

Interview with Georges Berthoin: the ECSC High Authority and European employers and trade unions (Paris, 22 July 2005)

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[Étienne Deschamps] Implementation of this common market for coal and steel required close relations between the High Authority, its members, employers, trade unions and industrialists. How did things work out in practice, and what was the nature of these relations?

[Georges Berthoin] The employers were hostile, very hostile, because many leaders in the steel industry really wanted a reorganisation of the Iron Works Committee, and they regarded Monnet as a dirigiste. He had directed and created the French National Planning Board. Thus they were much keener on something resembling a coal and steel Community, but one that favoured the employers and was private. This was obviously out of the question. So, hostility on the part of the employers was very strong and there was someone who played an important role in preventing the crisis between the steel employers and the High Authority from reaching a pitch that was often unpleasant — even personal. This was Léon Daum, who, although being one of the leading employers within the French steel industry, caught the European virus very rapidly and was enthusiastic about this adventure. Therefore, hostility where the employers were concerned. On the side of the trade unions, things were much more positive. The unions that cooperated with the coal and steel Community were non communist, and in France these were in the minority, but the union that played an important role was the German union, the DGB and, particularly, IG Metall, a powerful organisation with a large number of members and a discipline and tradition quite unlike the French union movement, which was more of a French revolutionary movement, aimed at changing the system. In the German case, it aimed to make the system work better in the interest of the employees. For this reason, they were undeniably a support right from the start. A man who contributed a great deal was Paul Finet, for Paul Finet had been President of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, a very important organisation that was the counterpart of the Communist-inspired World Federation of Trade Unions. Paul Finet was at an advantage where all the other members of the High Authority were concerned, for he had not been appointed by a government; he had been coopted as ninth member of the High Authority, just as the conditions laid down. Thus it might be said that he held a mandate which was much more European. He played an important part in the relations with the unions and, at the same time, helped the unions to understand what was going on. Later on, there was a very important institution: the Committee — it became the Economic and Social Committee, but I think it had another name at the time — a committee within which employers' and union representatives of the two industries were present, and were consulted. Monnet paid great attention to the opinions expressed in this committee. As a result, at the European level, the unions felt much more involved in the decision-making process than they often did at the national level. To sum up, therefore: reluctance on the part of employers; increasingly firm support from the trade unions.