



# The International Labour Conferences

by

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**T**HE first decision made by the Third International Labour Conference at Geneva was to declare itself competent to deal with agricultural labour questions. From the point of view of organisation this was the only solution of the problem. It would have been impossible to have had two Labour Offices, one for industrial, maritime, and commercial labour questions, and another for agricultural labour questions. Even if the wording of the Peace Treaty was not quite clear, this practical consideration guided the delegates in their decision.

The result of the Third Labour Conference was seven Conventions and eight Recommendations, together with a number of Resolutions. These Conventions and Recommendations were worked out in a most careful way. The International Labour Office had done the necessary preparatory work thoroughly, and the Commissions appointed by the Conference were to a great extent composed of experts. To my mind the work of the Third International Labour Conference was better prepared and better conducted than that of the First Conference at Washington. It was quite natural that it should be so. At the Washington Conference no Labour Office had prepared the work. Besides, the delegates did not know each other. A few of them had seen each other before, during the preparation of the Peace Treaty, but most of them met at Washington for the first time; nor were there so many experts at Washington as could have been wished. Monsignor Nolens, speaking at the Geneva Conference, pointed out that the spirit of the Washington Conference was gone. In a certain sense he was right. The Washington Conference had been guided by a desire to get to decisions and to obtain quick solutions of the problems laid before it. The problems were therefore not studied carefully enough and the daring spirit of

the Conference made the majority push through Conventions which were too rigidly drawn to be adopted by the large industrial countries. The Geneva Conference was more careful and it is therefore to be expected that the result will be better.

An important result of the Washington Conference was the formation of the International Organisation of Industrial Employers. The industrial employers of the world had never met before 1919. When the employers' group at Washington was called together, it was soon discovered that the work of such a conference must be thoroughly prepared in advance and that the employers of the world should meet at intervals to study the various problems put before them by the Labour Office and the application of these problems in their respective countries. During the two years which have elapsed the International Organisation of Industrial Employers has grown strong, and at the Third International Labour Conference at Geneva the employers' group accepted the services of the International Organisation of Industrial Employers during the Conference. Before the Third Labour Conference was convened the employers had organised their experts in committees to study various agricultural questions and those relating to the weekly rest, white lead, anthrax, and others; they were thus well prepared to take their place on the mixed Commissions of the Conference.

The purpose of the International Labour Conferences is to improve labour conditions. For this reason it is essential that the employers and workers should co-operate. This was not often the case at the First Washington Conference, but at the Third Conference at Geneva the workers' group and the employers' group co-operated successfully on several occasions. Thus they agreed on the election of the chairmen to the various mixed Commissions. They also decided on a final compromise in the solution of the white lead question. The latter incident was so important and of such an amusing character that I wish to recall it.

During the twenty-fourth sitting of the Conference on 18 November Dr. Legge of Great Britain moved an adjournment for fifteen minutes in order to allow the White Lead Commission to meet with a view to arriving at a decision. The employers' group at once met in an adjoining room and decided to accept a compromise on certain conditions; three delegates were appointed to negotiate with delegates from the workers' group as to such a compromise. In the meanwhile the White Lead Commission had started its proceedings in another room, under the chairmanship of Mr. Obed Smith of Canada. The three employers' delegates entered and walked up to the farther end of the room, where Mr. Poulton, the workers' delegate from the United Kingdom, sat surrounded by several other workers' representatives. Negotiations were started at once. By and by the other members of the Commission gathered round the little group, and finally Mr. Obed Smith, the Chairman, and the other

officers of the Commission found themselves deserted. Mr. Smith was aware of the importance of the negotiations going on at the farther end of the room and let them continue for over ten minutes, when finally he called out that the sitting would proceed. Mr. Poulton, striking the table in front of him with his fist, exclaimed: "Order", adding that it was he who was in the chair at the moment and that the work in his corner of the room had to be finished before the Commission could continue to sit. Mr. Obed Smith smiled and let the thing go on, and five minutes later Mr. Poulton was able to announce on behalf of the workers and the employers that they had made a compromise, which he put before the Commission. The sitting of the Commission then proceeded and the compromise was accepted. The compromise was afterwards adopted by the Conference. I tell this story in order to show the spirit in which the workers and the employers often met during the Third Conference, hoping that the same spirit will be present during coming Conferences.

Since the Third Labour Conference was held many persons have approached me with the conviction that international conference work is of no use. I have told them they are mistaken and have expressed the opinion that of all the work done by the League of Nations that of these Labour Conferences will be the most permanent. International effort for improving social conditions is of old date; it had grown strong even before the war and is bound to continue. It is therefore to my mind of great advantage that this important work be continued within the framework of a strong organisation. It is also desirable that social conditions should be standardised in the various countries as far as possible, and this is one of the aims of the International Labour Office. It seems to me, however, that the work is going on almost too rapidly. If an alteration of Part XIII of the Peace Treaty is possible, I would deem it advisable that from now on the International Conferences be held only every second or third year. Already the Conventions and Recommendations passed by the three Conferences are of such a number and of such great importance that it will take some time for states to adopt new laws and alter old ones in order to accommodate themselves to the proposed suggestions, particularly now when world economic conditions are so disturbed. Mr. Albert Thomas and his collaborators, I think, should bear in mind the old proverb: "More haste, less speed" (1).

If I may use this occasion to offer further criticism, I wish to say that I think it would be advisable that a certain number of practical industrial experts should be engaged by the International

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(1) Editorial Note: It should be stated that the items on the agenda are not determined by "Mr. Albert Thomas and his collaborators" but by the Governing Body. The Office is entirely in agreement with the opinion that the Conference agenda need to be greatly lightened, and made proposals to the Governing Body to that effect.

Labour Office. It seems to me that the tendency of the Office is to engage to a considerable extent those who believe in socialistic doctrines (2) ; although these doctrines are beautiful from a human point of view, they very often do not coincide with the economic laws of the world. I therefore believe that the work of the International Labour Office would be based on sounder principles if its reports on various questions were criticised by experts with a practical knowledge of industry.



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(2) Editorial Note : It should be stated that the staff of the International Labour Office is not recruited on account of their opinions, but solely on account of their intellectual qualifications. In the great majority of cases these qualifications are tested by competitive examination in which no question of economic or political tenets enters. The examinations have produced persons of all shades of opinions and of varied experience, but in order to ensure the collaboration of "practical industrial experts" the Office has requested the employers' organisations on three occasions to assist by proposing suitable candidates. So far, however, no nominations have been received.