

TWELFTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF LABOR HISTORIANS

The 1976 Linz conference (ITH) took place from September 14 to 18 at the renovated Jägermayrhof. The 127 participants were drawn primarily from Austria, the socialist countries of Eastern Europe, West Germany, Holland and Scandinavia. By contrast few labor historians attended from England, France or the United States.

The main topic for this conference was "Parties and Trade Unions prior to 1917" with the major presentation being made by Irena Koderdova (Warsaw), Dieter Fricke (Jena), and Gr̃ant Adibekov and Ivan Lunjov (Moscow.) In addition, a large number of detailed contributions on specific aspects of this question were submitted by other participants. Without exception these papers reflected what Georges Haupt (Paris) referred to as the Eurocentrism or even "Central-Eurocentrism" of the conference as a whole.

Koderdova and Adibekov/Lunjov emphasized the primacy of party over trade unions. They distinguished three principal trade union types: the reformist unions, the anarcho-syndicalist unions, and the revolutionary social democratic unions. Koderdova connected party-union relationships with the changing role of the working class in society and differentiated between the First International, the Second International prior to the Stuttgart congress, and the labor-union theory of Lenin.

Besides criticism and re-affirmation of party supremacy, the main discussion dealt with the general social-historical conditions necessary for the development of parties and unions alike as well as with questions of concrete political and organizational relations between parties and unions. Thus Kowalski (Warsaw) emphasized the importance of spontaneous movements for union development and described trade unions as the best bridge between the working class and its party. Tomicki (Warsaw) stressed comparative perspectives, a point endorsed by Haupt, Jemnitz (Budapest) and Hans Mommsen (Bochum). Haupt also underscored the socio-economic aspects of union development such as qualitative and quantitative problems of labor union development, the organizational potential of party and union, and the social structure of the trade union movement. In further discussion the more theoretically based position of Bravo (Turin) and Fülberth (Marburg) was countered by the more practice oriented approach of van Tijn (Amsterdam) and concrete problems of party-union relationships such as personal connections, political positions, day-to-day politics, and organizational involvement were raised. The influence of different political systems, trade and industrial structures and business cycles was also considered in this context. Much of the theoretical discussion centered on the so-called Hamann-interview of Marx which supported union autonomy. Overall a certain uneasiness in the face of labor history approaches which overstress ideology, platforms and organization was articulated and Erich Matthais (Mannheim) raised the question of the need for more adequate criteria of judgment. Fricke (Jena) argued, in contrast, that social history methods were not sufficient to explain party-union relationships, although they might make a contribution; the struggle for political power was the decisive factor even if a need for continued study of social-structural factors remained.

The second conference topic concerned methodological approaches to trade union history prior to 1917. Discussion centered on the presentation of Michael Schneider (Bonn) which emphasized "perception theory" and the need to examine unions within the broader context of the history of society during industrialization. Helga Grebing (Göttingen) elaborated on the first point while Wolfgang Abendroth further explored the second. Ernő Kabos (Budapest) and Anna Zarnowska (Warsaw) also stressed socio-economic factors. Theo van Tijn presented a remarkable contribution using the market-model approach with the Netherlands as an example.

The Conference did not bring about any concessions from those holding contrasting ideological positions. It did, however, suggest some points of contact on methodological questions particularly as these relate to social change and conflict during industrialization. For this reason as well as the less sensitive nature of the two topics, the tensions and clashes that marked the 1975 meeting were absent from this year's gathering. Once again the "spirit of Linz" provided the opportunity for personal contact between labor historians from East and West. The 1977 conference, may, however, raise some of the old problems since the main topic is to deal with "Labor movements, the Colonial Question and Liberation Movements prior to the First World War." It is also unlikely that the second theme scheduled, "Workers Education and Working Class Culture under Capitalism," will get the attention it deserves. The conference will meet from September 20 to 24 in Linz, Austria.

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