

'Anxiety among the coal miners' from La Libre Belgique (9 December 1951)

Caption: On 9 December 1951, the Belgian newspaper La Libre Belgique describes the fears among Belgian coal miners regarding the institutions that are to make up the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC).

Source: La Libre Belgique. 09.12.1951, n° 343; 68e année. Bruxelles: Société d'Édition des Journaux du Patriote. "L'inquiétude des milieux charbonniers", p. 8.

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The Schuman Plan

Anxiety among the coal miners

Will political considerations override the technical arguments?

The Joint Commission set up by the Chamber and the Senate has now spent a month considering the Schuman Plan and preparing for the public discussion thereof. The Federation of Belgian Coal Mining Associations recently published a leaflet in which it set out its position on the coal and steel pool envisaged in the Plan. Their position is as pessimistic as that expressed by the Chief Engineering Director of Mines, Mr Martens, in a recent bulletin published by the Mines Administration.

The Federation of Belgian Coal Mining Associations wishes to see certain amendments made to the project because of the particularly difficult situation in which our mining industry finds itself. If these changes are not made, the Federation warns that ‘the Schuman Plan, in the form given to it by the Treaty of 18 April, would have the effect of irremediably condemning to oblivion a substantial part of our coal industry, with all the economic, social and political consequences that such an eventuality entails.’

The Federation continues:

- ‘(1) A large number of Belgian miners would become unemployed;
- (2) Coal supplies to the entire Belgian economy would be compromised, particularly during a boom period;
- (3) Our trade balance would be endangered;
- (4) Public finances would be burdened by the subsidies payable to those mines that were to be kept going, by the allowances payable to unemployed miners and also by the deficit in the Mineworkers’ National Pension Fund.

Given the enormous risks that Belgium would be forced to run if the Treaty were to be applied, the guarantees that it envisages are totally insufficient. The intervention by the Council of Ministers will actually work against Belgium; as for the Court of Justice, the way in which its judges are appointed does not ensure its impartiality, and its action will be tardy and ineffective most of the time, largely because an appeal brought before it does not allow for a stay of action.

As for the role of the High Authority, it is clearly not equal to the task assigned to it by the Treaty; although the High Authority is not equipped with the means required to pursue a general economic policy likely to ensure the smooth running of a single market, it has been given a number of powers which enable it to meddle in the individual lives of the companies, something which, in the last analysis, will be highly prejudicial to the economy as a whole.

The Treaty’s numerous shortcomings take on all the more importance when we recall that the agreement is to run for 50 years and offers the signatory states no escape route, even if they find themselves experiencing fundamental and persistent troubles in their economies.

What is more, the Schuman Plan would not provide an answer to Europe’s political problem since it would simply result in establishing the political hegemony of the country which is the strongest economically instead of bringing about European unity which is based on the equality of all the participating countries.

The practical conclusion to be drawn from all this is that, if it is to become acceptable, the Schuman Plan needs to undergo drastic modification and, therefore, to be sent back to the drawing board.

Regarding wages, the objective of approximation, which was accepted at the beginning, should be restored, and the High Authority must be given the means required to attain it.

The Treaty should provide for practical methods for avoiding the appearance of fundamental and persistent troubles in the Member States.

If, nonetheless, such troubles were to occur, the possibility should be open, every five years, for each member state to withdraw from the group.

It is only on these conditions that the Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community could become acceptable to Belgium.'

The study carried out by the Federation of Belgian Coal Mining Associations will further reinforce the many misgivings that are clearly manifest in political circles. The point at issue is the attempt to impose the Treaty as a whole, to be accepted or rejected in its entirety without any amendment. Some of the Schuman Plan's protagonists are seeking to attain high political goals. They are trying to bring about the European Union in accordance with the wishes of the United States. This is why they despise, or affect to disdain, the technical aspects of the matter.

Late last week, in France, the Foreign Affairs Committee recommended ratification of the coal and steel pool by the National Assembly by 26 votes to 18. It is thought that Konrad Adenauer's Government will secure a majority in favour of the Plan, despite Socialist opposition. In our political circles, too, it is generally thought that the Government will ultimately secure a majority in favour of the Schuman Plan.

However, is it reasonable to subordinate the technical to the political aspect in this way? It was in just such a spirit that the Bretton Woods monetary agreements were approved. We have seen what that led to in practice: no useful result at all; but, in its stead, constraints that have slowed down the balance and reorganisation of trade.

It will, no doubt, be said that the opinion expressed by the coal industry should be received with some scepticism, given that it defends the interests of the industry itself. No doubt. It cannot be denied that a problem does exist as regards coal in Belgium. Our prices are much higher than those in other countries. This problem will have to be solved; with or without the Schuman Plan.

Nevertheless, the Plan entails a degree of bureaucratic control that inspires well-founded suspicion. The High Authority will have far too many powers, and no good can come of that. There may well be economic repercussions on a grand scale.

Let us hope once more that, before they become involved in this affair, our MPs will consider very seriously all the technical consequences that might arise from it.

It would be particularly unacceptable if the amendments that we judge indispensable were not accepted for fear of delays or procedural difficulties. In such a situation, Parliament has no right to accept what would clearly be Hobson's choice.