. The remainder is carried by the company.

Getting the food cooked and served is now the easiest part of the job. The real task is obtaining it. The chairman in charge of this duty is happy if he can have two days’ supply on hand.

Recently the council began serving each worker with a bowl of soup at midforenoon. This has paid off in worker efficiency, but has put an additional burden on the council.

Once a week the council serves a Schwabian one-pot meal known as Gaisburger March, a thick vegetable soup with noodles. The council takes pride in the meal, for it is a traditionally favored dish. It also provides the traditional mug of most, another Schwabian favorite. Most is a light fermented drink, of pear and apple juice, and pinkish in color.

Every industrial employer knows the cost of a large labor turnover and the burden of training new workers. In some industries in Stuttgart the turnover is about 5 percent a month. Salamander’s worker loss during December 1947, was 2.36 percent. The council members called attention to the fact that most of those leaving were refugee workers who had returned to their home countries, or to migrate overseas. Very few of the local employees quit.

One thousand, two hundred fifty of the present force of Salamander’s workers have been with the company 25 years or more, and 42 have been with the firm more than 40 years. About 600 former employees are still prisoners of war.

Among the councils’ duties are guarding the health and safety of the workers. The council is responsible for seeing that every worker is instructed in safety rules. In every department there is a worker who is responsible for the carrying out of these rules.

At a central point in the plant there is a well-equipped clinic with a nurse in charge. A second nurse visits the sick in their homes. The service of a doctor is available on call.

The nurse in the clinic also treats persons who are not employees. This practice started during the war, when the clinic was the first-aid station for Kornwestheim, the suburb where the plant is located.

The company has not objected to having its private clinic serve as a community facility, because the services cost little, and they result in community good will.

When the workers at Salamander are in financial difficulties because of illness or other reasons, they usually turn to the works council for help. Service funds are set aside by the company for this purpose. The works council is responsible for the distribution of these funds and for determining whether the
A worker at the Salamander plant operates a machine which presses glued soles to shoes. (Signal Corps)

Along with its other activities, the council also concerns itself with leisure time activities of Salamander employees. Social and cultural groups are being organized, and the council will help them in various ways.

Under Allied Control Council Law Number 22, works councils are free to negotiate with employers regarding the handling of problems within the enterprise. They may negotiate also regarding the extent and nature of council participation in dealing with the problems of the industry, and regarding the records that will be made available to the works council for its guidance.

The right and the extent of co-determination may be a subject of dispute between works councils and management in some enterprises, but this is not true at Salamander. Here the council has access to all essential company records, even those that relate to the unit cost of production. The chairman of the works council attends all meetings of management as well as the annual meetings of the board of directors.

This relationship of confidence has developed gradually through mutual working out of problems. Today it is to the interest of the company that the council should be informed about the problems of management.

There are 13 members of the Salamander works council. Each councillor is paid the wages he would receive if still employed at his regular job, although his hours are much longer than a worker’s.

Elections for councillors are held once each year, according to the provisions of Law Number 22. Officials of the firm have no part in these elections. Most of the councillors at Salamander have been reelected again and again.

The council, in representing the interests of the workers, has found a common ground with the company whereon both interests are served.

This mutual interest, for example, found expression in the decision of the council to support the company in asking the workers to forego their customary two-week holiday during the last Christmas season. The Salamander force stayed on the job, except for Christmas day and New Years day, and that meant the additional production of at least 100,000 pairs of badly-needed shoes.

One of the original functions of the works council was to take worker’s grievances to the management for adjustment. This function is still carried on. But there are many grievances that do not concern management; differences between workers, or between workers and supervisors. These have come to be among the daily tasks of the councillors.

Rhine Restrictions Removed

All major restrictions to Rhine River traffic have been removed except for the Freeman Bridge at Duesseldorf, which collapsed on Dec. 30, 1947, after the collision of a barge with the pontoon supporting the navigable span.