

'ECSC further reduces Belgian coal production' from L'Unità (30 May 1959)

Caption: On 30 May 1959, the Italian Communist daily newspaper L'Unità criticises the closure of many coal mines in Belgium, and the subsequent redundancies, before calling for a reorganisation of the coal sector by means of a policy of nationalisation.

Source: L'Unità. Organo del partito comunista italiano. dir. de publ. Lajolo, Davide. 30.05.1959, n° 128; anno XXXVI. Milano. "La CECA ha ridotto ancora la produzione di carbone belga", auteur:Gobbi, Dante , p. 7.

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While workers are fighting job losses

ECSC further reduces Belgian coal production

By our editorial staff

Brussels, 29 May

While hundreds of thousands of Belgian and foreign workers have been demonstrating today, as announced, in factories and towns against company closures and for full employment and higher unemployment benefits and social security, grave news has arrived from Luxembourg on the future of the Belgian mining industry. It has been announced that the ECSC 'Coal' working party has made a proposal to the High Authority concerning a series of measures *in favour* (sic) of the Belgian coal industry. For this year, in addition to those mines that are being or have already been closed, it is planned to shut down a further ten mines (three in the Borinage area, three in La Louvière and four in Liège), reducing coal production in Belgium to 24.3 million tonnes compared to the 26 million of 1958 and the 30 million of a few years ago. Furthermore, it is planned to cut the 14 Borinage pits to five over the next three years; a similar fate is recommended for the mining areas of Liège and La Louvière. Further 'recovery' measures will be discussed on Monday.

This is obviously another serious blow to the Belgian economy, and the promised subsidies are but a drop in the ocean. There is even talk of 'retraining the mine workers', but it is obvious that in a country that already has 200 000 people fully unemployed and just as many partially unemployed, the outcome is highly unpredictable. There is no doubt that such measures would primarily favour the German monopolies. Besides, I have just come across a Belgian coal industry publication, dating back to 1951, i.e. before approval of the Schuman Plan. This leaflet predicted that 'Belgium would be forced to abandon a substantial part of its domestic coal production potential due to the pressure of German competition.' And again: 'The centre of gravity of all heavy industry in Central Europe would systematically be shifted towards Germany, which would have the effect of establishing its economic supremacy over all the other countries.' The publication also emphasises that 'it would in practice be extremely difficult to absorb the unemployment created by the mine closures', as a result of which certain regions, such as Borinage, would become 'economic cadavers'. This would also have absolutely negative repercussions on the whole of the Belgian economy. It was predicted that within seven years, i.e. today, the problems would become extremely serious.

Why, one wonders, have the Belgian collieries agreed to take part in this adventure? The answer is not hard to see: only a third of Belgian mines are in the hands of so-called independent companies, whereas the rest, that is to say the majority whose decision it is, belong to trusts that have agreements with the German monopolies as well as connections with every sector of the economy and thus have ways of cushioning the blow elsewhere.

It is also true that practically no investment has been made. All profits have been distributed to the shareholders: in 1954, more dividends were paid out than profits were made, that is to say 842 million Belgian francs in dividends compared to 716 million francs in profits. In all these years, a policy of pillaging the mines has been pursued, exclusively focused on exploiting the miners in order to maximise output (it now stands at 904 kilograms per day per miner, the highest ever achieved in Belgium). And all this at the expense of safety. Which explains the hundreds and hundreds of deaths in Belgian mines.

The workers, the Communists, agree that there must be a restructuring of the Belgian mining industry; not by dismantling the whole sector, however, but first of all by planning to nationalise the industry, establish an energy policy and develop the chemical industry. At all events, however, it will once again be the workers who will be hardest hit, and foremost among them the Italians, even if they are the ones who have so far been assigned to the unhealthiest and most dangerous jobs at the bottom of the mines.

Dante Gobbi