

Artículo publicado en el Sheffield Telegraph el 17 de marzo de 1961 por don Harold Neal, M.P., el cual asistió como observador británico al reciente Congreso Sindical de España (27 marzo 1961)

Source: Consejo de Europa. Asamblea Consultiva. Comisión de Naciones no representadas. Artículo publicado en el Sheffield Telegraph el 17 de marzo de 1961 por don Harold Neal, M.P., el cual asistió como observador británico al reciente Congreso Sindical de España . Estrasburgo: Consejo de Europa, 27.03.1961.

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URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/articulo_publicado_en_el_sheffield_telegraph_el_17_de_marzo_de_1961_por_don_harold_neal_m_p_el_cual_asistio_como_observador_britanico_al_reciente_congreso_sindical_de_espana_27_marzo_1961-en-72922aaf-5521-4dc0-933a-5220b9c14b0d.html

Last updated: 20/02/2014

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COUNCIL OF EUROPE CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Strasbourg, 27th March 1961.

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CONSULTATIVE ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE ON NON-REPRESENTED NATIONS

Trade Union Congress at Madrid
March 1961

Article published in the "Sheffield Telegraph"
of 17th March 1961 by Mr. Harold Neal, M.P.,
who attended the Trade Union Congress as a
British observer.

I have lived for a week amid quiet, latent rebellion. For seven days I have witnessed what may be the precursor of great constitutional changes in the Iberian Peninsula.

Ness Edwards, M.P., and myself were invited to attend as British observers at the Congresso Sindical in Madrid.

The experience has been in many ways both heartening and illuminating; heartening because the spirit of democracy in Spain is vocal and vigorous; illuminating, because contact with the ordinary Spanish people has dispelled so many misconceptions harboured in Britain.

Separated geographically by the Pyrenees from the rest of Europe; withdrawn into ruinous isolation since the end of the Civil War, Spain has been regarded as the last bastion of Fascism.

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We saw ample evidence that the old order is changing - changing this sunny land into an emergent democracy of the 1960's.

The Congresso Sindical cannot by British standards be regarded as a Trade Union. It is a strange mixture of employer and employee representation that wields tremendous power in the social, economic and political life of Spain.

To study the conflicts of this gathering and watch the actors on this living stage of expectation, is a tense excitement for the political student, and a subject well-suited for the pen of some great historian of the future.

Unlike the British Labour Movement that is tearing itself to pieces by disputations on Defence, that may not be relevant in 12 months' time, the Spanish Sindical delegates were concerned only with social and economic problems.

The President (of whom I say something later) sits on a raised platform, surrounded by top-level executives.

There are the familiar hordes of camera-men and flashing bulbs in greater intensity than I have witnessed in any country, but there is a strange imperturbability about this audience that seems to regard the intrusion of brilliant illumination as only the trivia during a week of serious vital work.

Pronouncements from the platform are subject to the cut and thrust of debate by the delegates at the rostrum. Reports of "working parties" received similar critical examination. Criticisms of the Franco Government were frequent and emphatic.

To say there is no free speech in Spain has the same precarious relation to truth as to say that the position of General Franco is inviolable as Head of State.

From the delegates' overwhelmingly serious contributions from the rostrum, we listened with surprise to clichés such as are uttered by Trade Union demagogues anywhere.

There were attacks on the inequalities of capitalist society; there were demands for a greater share of workers' participation in the management of industry; and unanimous hopes of a higher standard of living.

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It was difficult for two Britishers to reconcile these free contentions with some of the propaganda of the exiled Spanish organisations in the free world.

There was a paucity of support for the Government and the pungent criticisms of local workers' leaders were unmistakably real and convincing.

I am sufficiently experienced to detect what might be served up for foreign consumption, but here was historic political drama, the consequences of which must reverberate from Bilbao to Algeciras.

Exercising presidential authority over the Congress was the brilliant and energetic minister, Señor Jose Solis.

He is an acknowledged first-rate orator and his chairmanship was an example of firmness and gentle tolerance.

Jose Solis is a man of exceptional political insight and unmistakably conscious of his power outside the confines of the Congress Headquarters.

Dictators do not easily tolerate the existence of a "shadow", but if a Number Two exists in Spain, it is surely Jose Solis.

To appreciate the significance of this first united Congreso Sindical, one has only to take note of the famous figures who gave it open recognition.

One day, a message of felicitation and congratulation from Pope John was read by a Church dignitary.

Next day the proceedings were graced by the presence of Don Carlos, grandson of Alphonso XIII and General Franco's nominee for the throne of Spain.

On the final day General Franco attended to join the competition with the other two branches of Establishment.

Here was history being made before our eyes.

Imagine a British monarch attending a trade union congress, or even a conference of the Federation of British Industry.

It was apparent that wherever power resides in the future, it can only exist in co-operation with the Sindical.

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About a couple of hundred soldiers were lined up outside the Congress to await Franco's arrival.

His entry was the signal for a storm of tumultuous applause from outstanding delegates, some of whom interspersed their clapping with shouts of "Franco!" "Franco!"

My colleague and myself were the only two people standing to attention until, looking over the balcony, I saw one solitary workers' delegate with arms akimbo, defiantly refraining from joining in the great welcome.

Many Spaniards assured me that this demonstration has not the least significance and only represented perfunctory recognition of the Head of State.

Jose Solis, the President, in a ten minutes' speech of welcome, enumerated the Resolutions passed during the week.

He emphasised the great need for economic expansion and declared that while other nations were advancing at supersonic speed, Spain could not remain static.

He said the unmistakable demands of the workers for a better standard of living would be passed to the Government.

He freely acknowledged the justice of the workers' claim for a higher standard of living, and a greater participation in the management of industry. All this and more.....

It was a British political philosopher who said: Derived power cannot be greater than the power from which it is derived.

Here were the three branches of established power in Spain vying with each other for the affections of this Congress.

One thing is certain. The international insularity of Spain cannot survive this Congress.

In one of his public utterances, the President, Jose Solis, said to foreign observers: "We ask no more of you than to say what you have seen for yourselves."

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During this week of interest and surprises, my colleague and I talked with many Spaniards, including members of the Cortes, the President of the Mineworkers, university professors and workers' leaders. Among all our conversations there was unanimity about three things:

1. Spaniards do not want a Communist regime.
2. They do not want another Civil War.
3. They do not want another Dictator.

It is overwhelmingly evident that Spain is on the eve of great changes.

Indeed, we were given foretaste. We were interested in the release of a certain political prisoner and within 12 hours we had the chance to visit him in prison.

Without the slightest demur, the responsible Minister granted our request. Because of the circumstances surrounding this Spaniard's sentence, if I had been told before leaving England that an interview would be granted, I would not have believed it possible.

After last week's atmosphere of cordiality to its neighbours, I am certain that Spain's insularity cannot survive much longer.

She is bound to make tremendous efforts to justify her place in the comity of nations and overcome the natural ostracism of the past 30 years.

If alongside this effort, there are new faces at the top, the free nations of Europe will join in wishing a peaceful transference of power to the man best calculated to advance the interests of all the Spanish people.