



The Work of the Geneva Conference

by

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FOLLOWING on the Washington and Genoa Conferences, a further important stage in the life and development of the International Labour Organisation was marked by the Conference held at Geneva. He would undoubtedly be a bold man who would attempt to estimate its full results three months after the sessions have taken place. The precise bearing of the decisions which were taken cannot immediately be summed up, but it is at least possible to state the views of the workers' delegates on this Third Conference.

Its primary characteristic to our minds was that of being the logical continuation of the two previous Conferences. Washington was the opening. There we had to define general lines for the international regulation of labour, from the point of view both of essential labour demands and of their application to workers in industry. The importance of this initial task was considerable, but its difficulties were to some degree alleviated by the fact that the state of labour legislation in various modern countries lent itself to the generalisation of reforms already achieved, while, on the other hand, the power acquired by organised labour was such as to ensure their application.

At Genoa this principle of the general regulation of labour was extended to workers at sea. But in 1920 we were already being forced to recognise the increasing difficulty of our task. It was not so much that labour is less powerful among seamen than among workers in industry, as that the problems to be solved were becoming more complex, and above all that the Conference was required to interfere more markedly than at Washington, with current conditions prevailing in the different countries.

The Geneva Conference was confronted with an even more arduous task in that it sought means to confer on agricultural labour the benefits granted to other groups of workers. It was impossible not to realise the difficulties involved even before the Conference opened. Again, the actual state of legislation in each country, in the case of the agricultural wage-earner, obviously left a much wider gap between what was being aimed at and what had already been attained than confronted the worker in industry, in commerce, or at sea. Finally, the organisation of agricultural labour is mostly of recent date, and almost always inadequate.

These factors have to be taken into account in estimating the value of the work done at Geneva. There may perhaps also be a tendency to forget that neither the Washington nor the Genoa discussions were conducted without conflict or friction; but those who have followed the work of the International Labour Organisation from its start cannot forget the sometimes sharp disagreements experienced at those two Conferences. The realisation of the proposals of Part XIII of the Treaty has not been, nor should it rightly have been, easy. Nothing is won without a struggle, and it is this continuous effort and the trouble devoted to achieving an end that very largely give the latter its value. All these general considerations are to the point if the work of the Third International Labour Conference is to be justly appraised.

Some reservations must certainly be made, if this is to be interpreted in the sense of saying that the workers' expectations were fully realised. We did not get all we wanted, all we felt to be just and necessary, on the many subjects on the agenda. But having made our reservations, having taken into account the general conditions under which the Conference worked, we cannot in the face of the decisions finally reached fail to recognise the value of its results. It is of considerable importance to us that the Geneva Conference marked a step in advance, even though one smaller than we had demanded of the International Labour Organisation. That step in advance was taken when the attempt to withdraw agricultural labour problems from the competence of the Organisation failed. We have no desire to reopen this controversy here, but we can forget neither the energy with which this attempt was made nor the arguments and pretexts brought forward in its support; still less can we forget the object pursued, which was both to reduce the authority of the Organisation and to get the Conference to declare the existence of two distinct classes of wage-earners, one with the right to receive that minimum of social justice essential—to quote the words of the Treaty—to peace, the other deprived of those rights and guarantees. A little reflection has already brought out the paradoxical character of so strange a theory, of claims so untenable. The Conference rejected them. It did not, indeed, pursue the matter to the logical conclusion demanded by the workers; but a way has been opened up, and what has already been done on behalf of agricultural labour justifies the belief that the work will be completed.

It is obvious that this first result might be a guide in judging certain other difficulties confronting us at Geneva, all of them the outcome of the general conditions of society. Representatives of the working classes could not fail to realise that they were about to be faced, in the international sphere, with the same attacks as had confronted them in their own countries. We have been told that the time is past for the sort of illusions that followed the war, that the need for international labour legislation no longer presses on governments with the urgency of three years ago. We have seen capitalism once more take the offensive, and have

noted every attempt to revert to a state of affairs existing before the war. Nor can we any longer shut our eyes to the fact that in certain countries labour has gone through an internal crisis detrimental to its power and to the interests it represents and defends. But the Geneva Conference has no more adopted the view of those who imagined these passing difficulties sufficient cause for driving the International Labour Conference to retrograde action, than of those who sought to make it forget that its duty is, not to look after individual interests, but to protect general interests and to defend a human ideal. The Conference was not to be persuaded that its work must simply be that of measuring opposing forces and of making a pronouncement in favour of those momentarily superior. This we feel to be of happy augury, showing that the Third Conference has continued the work begun two years ago.

The world of labour will not magnify these temporary difficulties, or think them a reason for withdrawing the trust it placed in the International Labour Organisation. All past experience teaches the worker what laborious and unremitting effort is needed to obtain that social justice which is his aim. There is no royal road to progress. These difficulties, which we do well to recall here, are themselves indicative of the importance of the task in which the worker is taking a hand. If it were of no value, leading to no real results, there would be nothing to excite the hostility displayed by the two extremes of society, who meet here equally determined to take refuge in denial.

Nor are the workers willing to admit that results achieved can be compromised because of any temporary difficulties. They have already passed through many crises, and have emerged from all with increased power, armed for fresh attack. The like will happen this time too; witness the power maintained by their international organisation. We are profoundly convinced that those are mistaken who count on passing difficulties to effect a permanent set-back. It is a serious miscalculation to suppose that these difficulties will lead the workers to forget the promises made to them during the war; for that is not the problem at all. It is not a case of knowing whether the sacrifices made by the masses during the world struggle are to be compensated by the recognition of some of their legitimate rights; it is a question of understanding that the masses must needs take their part in the world re-organisation on which alone peace can be established. This work is today indispensable; tomorrow its urgency will be even greater than it was immediately after the Armistice, precisely because the blunders made since then, because the policy of ignoring how indispensable it really is, have aggravated the situation to such a point that we are now forced to return to it as the sole means of restoring the world's normal activities, of re-establishing equilibrium, as the sole possibility of repairing the grievous effects of the war, or even of continuing to exist.

To our mind another result of the Geneva Conference should here be emphasised. The Conference did not merely refuse to

follow those who wished to restrict the competence and action of the International Labour Organisation; on the contrary, it actually extended the duties of the latter substantially by falling in with labour views. It may be recalled that at Washington a very small majority rejected the resolution on the distribution of raw materials proposed by our colleague Baldesi and supported by us on behalf of the workers' group. This same resolution, when brought forward at Geneva, was passed. Why should no emphasis be laid on this decision, which anticipated the concern which was shown by various governments at Cannes, and suggests how much the solution demanded by us is forcing itself upon them, if the abnormal economic situation of the world is to be remedied? We may also mention the passing of our own resolution on unemployment, supplementing that of our colleague Schürch, instructing the International Labour Office to convene an international conference. We showed at the time that the problems raised by the regulation of labour could not be considered apart from general economic problems, and that in these questions no national solutions can be adequate. As soon as any attempt is made to discover the conditions for that reconstruction which the world requires, if it is to be saved from paralysis and want, the very nature of the problems attacked forces us to admit the urgency of a world re-organisation which would constitute a 'solidarity of nations' and for which the collaboration of the workers must be asked. Nor can it be denied that it was these considerations which prompted the Allied Governments to convene the International Conference of Genoa.

It would be easy to demonstrate in the light of recent events the real character of these resolutions of the Conference and the new perspective which they open up to the International Labour Organisation. They have at least already shown the efficacy of the work begun less than two years ago, the importance and place it has already won, and the hopes it has raised. The workers, far from withdrawing their confidence, will continue to give their support, so as to secure, in their unremitting pursuit of the general interest, that peace and progress which they desire above all other things.

