

'A handful of trade unionists facing Europe' from Esprit (November 1948)

Caption: In November 1948, in the French periodical Esprit, Jean Mathé, general representative of the French trade union Forces Ouvrières Syndicales, recalls the demands made by the trade union movement at the Congress of Europe, held in The Hague in May 1948.

Source: Esprit. dir. de publ. Mounier, Emmanuel. Novembre 1948, n° 150; 17e année. Fontenay-aux-Roses: Imprimerie Bellemand. "Quelques syndicalistes devant l'Europe", auteur:Mathé, Jean , p. 631-633.

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A handful of trade unionists facing Europe

We are trade unionists. Irrespective of natural and arbitrary borders, we want workers in all countries – these men so closely united by the similarities between their lives and destinies – to feel solidarity for each other and to reach agreement so that, together, they may ensure everyone’s well-being, FREEDOM and PEACE.

The organisation in The Hague of a ‘Congress of Europe’ could meet with nothing but approval from our members. Until the day when ‘The Universal Republic’ is proclaimed, the workers will enthusiastically welcome the ‘United States of Europe’.

The fact that eminent persons, who do not have a reputation for being very good friends of the working class, have played such an important role in the organisation of the Hague Congress could not prevent us from welcoming this first European event with hope and understanding: Europe cannot be built without friends.

That a large number of French trade unionists would attend the Congress of Europe seemed guaranteed from the outset. It had been announced in advance that the most experienced and representative activists in the French trade union, CGTFO, would attend.

This natural momentum has been broken: the reservations expressed by British labour organisations such as the Labour Party and TUC led to the official non-attendance of independent French trade-union activists.

However, some trade unionists did not want to give up the journey to The Hague. They wished to see, and where possible, participate in this initial attempt at European integration. They went there in an individual capacity, without having sought a mandate from their organisation, as activists, whose training abounds with magic incantations and with slogans such as ‘United Europe’.

At the Congress, we gravitated quite naturally towards the Economic and Social Committee, where we tried to ensure that workers would participate in the organisation and management of Europe’s economy.

It must be said that, on the whole, the organisers of the Congress itself were not overly sympathetic towards trade unionism and that we had a few difficulties making ourselves understood and heard. We had to be somewhat persistent and ruthless in defending our ideas, as our continued participation in the proceedings at the Congress depended on the acceptance thereof, at least in principle.

‘Europe cannot be built without the workers,’ we declared from the podium in The Hague. ‘You will not have the support of the workers if they are not closely involved in the organisation and management of Europe’s economy.’

The Congress understood. The Socialists, naturally, and the federalists, less obviously, gave us their support.

We did not preach ‘federalism’ in The Hague, as it was not our intention, nor our job, to do so. We spontaneously joined the federalists, probably because of natural affinity: French trade unionism is in all likelihood the oldest of the federalist organisations. Trade unionists can only hope that Europe will be politically and economically organised on federal principles. Federal organisation is responsible for the scale, the wealth and the effectiveness of French trade unionism. It is this organisation that has saved it from ‘politicisation’ for a long time and that may enable trade unionism progressively to regain its independence after the trials and tribulations of the past few years.

Trade union headquarters are all-powerful, the individual trade union member has less and less freedom, that is to say, he finds himself in the same situation as the individual citizen before the State.

Federalism is therefore not making progress. It has fallen back to the state it was in before! But trade union members are finding it increasingly difficult to cope with the centralisation of trade union authority, and the average citizen is suffering more and more totalitarianism. This is undoubtedly federalism’s opportunity: it

is able to offer workers, citizens and Europeans freedom in an effective democracy. We can only hope that we may rapidly create all the conditions required for its success.