The Founding Congress of the Red International of Labour Unions

The Founding Congress of the Red International of Labour Unions held its first session on 3 July 1921 and continued until 19 July. The agenda adopted on 3 July was extensive. It covered practically all aspects of trade-union activity: (1) report of the ITUC on its activities; (2) the world economic crisis and the tasks of the trade unions; (3) the relationship between the Comintern and the trade-union international; (4) trade unions and factory councils; (5) trade unions and workers’ control; (6) unemployment; (7) International Trade Secretariats; (8) questions of organisation; (9) women; (10) elections. However, it turned out to be impossible to keep to this planned agenda.

After the end of the congress, a collection of the daily bulletins – sixteen altogether – in which its proceedings were reproduced for the delegates was published as the minutes of the congress, supplemented by a bulletin which documented the establishment of the International Propaganda Committees and, in an appendix, the resolutions and manifestos it had adopted. According to the information given in the RILU press and the published reports of the participants, the bulletin appeared in the four congress languages (Russian, German, English and French). Even so, we were able to find only the first seven issues of the German edition, so it was necessary to fall back on the Russian text. The complete edition appeared under the title 1-st Mezhdunarodnyi kongress revoliutsionnykh, professional’nykh i proizvodstvennykh soiuzov. Stenograficheskii otchet, Moscow, 1921, but since this edition is without pagination it is only quoted here according to the bulletin (Biulleten’) numbers. The reports on some points of the agenda were also published in German, and also the congress resolutions were issued as separate pamphlets. The materials in the RILU archive on this congress (RGASPI 534/1/1–14) are very fragmentary. There are neither complete stenographic minutes of the sittings nor complete data on the delegates. Nor is there any documentation on the commissions set up by the congress. As a result, this archive material is of no assistance in depicting the course of the congress. There is one additional source, however. Many of the delegates, particularly members of the syndicalist minority, published accounts of the course of the congress after their return home, and these are a valuable supplement to the official minutes. There is an extensive description of the course of the congress, based on his examination of the minutes, in Resis 1964, pp. 133–228, and the position of the syndicalist opposition is portrayed in Thorpe 1989, pp. 181–200.
The congress was completely dominated by the ‘questions which were most passionately discussed’, as Nin later recalled.\(^2\) Just as when the ITUC was founded, these questions derived from the conflict between the communists and the syndicalists. They revolved in part around relations with the reformist trade unions, but much more around relations with the Comintern. The result of these passionate disputes was that a number of points were forced into the background, and were dealt with, as it were, by acclamation, in other words by the plenum’s acceptance of a resolution without any discussion. On other matters, the prescribed agenda was altered (for example, in relation to the reports) or new agenda items emerged in the course of the congress.

The congress had afternoon and evening sessions, but it was interrupted again and again by meetings of the commissions established by the plenary meeting to discuss specific points of the agenda. It was also interrupted by the Third Comintern Congress (until 12 July), which is discussed in section 6 of this chapter. The result was that the congress only met in plenary session on a total of nineteen occasions. Lozovsky took pains to ensure the efficient running of the congress, by calling together the plenum punctually, for instance, and this made a positive impression on foreign observers, who had had different experiences in Russia.\(^3\) The punctuality of Lozovsky contrasted with the behaviour of some of the delegates at the congress.\(^4\)

What was most important in the discussions can be seen from the fact that no fewer than five sessions were devoted to regulating the relationship between the two internationals, half a session to determining the RILU’s tactical orient-

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\(^2\) Nin 1978, p. 83.

\(^3\) For instance, William Z. Foster, who took part as an observer, had this to say afterwards: ‘Lozovsky is one of the busiest men in Russia, and punctual and business-like in his methods to a degree that shocks all good Russians. It was his custom to open the R.T.U.I. [RILU] congress sessions promptly upon the stroke of the hour set – some of the delegates declared that they corrected their watches by the sound of his opening bell – whereas, in the recent III. International congress, which was run in true Russian fashion, the sessions began anywhere from one to three hours after the appointed time. It is safe to prophesy that under Lozovsky’s skilled guidance the Red Trade Union International will soon come to play an important role in the international labour struggle’ (Foster 1921, pp. 125–6).

\(^4\) In fact he issued this warning to the delegates at the third plenary session, after the draft of a manifesto by the congress had been read out: ‘We decided yesterday to start our sessions at 11 o’clock. We started our work today punctually at 11 o’clock, although we had to read out the manifesto to a half-empty hall. We shall open all future sessions just as punctually, even if only a quarter of the delegates have arrived’ (Biuletén’, no. 3). Rosmer would also complain strongly about the nonchalance with which the fiercely oppositional French delegates treated their work at the congress (see the next chapter).