

'Mobilisation of miners and steelworkers against the Schuman Plan' from Le Mouvement Syndical Mondial (20 October 1950)


Caption: Fiercely opposed to the Schuman Plan, the Communist World Union Movement strongly criticises US control over the European economy and predicts a deterioration in the financial situation of the working class.

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Mobilisation of miners and steelworkers against the Schuman Plan

Mines abandoned, factories closed, thousands thrown out of work, others thrown out of their homes, steelworkers with years of experience moved to construction or farming, everywhere pressure on those still in jobs to work faster, harder and longer for less pay, and fear of mass unemployment spreading like a cancer through Western Europe.

All this is happening now. The Schuman Plan — designed to concentrate Western Europe's vital industries in the hands of a few American and German monopolists, to create unemployment and reserves of cheap labour, to hit the workers' standard of living and to work for war, not peace — is already being put into practice.

This plan for war and poverty has not yet been signed by the governments receiving aid from the Marshall Plan, but they are already carrying out the orders that they have received from the United States and are cranking up the giant coal and steel monopoly machine known as the Schuman Plan.

The International Conference held in Paris on 22–24 September by the Miners' and Steelworkers' Trade Union Internationals (WFTU trade secretariats) provided plentiful proof of this.

The Conference was attended by 63 delegates, including leaders of the trade unions involved in the class struggle in Italy and France, delegates from mechanical engineering firms in the United Kingdom, elected by their colleagues to represent them, grass-roots militants from miners' and steelworkers' trade unions in Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and the Saar, and others who have been banned from their trade unions by reactionary leaders because they had dared to launch a debate among workers about the true nature of the Schuman Plan. Representatives of shopkeepers and other groups of the working population also attended the Conference, accompanying the French delegation.

Delegates from West Germany and the German Democratic Republic had been refused an entry visa for France, but they had sent messages that they were mobilising German workers to fight alongside workers from other countries against the monopolists, against the militarisation of the Ruhr and against the transformation of Western Europe into a massive arsenal for war against the Soviet Union and the People's Democracies.

The fight against the Schuman Plan has already started. The Conference proved that, where enough is done to explain the situation to workers and other sections of the population in a threatened region, they can be engaged in united action. It also proved that, by putting up a united front, **they can defeat the monopolists and rescue their mines, their factories and their jobs. They can save the shops and small firms that rely on workers' wages for their prosperity. And when enough regions answer the call to action, they can save their country's economy and its national independence.**

Workers running factories

Take, for instance, what the Italian delegates had to say about the major battle fought — and won — in Genoa. Their industry is under threat, as it is throughout Italy, from the ruling classes and their policy of speculation and developing money-spinning arms production, which is closing factories and transforming Italy into an American colony.

There are two factories in Genoa, Bagnara-Sestri and Ilva Bolsameto, where, with local people's support, workers have successfully refused to submit to the unemployment and poverty plan.

The Bagnara-Sestri factory is a private company employing 800 workers. It was closed by the owner on 30 June in an attempt to break the workers' resistance to the laying off of 40 % of the staff and a reduction in productivity bonuses. The owner had refused to consider the workers' proposals for converting production with a view to manufacturing new products.

The workers occupied the factory. They explained to local shopkeepers that closing the factory would hurt them, and the shopkeepers, businessmen and farmers lent them enough money to allow them to continue production. The workers manufactured buses which were bought by the democratic local council. They built and stored railway carriages which the Government had ordered earlier and for which it is now refusing to pay.

The Government has tried to break their unity by securing a bankruptcy order against them, but the workers have firmly resisted. As Mr Lantero, Secretary-General of the steelworkers' trade unions in Genoa Province, stated: 'If the Government tries to occupy the factories by force, it will find itself face to face with 25 000 workers and members of the public ready to fight for their rights.'

At the Ilva-Bolsameto factory, a semi-nationalised company, 1 063 workers have also continued production without managers for almost three months. The entire population of the region has helped them by collecting scrap metal and bringing it to them for the new open-hearth furnace which the workers have built.

Mr G. Roveda, President of the International Steelworkers Secretariat, told the Conference: 'I have visited these factories and seen the pride with which old workers are keeping their factories going and modernising them and developing new techniques. They asked me to tell you that they will continue to fight alongside workers from every country to increase production for peaceful purposes, not for war.'

The fight for full employment

One general approach has emerged from the overall discussion: the fight against the Schuman Plan and against preparations for war cannot be separated from the fight for full employment and an adequate standard of living.

In the United Kingdom, workers do not yet see the Schuman Plan as a major problem, but Dave Michaelson, Secretary of the National Council of delegates from mechanical engineering firms, described how British workers can be shown that American pressure is trying to force their government to change its position and accept the Schuman Plan and that the creation of a gigantic monopoly on the Continent, with which British industry could not hope to compete, would inevitably have an impact on the standard of living of British workers. Once the workers have clearly grasped the problem, it will be possible to mobilise them *en masse* against the application of the Schuman Plan in the United Kingdom.

Progress has already been made. A conference held in London on 16 July was attended by delegates from firms representing 55 000 workers who denounced the Schuman Plan and called on all workers in the steelworking industries to fight it.

In France, too, at the National Conference on the defence of the coal and steel industries in September, 500 delegates unanimously adopted a resolution calling for the creation of regional and local defence committees representing all industries and all sections of the population.

Similar conferences have been held in Italy and the German Democratic Republic. A joint action agreement was concluded in June by representatives of the CGT in France and the Federation of Free German Trade Unions (FDGB).

Unity can be forged

The International Conference provided many other practical examples of how workers are going on the counter-attack against the betrayal of their interests.

Since February, at the large MAP works near Paris, which had won new markets for French tractors, workers have been fighting attempts to shut down production, at a time when farmers are short of agricultural equipment and an American tractor factory is being built at Saint-Dizier.

Still in France, in the mining areas, 79 coal mines have been closed and more than 72 293 miners laid off. Production is being wound down at Saint-Eloi-les-Mines in the Allier region of central France, with miners

working nine days a fortnight. At Sainte-Florine, workers are being transferred to another mining district in preparation for the closure of all the pits in the Haute-Loire.

Productivity bonuses are being reduced by 30 %; bonuses provided for in the miners' regulations are not being paid; many miners are being downgraded without reason; victims of industrial accidents with a 15 % or 20 % incapacity for work are being laid off, as are miners aged under 50 who are, therefore, not entitled to a pension, even though they have worked in mining for 30 years.

Yet Henri Gaillard, Secretary of the Force Ouvrière (break-away trade union) branch at Chocques in the district of Auchel, who was one of the delegates, proved that a united front can be forged to save the mines.

Henri Gaillard told how members of the three trade unions and non-organised workers formed an action committee to defend their industry and how they obtained the support of the local people and a number of local councils and MPs from various political parties.

He ended his speech with these passionate words: 'Forward, comrades of all trade unions and of all political, ideological and religious persuasions, forward to a united front, victory, liberty and peace.'

Other delegates described what has been done to prevent production of military equipment in factories. Numerous plants have been shut down either for conversion or in order to re-employ workers on lower wages, yet work in the rolling mills is slowing down because there is not enough steel. And all the while factories in which American capital has been invested have already been working for war, directly or indirectly, and taking on new workers who are working overtime — in certain plants they are working more than 60 hours a week.

The great betrayal

In Luxembourg, where the development of the steel industry is vital for the whole of the national economy, the Schuman Plan is a matter of life and death. It is supported by the government and the trade union leaders won over by the Marshall Plan. 'They are ready,' said one delegate, 'to sacrifice our independence in the interest of capitalist exploitation ...'

Workers are being urged to increase productivity, and prices are going up, while the total wages paid by the steel industry have fallen and unemployment has started to grow. At the same time, the workers will be stiffening their resistance to these attacks on their standard of living.

In Belgium's rolling mills — whose main customers used to be France and West Germany — workers are unemployed for three days a week. There are lay-offs in almost every coal mine, while miners are being brought in from the Netherlands and Italy to work for lower wages. In Belgium, too, right-wing union leaders have given their full support to the Schuman Plan, but they are afraid of how grass-roots workers, and even their own local or regional union officials, will react once they know the details of the Plan, what it means and what effect it will have.

One Belgian steelworker described how, at a meeting of the General Council of the Brabant Province Trade Union Federation in Brussels, one delegate underlined the dangers of the Schuman Plan and asked the leaders to explain why they supported it.

The Secretary said that he knew very little about the Schuman Plan and handed over to Mr Correman, the President. He claimed that he knew even less than the Secretary. The delegates are still waiting for their leaders to tell them why they have taken this decision on their behalf, without consulting them.

One delegate from the Saar exclaimed: 'They are trying to use us to bring down miners' wages in France.' In the Saar, while production is increasing and prices are going up at an unprecedented rate, wages are falling, freedom of speech is being suppressed, meetings of progressive organisations are banned, and workers' clubs are being searched.

Steelworkers from the Saar working in factories in the west of France have been dismissed without notice and escorted by the French police to the Saar, where they have been given new jobs — on lower wages — in construction or farming.

Right-wing union leaders are expelling militants who fight most actively against war and poverty, the French High Commissioner frequently deports them. The leaders of the union to which one delegate belonged told him not to discuss the Schuman Plan at any meeting because ‘all union members are bound by the resolution that we have adopted.’

But although not all Saar workers have yet grasped the true nature of the Schuman Plan, they certainly understand what ‘cutting production costs’ means, and they are taking action to defend their standard of living.

In the Netherlands, unemployment is not yet a major problem in the coal and steel industries, but the Schuman Plan is still brutally exploiting the workers. The Royal Blast Furnaces and Steelworks, employing 7 000 workers, announced net profits of 14 million guilders last year, or 44 % of its declared capital, while the total paid to workers was 16 million guilders. In other words, Mr Van Tilburg, Secretary of the Committee of delegates from the Velsen blast furnace companies, told the Conference: ‘a handful of parasites have made off with more than 46 % of the profits generated by the work of 7 000 men.’

In the blast furnaces, Mr Van Tilburg said, the Steelworkers’ Federation affiliated to the WFTU’s International Steelworkers’ Secretariat was stronger than the three other unions which had a reactionary leadership, and it was growing even stronger by organising united action against the Schuman Plan.

In the mines, Catholics risk excommunication if they join a union other than one of the Catholic ones, whose leaders openly support collaboration between capital and labour. However, progressive forces are uniting at grass-roots level and preparing to publish a guide to help miners in their struggle against reactionary union leaders and for a policy based on the WFTU’s manifesto.

For progress and peace

In his address to the closing session, Louis Saillant, Secretary-General of the WFTU, stressed the role of the Conference in intensifying the struggle for international unity between trade unions, for social progress and for peace.

Louis Saillant showed that the so-called Schuman Plan was ‘a clear and absolute violation of the Potsdam agreements.’ The policy of friendship with German-American capitalists pursued systematically over the last five years, contrary to those agreements, was ‘inevitably rebuilding the political and economic powers of the forces which brought Hitler to power’ and ‘reconstituting the military might of a not yet denazified West Germany.’

Those who are engaged in preparing for war ‘are applying the policy of Nazism. The origins of the current preparations for pooling our coal and steel supplies provide the most compelling evidence of this.’

Louis Saillant showed that ‘the spiritual, political and theoretical father of the coal and steel pool is Mr Hermann Roechling, who was, before and during the war, President of the German Imperial Union of iron and steel production.’

He declared: ‘We can therefore safely conclude that the Schuman Plan is a plan to have Europe’s economy run along Nazi and fascist lines.’

On the other hand, the creation of the German Democratic Republic had been a victory for peace. How did the WFTU see the new situation? ‘The trade unions in East Germany have been able to be more involved in a policy of peace and to extend the military defeat of Hitler across the board on an economic and social level.’

In conclusion, he said: ‘You have helped us to see the need to strengthen our common front with the FDGB ...

with workers in West Germany who have been taken in by unworthy bosses ... with the Central Council of Soviet Trade Unions, a vital force and an essential component of the World Federation of Trade Unions' authority and security through the strong support which its trade unions have given to the development of our international trade union movement and through the broad understanding which the Soviet unions have of their duty of international solidarity and friendship with workers in all countries.

You have helped us to strengthen our common front with all those who fight for peace, because, in the times that we are living through, it is becoming increasingly clear that, if peace is to be defended, we must combine the efforts of all those around the world who want peace, because, without them, they cannot pursue their policy of developing the democratic rights of nations and achieving the social demands of the working classes.'