The United Front That Didn’t Happen in 1923: The Role of the RILU

1 From the Hague Congress to the Ruhr Crisis: Fimmen Breaks Ranks

Only a few days after the second congress of the RILU came to an end, there was a quasi-official meeting between the communist trade-union movement and the leaders of the IFTU, at the Peace Congress organised by the IFTU at The Hague between 10–15 December 1922. This congress took place in circumstances dominated by the crisis over the Ruhr, which was to lead almost exactly a month later to its occupation by French and Belgian troops. But the Hague meeting was actually a result of decisions made by the IFTU congress held in Rome in April 1922. The London congress of the IFTU in November 1920 had already made the fight against war one of the organisation’s tasks, to be conducted if necessary with the weapons of the strike and the boycott. In this way, the London congress had gone beyond the purely economic definition of trade-union tasks which had determined the IFTU’s approach before the First World War. Fimmen made a particular effort to commit the IFTU to an anti-war course. A provisional committee with this aim had already been established at a meeting of the IFTU bureau with the representatives of the three most important ITSS (metalworking, transport and mining) on 15–16 November 1921. The Rome congress then made it a permanent fixture, while confirming the resolutions of the previous congress about war.¹

This was the background to the decision to summon a peace congress to meet at The Hague, so that representatives of the international trade-union movement could discuss together with social democrats and pacifist organisations what possibilities there were for safeguarding peace and what measures could be taken to preserve peace in case it was in danger.² The Comintern and the RILU were not invited, but an invitation did go out to the headquarters of

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¹ On the conference of November 1921, see ‘Der I.G.B. und der Kampf gegen den Militarismus’, Die internationale Gewerkschaftsbewegung, no. 6, December 1921, pp. 194–8. On the discussions in Rome and the resolution adopted there, see Bericht über den internationalen Gewerkschaftskongreß 1923, pp. 66–84, 97–100 and 115–17.

² On the decision to summon the congress, see Presseberichte des IGB, 24 November 1922, with a statement by Fimmen and a list of participants.
the Russian trade unions. They had already decided to participate before the RILU congress took place. Only Lozovsky, Radek and Theodore Rothstein were able to make the journey initially, as the other members of the large Soviet delegation originally chosen were prevented from travelling at first by a refusal to issue visas. All three were able to take part in all the proceedings of the congress. They had been delegated, formally speaking, by the VTsSPS, although only Lozovsky was a member of that body. Radek in practice represented the Comintern and Rothstein represented the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs. Although they were denied the opportunity to present alternative reports, they were able to present their views in contributions to the discussion. Their position, which was a controversial one as far as the other participants were concerned, guaranteed that their views would in a certain sense lie at the centre of the discussions. The rest of the Soviet delegation only arrived at The Hague when the congress was almost at an end, but they were able to have informal discussions with some of the IITS representatives.3

The congress confirmed the line taken at Rome, that the trade unions should prevent a new war by all means at their disposal. But distinct variations in approach were already perceptible. Fimmen, who gave the main report at the congress, under the motto ‘War on War’, remained true to his utterances at previous IFTU congresses, stressing the need for the workers’ movement to take action by itself, independently. Other people, however, like Jouhaux and a number of Social Democratic speakers, placed their faith in the League of Nations, although they admitted that its response so far left much to be desired. The three Russian representatives protested against the failure to send official invitations to the Comintern and the RILU, and they also bemoaned the absence of representatives from the ‘Near and Far East’. The immediate reply to this

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