

Interview with Mr. Guido Nobel, secretary of the Swiss federation of trade unions

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INTERVIEW WITH MR. GUIDO NOBEL, SECRETARY OF THE SWISS FEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS

In analysing the strikes in Switzerland, one finds various kinds; which are they?

We know the *Bummelstreik* or delaying tactics, the strike which includes occupying the premises and the organised strike.

Which were the reasons leading to the numerable strikes in the period from 1926 to 1937?

The social climate was very bad. The country was in an economic crisis, and the employers did not see the use of co-operating with the trades organisations which grew in importance more and more. Their membership increased considerably.

What kind of demands lies at the bottom of most strikes?

One tries above all to realise the demands which have been categorically refused by the employers after long discussion and only then have led to strikes. The most frequent demands are: increases in pay, security in employment, improved working conditions.

Which were the reasons making it possible for an employers' organisation and a workers' organisation to sign the famous Swiss agreement on "Labour Peace"?

Economic conditions in Switzerland were very precarious, and one had to find a solution to break the deadlock. Mr. Ilgg was anxious to find a permanent solution and agreed to establish contact with employers, and the many discussions and negotiations finally led to the industrial peace agreement.

Which were the first measures taken after signing the agreement, and which were the first results in the "World of Work"? Had one already visualised measures to let the worker participate in the management of enterprises?

The introduction of participation was an important step. The first result which was noticeable, was a general feeling of relief, for workers do not like strikes. One has to realise that with this kind of manifestation, everyone loses something, workers as well as employers. "The Labour Peace" agreement did not introduce workers' participation as it is known today. But it enabled all parties to settle differences by negotiation.

No sooner was the agreement on industrial peace signed than the war broke out. Which reactions did the contract partners

show? Was there any campaign at Government level in order to encourage the signing of such an agreement?

At the moment there exist more than 1,700 collective agreements. The war naturally strengthened the bonds between workers and employers, since one had to fight together. The Government which took a positive attitude towards signing such an agreement, did not intervene. Publicity was direct, and the first agreement was very widely publicised. One cannot deny that it was a panacea.

The parties to the first agreement deposited an amount of Fr. 250,000 – each with the Swiss National Bank. What prompted them to do this?

When the court of arbitration settles a dispute and one of the parties does not respect the verdict, the injured party may ask for compensation from the deposited funds. Up to date, 36 years after the signing of the agreement, there has never been any need to touch these funds. When one considers the cost of a strike, the deposits are very small for today's conditions. At the time they were demanded by the workers' union which wanted to have a tangible guarantee apart from the piece of paper representing the contract.

How does the control of the industrial peace function, for surely there must have been some infringements since the signing of the agreement?

Naturally, one could never prevent the wildcat strike, but the smooth working of the agreement is due above all to the good intentions and the wisdom of the contracting partners. The strike which the plasterers staged in Zurich in 1960, does not belong in this category, for it happened when the two partners could not agree on the manner of renewing the expired contract. In such a case no punishment was possible.

At the end of 1970 and the beginning of 1971 there were some stoppages in Switzerland. Will these not induce contracting partners to examine and alter the decisions taken in 1937?

In one of the strikes in 1971, the instigators were the foreign workers in a building enterprise which put really bad accommodation at the disposal of the workmen. Not knowing the Swiss methods of negotiating, the workers did

not take their complaints to the local union representatives, but began to strike immediately. That strike, however, was of only short duration. The affair created a lot of stir, as two or three journalists did not hesitate to exaggerate in their reports. In my opinion, the spontaneous strike is the only valid one. These announced well in advance (such as prescribed in the French system) serve no other purpose than to get a few additional free days. On the whole, we may say that the various strike movements in 1971 were started by foreign workers, followed by numerous Swiss employees.

What are the means of information by which you make known the methods of the Swiss trade unions to the foreign workers in our country?

The large trades unions have periodicals which are published in different languages, specially in Italian. They distribute leaflets and organise meetings. But this is not sufficient, for many foreign workers are not prepared to take notice of such publications. Many of them are not interested at all in press matters. The best solution would be to have television transmissions showing the Swiss attitude and the methods of procedure in disagreements. It seems to me that this would be more useful than the individual programmes transmitted for foreign workers today. Information is really a very difficult problem, and in spite of our contacts with the central offices of the Italian trade unions, we have a lot of trouble to inform them all to their satisfaction. Some extremist organisations consisting of approximately 20,000 members have little influence, but they have recommended nevertheless not to accept the second column of the Swiss social insurance policy. Thus they respect the wish of the Communist Party in Italy, although the largest Italian trade union (of Communist leanings) has recommended their members in Switzerland to accept the second column.

Which are the present effects of the concentration of enterprises on the trade unions?

This brings two important problems:

1. Depersonalisation
2. Security of employment

There is not much that can be done against concentrations which, in an economic sense, are beneficial. But I regret the disappearance of the artisan who is becoming a sub-proletarian. One tries hard on the labour front to continue the development of workers' participation. The security of the job presents no big problems. But we are behind with our schedule as we have no legislation yet, although this matter was put to the Federal Council already in 1971. We have

good prospects of getting legal assurance which will meet the following needs:

- a) re-training possibilities without reduction or loss of income
- b) for those no longer able to change jobs early retirement pension
- c) transport allowances for those who have to change their place of work due to changes in their company's structure.

The trend towards concentration cannot be reversed; we shall have to come to terms with it.

What are the probabilities for the future of industrial peace?

As has been shown, neither the trade unions nor the employers are willing to renounce it. We shall examine our attitude and to strengthen the rights of the workers, for the employer must realise that this "peace" is not free of charge.

After the statements by the Secretary of the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions, we felt it would be interesting to ask one of the Secretaries of the Central Federation of Swiss Employers' Organisation for some information. Mr. Duc kindly granted us the following interview.

Would you please define the structure of the employers' organisation?

In it we have a central federation which considers in the main social problems of the industrial and service sectors. The central organisation has no contact with the trade unions, only with the employers' organisations. The central federation comprises 45 sections of very varied activities. The umbrella organisation was founded in 1908 and sees its main task in the co-ordination and solidarity of the employers.

With what kind of strike have you had to deal during the past few years?

Basically, the Central Federation of Swiss Employers' Organisations gives advice to members only if these ask for it. During the last decade, there has been only one important case. That was when the plasterers opposed their employers when renewing the collective agreement. The plasterers demanded the forty-hour week which, in 1964, had the effect of a bomb-shell. One must remember that if working hours were reduced in all sectors by one hour a week, 60,000 additional employees would be needed annually.

The Swiss Federation of Trade Unions and the Central Federation of Swiss Employers' Organisations are two power blocks which oppose each other. What is the relationship between the two parties?

The structure of the two organisations is very federalistic. Every member of the umbrella organisations has extensive individual competence which enables it to be largely independent. Today one can see tendencies, however, which will lead to strengthening the umbrella organisations. This movement began in the 'fifties when the first measures were introduced to combat the excessive economic boom. In the years 1969 and 1970 this tendency became even more pronounced.

Does an employer immediately approach the Central Federation when there is conflict with his workers?

The measures to be taken result from the nature of the difficulties. In nearly all cases the employer turns to the organisation to which he himself belongs, and this gets in touch with us according to the gravity of the case. We give legal help when needed.

Does the fact that the workers have a voice in the making of decisions not result in a certain levelling out of functions and responsibilities? Do you recommend this policy to your members?

Since "Workers Commissions" have been introduced, there is extensive co-operation. To have a voice in decision making is thus nothing new. We recommend to all our members that this method should be developed. In the machine industry, one has had very good results with the workers commissions, but in the watch industry the system has been little developed. To have a voice in decision making must stop, however, at management level, for the power of decision must remain a matter for the employer. If something goes wrong, the employee's responsibility is not asked for either.

What is your opinion why there are no strikes in Switzerland?

Above all this is a problem of mentality. We have hardly any class distinction; the people mix already at school and later through the militia system in military service. Nor is industry concentrated in certain regions. In the German-speaking part of Switzerland, for instance, one finds a factory in every village, and thus there is no absolute separation between the industrial and the agricultural sectors. This situation strongly favours human relationships.

In 1936, the dual association of political events enabled the creation of the labour peace agreement; i.e. class-conflict was replaced by collaboration. Such cristallisation, however, was only possible because Switzerland was threatened from outside.

Which are your means of information?

Apart from a weekly magazine, many internal communications circulate amongst members. We also quite often have the opportunity to pass on information through press and television — with all the risks this involves.

What are the means you use in trying to prevent workers from going back to strikes as a means of putting pressure on employers?

The labour agreements guarantee us industrial peace. In the course of time, they have taken on many different forms. At the beginning, they included only conditions of work and pay. Today they also contain regulations as to vocational and further training, housing for workers of a particular line, and long-term integration of foreign workers. A fund was raised to fulfil these tasks.

What effect did the industrial peace have for the employers?

It led to a favourable working climate for all contracting parties. One must realise, though, that such peace has to be paid for. It does not appear out of the blue, and the employers have made considerable concessions. If the system of agreement has worked well for 30 years, one begins now nevertheless to see a few difficulties which have their roots in inflation and labour shortage in all sectors.

It is the industrial peace which itself carries an explanation for inflationary conditions, for every year employers let their staff profit from/increased productivity in the previous year. This may be because of trade unions' demand for due to existing agreements. As a result of labour shortage, workers often make their own demands, although the employer frequently has to grant pay increases twice as large as laid down in the agreement. In addition, social insurance contributions have become ever more a burden both for employer and employee. The cost of infra-structure also plays an important part. Thus the employer is driven in a corner and has to pay out annual increased profits four- or five-fold.

How do you judge the future of labour peace?

The present order should be adhered to as both parties profit from it. The answer depends largely on the Parties on the Left, which show a certain tendency to take over some of the "anti-labour peace" slogans from small but active groups of the extreme Left, so that they won't lose any ground.

I believe that the system of agreements will stay as long as no better one is found.

LUCIEN PAILLARD