



# The Economic Labour Council in France

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THE creation of an Economic Labour Council, finally constituted by the General Confederation of Labour<sup>1</sup> at the beginning of 1920, has produced a great deal of comment, not only in France, but also in other countries.

On the whole, the views expressed have been favourable, and most of them indicate that the development of this body, created by the initiative of the workers, has been followed with close attention in widely different circles.

The Economic Labour Council has just completed the study of the most urgent questions which were submitted to it. Some of its work, including certain results which it has reached, have already been under fire, so to speak, in the social battle. For example, the railwaymen's strikes of February and May, 1920, placed the nationalization of the railways in the forefront of the demands of the French trade unions.

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The conception of the Council, (at least in its original form, which is very different from the body as it now exists), dates from a year previous to its constitution by the C. G. T. Before the Armistice, but more especially immediately after the general cessation of hostilities, the General Confederation of Labour studied the question of the re-organization of French economic life, an essential matter in the reconstruction of a country which had suffered so severely in the war.

In a *Minimum Programme*, which was adopted unanimously on December 15 and 16, 1918, by the delegates of the National Federations of Industry and the Departmental Associations of Trade Unions at a meeting of the National Confederation Committee, the General Confederation of Labour stated the need for this re-organization, defining its principles as follows :—

“ In future, the General Confederation of Labour demands for organized labour the place which it deserves in the direction and management of national production.

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<sup>1</sup> *Confédération Générale du Travail.*

“Economic re-organization must have, as a basis, the uninterrupted development of national or industrial resources and the unlimited extension of general and technical education. Its aim should be to enable all talents to be usefully employed, to endeavour to obtain the utilization of all material resources and the application of all inventions and discoveries, to stimulate private initiative by removing all excuse for, and all acquiescence in, monotonous and deadening routine, and to prevent any voluntary limitation of production and any over-working of the producers, the consequences of which are harmful to production itself.

“The working classes must therefore direct national effort along these lines”.

Some days afterwards, on December 31, a deputation waited upon the President of the Council, M. Clemenceau, and laid before him a brief report, requesting that a new body might be constituted, which could provide the co-ordination necessary for the economic life of the country. This body, the National Economic Council, was to be composed of five classes of members :—

- (1) Industrial leaders, representing employers' organizations.
- (2) Labour leaders, representing workers' organizations.
- (3) Technical advisers, (engineers, etc.).
- (4) Government delegates.
- (5) Persons versed in law and economics, capable of expressing the wishes of the consumers.

It is unnecessary here to deal at greater length with this scheme. M. Clemenceau, who appeared to receive it with marked favour, who even expressed in the official press his intention of giving effect to it, confined himself to proposing, in July 1919, a simple caricature of it. According to his scheme, the National Economic Council would have been nothing but a new interdepartmental commission, so many of which exist in France, without any good result; the working classes would have had only a ridiculous representation on it, and not the least guarantee. This offer could not be accepted; trade unionism rejected it absolutely. It offered, moreover, no prospects for the future.

When, for the first time after the war, the trade union delegates met at Lyons at the National Congress held from September 15 to 21, 1919, there could no longer be any question of a National Economic Council; it was necessary to proclaim the impotence of the Government, and to put on record that, one year after the close of hostilities, “no fundamental improvement had taken place in the economic situation”, which, indeed, was becoming rapidly worse.

Before the *Declaration* was submitted to the Congress, we therefore drew up a motion, in which the principle of an Economic Labour Council was adopted. This Council

was to be composed of delegates of workers, technical workers, civil servants, and co-operators, and, as said at that time, its function was to apply itself "without delay both to the immediate and to the general problems of production and exchange".

In virtue of this decision of the Lyons Congress, and in accordance with the explanation of that decision which has just been given, the Office of the General Confederation of Labour set to work immediately.

On January 8, 1920, the inaugural meeting of the Economic Labour Council took place in Paris under the Presidency of Professor Gide, in the course of which the delegates of the organizations taking part explained the reasons for their co-operation.

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Workers, technical workers, civil servants, and co-operators, these are the four elements which compose the Economic Labour Council, acting through their respective organizations: the General Confederation of Labour, the Trade Union of Technical Workers in Industry, Commerce, and Agriculture (or the *Ustica*), the National Federation of Civil Servants, and the Federation of Co-operative Societies.

The participation of the General Confederation of Labour requires no explanation. It took the initiative in the establishment of this new body, of which it intends to make "an instrument for investigation into, and preparation for, the part to be played by the workers in the community." The participation of technical workers is also not difficult to explain, for it would be impossible for a single moment to dispute the importance of their place in industrial and commercial activity. That of the co-operators, representing the organized consumers, is the logical and essential complement of the representation of the producers. Perhaps it is necessary to dwell at greater length on the invitation issued to the civil servants.

A creation of the workers, the Economic Labour Council contains no official element, no State representation. It was not, indeed, in view of this fact that the General Confederation of Labour addressed its invitation to the civil servants; but it saw in their associations of yesterday, in their trade unions of to-day, the organization of workers who are in the service of the community, or, at least, who ought to be in the service of the community. The function of these workers is to assure either the general services, which are necessary to co-ordinate private endeavours in the production and distribution of wealth, or activities, which, although they do not fall within the sphere of economics, are no less essential to life in general.

Their proper place was, therefore, on the Economic Labour Council, the more so, in that the development of trade unionism among civil servants in France and the criticism of the administrative departments, which it has produced, have giv-

en State employees a conception of their duties very similar to that which industrial workers have of their own functions.

Since the constitution of the Economic Labour Council, a change has taken place. The Federation of Civil Servants has become affiliated — this affiliation was accepted on June 2 last — to the General Confederation of Labour. But this fact is not of a kind to involve any alteration in the principles on which the Council is based.

The co-operation of these four bodies gave rise to somewhat delicate questions. As an assembly of the bodies which contribute to economic life and which combine in a common ideal their acceptance of the *Minimum Programme* of the General Confederation of Labour, the Economic Labour Council had to be organized on a scale large enough to assure both sufficient representation and also thorough inquiry into the questions submitted for its consideration; but it was essential that it should not be so large as to constitute a sort of club, where general discussions would take the place of actual investigations. On the other hand, organization was necessary up in order to divide, the inquiries and to make them contribute to one general aim.

We have been able, we think, to obtain the most satisfactory result, thanks to the constitution summarized below:—

Members of the Economic Labour Council are divided into nine sections, to which the following general subjects have been assigned:—

- 1st Section. National equipment, power, transport and communications.
- 2nd Section. Economic organization (control and management of national and international economy).
- 3rd Section. Industrial production and raw material.
- 4th Section. Agricultural production and agrarian organization.
- 5th Section. Finance and banking.
- 6th Section. Social life, health, town-planning, recreation, education, social insurance.
- 7th Section. General and technical education.
- 8th Section. Commerce and the distribution of wealth.
- 9th Section. Devastated regions.

Each of these Sections is composed of at least three delegates of each of the constituent organizations. This number may be increased according to requirements and the nature of the work undertaken. The Sections may also call upon, in an advisory capacity, and with the authority of the constituent organizations or of their regular delegates, persons outside these organizations.

Each Section has two Secretaries. The Secretaries together constitute the Committee for the Distribution of Work.

This Committee acts as a liaison between the Sections themselves and the Managing Committee, which is at the head of the organization.

The Managing Committee is composed as follows :—

Three Members representing the General Confederation of Labour;

Three co-operators appointed by the National Federation of Co-operative Societies;

Three Civil Servants appointed by the Federation of Civil Servants.

Three Technical workers appointed by the *Ustica*.

The General Secretary of this Committee is the General Secretary of the General Confederation of Labour. We will now see how this body works.

The Managing Committee decides that an inquiry shall be made into a certain question; the general instructions regarding the work to be undertaken are sent to the Sections through the Committee for the Distribution of Work, which also co-ordinates and collects the special work of the Sections. Thus, in the case of questions relating to the re-organization of the railways, when the nine Sections have studied, each within the limits laid down for it, one of the aspects of the problem, the draft for the nationalization of the railways is the result of this work as a whole.

The re-organization of the French railways system was, and is still, the most urgent problem for the world of labour, both from the general standpoint, for it is clear that this re-organization involves the whole national equipment, and from the trade union standpoint, because of the struggles which we referred to above. The Economic Labour Council, in a very short time, although it was very incompletely established (or, to be more precise, not at that moment established at all), in spite also of the delays due to the strikes, was able successfully to undertake a particularly complex and difficult inquiry. As has been said, this inquiry terminated in favour of nationalization of the railways; but it must be added that this nationalization was conceived by the workers' movement under a form entirely different from that of a return of the railways to the State and of their exploitation by the State.

The Lyons Congress stated:—"The direct exploitation of national wealth by the community, the placing under community control of the organs and powers which direct industrial operations for the transformation of this wealth and its distribution, form an essential condition of the re-organization which we wish to bring about. But, in view of the weakness of political organizations and the nature of government, we do not wish to increase the functions of the Government, we do not wish to increase the functions of the State, to strengthen it, and above all we do not wish to have recourse to any system which, would submit essential industries to bureaucracy with its irresponsibility and its constitutional faults, and would reduce the forces of produc-

tion to a kind of fiscal monopoly. The deplorable results, which the past and present can display, are a sufficient condemnation of this system. By nationalization we understand the entrusting of national property to the persons concerned, associated producers and consumers”.

That is the system which we have called “industrialized nationalization.” There can be no question here of discussing it in detail or even along the broad lines laid down by the Economic Labour Council. It is perhaps sufficient to explain it thus : the return to the community of the great industries or services (in the first place the railways, the mines, power-stations etc., in fact the main sources of energy and the main means of transport), and the independent working of these industries or services by bodies representing three parties in equal numbers — producers (manual and technical), consumers and users, and the community.

A scheme of the same kind has been adopted for mines, and is in preparation for power-stations etc.

However, the efforts of the Economic Labour Council were not confined to this programme, which has now given the French Labour Movement a definite “platform”. Thus, the Fourth Section has studied important aspects of the agrarian problem, the Fifth has criticized the present banking system, and is inquiring into the creation of a State Bank and a general financial organization; the Sixth has dealt with the problem of housing and urban life, in agreement with the Ninth as far as the reconstruction of the devastated regions of France are concerned; the Seventh is studying the question of education, recommends the establishment of one uniform school in order to utilize every kind of mental ability; the Eighth has prepared a scheme for an organization to deal with food questions.

This means a very great deal of work. The interest which the correlation of these questions has for the workers does not require to be emphasized. But, on the other hand, it has become evident during these inquiries that economic life must be organized on a generally rationalized basis. The dissipation of initiative, the prevalence of competition and speculation, the waste of effort and of materials and of food-stuffs endanger industrial life and the very existence of peoples. The Second Session of the Economic Labour Council came to the conclusion that the continuation of such a state of affairs is impossible; but it also declared it impossible to allow great capitalistic combines to create the necessary systematic organization for their advantage and to the detriment of the community which they exploit. It therefore recommends the setting up of a great regulating body, a general directorate of national economy, and it is proceeding to prepare a scheme for this.

Such a scheme will doubtless give rise to controversy. But at least it destroys, and that in the most explicit manner,

the old prejudice that the workers dislike technical progress and new methods.

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The whole activity of the Economic Labour Council is an effort towards progress. The above short quotation from the Minimum Programme of the General Confederation of Labour has shown that the workers' movement, far from being opposed to economic development, actually demands it. It should, however, be understood that it is very naturally anxious not to see economic development result in disadvantage to itself.

There are those who think it possible to continue the present system and to find in it peace and prosperity. They are strangely mistaken, in that they count upon the co-operation of labour, while continuing to refuse it all the rights to which it lays claim, and lays claim all the more insistently, because it does not divorce defence of its own special interests from care for the general interest.

What has just been said to explain the establishment and the work of the Economic Labour Council, shows that the French working class is following high ideals. To a greater and greater extent they identify their aspirations with the public good; they do not believe — and the experience of these last years has not been such as to modify their views — that this general interest can be protected as against the workers' own special interests.

“An instrument for inquiry into, and preparation for, the part to be played by the workers in the community”: the Economic Labour Council has realized in the minimum of time all that we expected of it. It has accomplished the most pressing task that the workers' organizations had entrusted to it. The first part of its work is now finished, or almost finished. This is where the function begins, which is strictly that of the working classes. Our trade union organizations are now to be entrusted with the task of putting into force the schemes prepared in common by the workers, the technical workers, the co-operators and the Civil Servants, who represent in the life of society the whole labour class and the whole labour force. The positive constructive programme of trade unionism is defined, not only in theory, but in the sphere of actual facts.

In reality, the setting up of the Economic Labour Council means for us a new phase in trade union action. It is no longer a question of criticizing; it is a question of realizing our ideals. It is no longer enough to formulate social theories; we must pass resolutions which can be realized at once, and which must bear a double character — to better the worker's lot, and to prepare for the future.

The working class has general ideas. Labour is coming to understand its part better and better, the part it plays and

the part it ought to play. Does this mean that it can of itself, by making use of its own experience, solve the multitude of complex problems of the present and of the future order of society? Certainly not.

But it can — and the Economic Labour Council has at least the merit of having furnished the proof of this — study these problems along with other classes having ideas similar to its own, put its experience and theirs into a common stock, define programmes, formulate schemes. This is preparation for a part, which passes considerably beyond our present limits and which will develop as the work develops. The Economic Labour Council, therefore, satisfies a demand for education. For us, it is a matter, to some extent, of giving the workers economic training, of broadening their horizon, which until now has remained too narrowly trade union, of making them capable of understanding the mechanism of modern life, of adapting them to the part which they must play in the re-organized community.

We believe that this re-organization must be brought about, and that it will not be accomplished without the help of Labour.

