

Léon Chevalme, The Schuman Plan and the unions (1952)

Caption: In 1952, writing in the French magazine Notre Europe, Léon Chevalme, representative of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT), sets out the stance taken by the European trade unions on the Schuman Plan and on the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC).

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The Schuman Plan and the unions

by Léon Chevalme

Once the European public became aware of the plan for the Coal and Steel Community put forward by the French Government, the trade union movement, naturally with the exception of the unions that were dependent on Communist orthodoxy, gave its support in principle.

This is because the Schuman Plan was a move towards the rational organisation of the European economy that the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) had been seeking for many years.

In 1919, just after the First World War, the CGT was already stressing the need for the free movement of raw materials in order to allow the economic development of Europe and the abolition of the national economic antagonisms that give rise to war.

It did not cease to defend this idea within the international bodies in which it played a part, and in 1948, at the Hague Congress of the European Movement, the Workers' Force European trade union group (*Force Ouvrière*), of which I had the honour to be President, had a resolution adopted that advocated the organisation of the European coal market.

Concerned with the same issue, discussions had been started by the Belgian, Luxembourgish and French unions of metalworkers with the German union in order to examine the conditions under which the important industrial metallurgical and mining area of the Ruhr was to be reorganised.

These discussions resulted in an agreement with the German union that affirmed the desire of the miners' and metalworkers' unions to see this important industrial area rid of the domination of the trusts, and reorganised in such a way that the Ruhr industries would henceforth be used exclusively for the peaceful development of the economy. Furthermore, this industrial organisation of the Ruhr should be considered merely as a first step towards the general organisation of the European economy.

The International Federation of Metalworkers, comprising 6 million members, adopted the measures agreed and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) took up the issue and organised a conference in May 1950 in Düsseldorf, where the various national miners' and metalworkers' trade unions as well as the International Committee for the Ruhr were represented.

This conference confirmed the conclusions of the debates held by the Inter-Union Committee for the Ruhr, and in a resolution it set down the position to be taken by the international trade union movement by declaring specifically:

In the definitive reorganisation of the Ruhr, management of the industries must be entrusted to administrative bodies with representation of all interests on an equal footing, to the management of each industry and of each company ...

The governments of West Germany, Belgium, France, Great Britain, Luxembourg and the Netherlands must open negotiations with regard to the establishment of an inter-European authority for the coal, iron ore, iron and steel industries, whilst leaving open all possibilities for future accession.

The European authority for heavy industries will be given responsibility for supplying the raw materials for the participating industries;

for normalising prices on the internal and export markets of the products of these industries;

for drawing up joint production and investment plans for the modernisation and specialisation of production and the improvement of product quality;

for co-ordinating technological research work;

for harmonising production of heavy industries and production and investment plans in order to develop the economies of Western Europe and of the overseas territories;

for taking all the necessary steps to ensure a maximum level of remuneration for employment and to help improve workers' living conditions.

In the course of that same month of May, Mr Robert Schuman, on behalf of the French Government, approved the statement in which it was proposed to place the entire production of Franco-German coal and steel under one common High Authority within an organisation that was open to participation by the other countries of Europe.

Having no knowledge of the ways in which this plan would be implemented, the Düsseldorf Conference, after declaring which free trade unions were fundamentally interested in a rational organisation of Western European heavy industry, took note with some interest of the fact that a plan for such a body had been proposed by Mr Schuman in the name of the French Government.

It recommended that the Executive Committee of the ICFTU emphasise the need for free trade union representation in any discussions that were to take place at national and international level with the aim of determining the principles and drawing up the details of the plan.

A committee made up of representatives of the national unions and of the international professional secretariats was set up to deal with the issue.

This sub-committee followed with the greatest attention the debates of the conference that was entrusted with finalising the draft treaty. During the various debates it was able to determine the position of the workers' organisations on the issues that concerned them most particularly and on the conditions under which this Plan was to be applied, insisting on highlighting the social guarantees aimed at safeguarding workers' organisations' rights to participate in the proposed body.

As it stands, the treaty has not failed to meet with objections and opposition.

We shall not uphold opposition stemming from orthodox elements that attack any co-ordination of the Western European economy, a position dominated solely by the concern to serve the policy of the USSR, and that use flagrant untruths to bolster their propaganda in working-class circles.

The reluctance shown by some industrialists who see the implementation of the Plan as resulting in the disappearance of some of their prerogatives is to some extent understandable, but this cannot be an obstacle to the proposed body. Insidiously, within the area of public debate the opponents of the Pool have lent their support to the argument that application of the Plan will have a disastrous impact on our industry and on the working class in particular: factory closures, unemployment, etc. These are specious arguments that we cannot support.

It is a fact that, even if the Plan does not materialise, industrial evolution and technical development will create upheavals in the structure of industry. The establishment of the common market may have the same consequences, but we recognise that the Treaty provides for measures that can diminish their impact. This is why we attach great importance to worker participation within the institutions of the European Community; this is vital if peace is to be guaranteed.

We understand only too well how necessary it is to calm the antagonism existing between France and Germany in order to oppose any tentative that may be made in that direction. The merger of the French and German economies on issues as important as those of coal and steel will make it impossible for another Franco-German war to break out.

It is arguable whether, within such a coalition, German interests will not be better defended than those of

France, or whether Germany will not enjoy a measure of predominance.

These are certainly important issues to which the Plan's institutional bodies will have to pay attention. But there is no possible doubt about one thing at least: the Coal and Steel Community will make a war of revenge impossible between the two nations. I say this because I believe it is true and, bearing in mind the past, this is no small advantage.

This, however, will not hinder us from seeing the Plan's shortcomings and, as we see them, from pointing them out, given that during its implementation it will be possible to make the necessary corrections.

The danger posed by the Plan is not a national danger; it is an economic danger or a social danger; it is the danger posed by trusts and technocracy. The Treaty abolishes the restrictions placed on the production and circulation of coal and steel, not just by the system of customs, quotas and double prices but also by that of industrial agreements, trusts and cartels.

But it cannot be permitted that the powers exercised by the forces of capitalism, whether in our own day or in the past, should continue to be exercised in the future by state-run, bureaucratic bodies over which workers have no influence. We must have guarantees; we must have the certainty that we are able to stop the reform from turning against the public interest and the working class.

Given that this is a policy area that is not our own, it is not our place to say here how the political institutions of the Community should be strengthened, the Council of Ministers in particular so that the High Authority does not do as it pleases.

As trade unionists we must demand that our rights be defended and guaranteed.

The Consultative Committee, a third of which will be made up of trade union representatives, must see its powers strengthened in order for the voices of the professionals to be heard to best effect and, where necessary, the activities of the pure technicians curbed.

It is essential that, in accordance with the terms of the Treaty, in the bodies that the High Authority will create to replace the cartels and the arrangements of the past, the trade unions have their place. To tell the truth, we would prefer that, instead of *creating*, the High Authority *authorise* the creation of such bodies and that it lay down one essential condition for its authorisation, namely, the participation of workers' organisations in the management of these bodies.

The objective of our efforts must be that this necessary economic and industrial organisation of Europe will come about, bringing with it greater general well-being and, for the working class, better working and living conditions; in addition, that by bringing people together and abolishing national antagonism, an era of peace may be created in which the human personality can flourish.

Failure of the Plan would strike a fatal blow to the idea of European organisation that we have advocated ceaselessly, whilst its implementation, by creating for the first time, in a limited but particularly important area, a European community, opens the way towards a united Europe in which economic and industrial development will improve the conditions of the people concerned.

This is why we will support the creation of the Plan, considering that workers' rights will not be flouted, and that its implementation will follow the development of general well-being.