

Letter from Jules Aubrun to René Pleven (Paris, 13 November 1950)


Caption: On 13 November 1950, Jules Aubrun, President of the French Iron and Steel Employers' Federation, sends to René Pleven, French Prime Minister, a letter in which he complains of being sidelined from the negotiations on the Schuman Plan.

Source: Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman, Correspondance 1947-1953. Lausanne: Fondation Jean Monnet pour l'Europe, Centre de recherches européennes, 1986. 188 p. (Cahiers rouges). p. 65-67.

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Rue de Madrid, Paris (8e)
13 November 1950

Ar/b
Service 231.

Dear Prime Minister,

I would be betraying the interests that I represent if I did not bring to your esteemed attention the unacceptable situation in which the French steel industry has been placed since the opening of the negotiations relating to the Schuman Plan.

From the outset, and during the first few weeks, our industry has been excluded from the discussions, although foreign delegations have been admitted with their own advisers representing the professions directly involved. At our request, the Commissioner-General of the Plan invited one of our advisers to attend the meetings of the Committee on Production and Prices, along with two representatives of the steel consumers.

The Production Committee was in existence for only a couple of weeks and therefore had no time to deal with the vital issues. The discussion continued within two other bodies from which our advisers were excluded: the Group of Chairmen and what is referred to as the Group of 'Six'. In principle, the heads of the six delegations of the Production Committee constituted the Group of Six, but the 'Six' very soon became 12 or 18 because of the presence of private foreign advisers. However, there was no French adviser to help the French Delegation, much to the surprise, I must say, of the other delegations. Very important subjects were therefore discussed in our absence; after renewed protests, our adviser was admitted to the Group of Six for a few days, but the Group very quickly suspended its activities.

The problems were further discussed among the Chairmen; the Chairmen of the other delegations deemed it fitting to be accompanied by their advisers at these meetings. Each foreign delegation had built up close ties between its members, including their professional advisers; the latter took part for instance in all the talks between sessions, which helped to determine their position in the meetings.

Nothing like this happened as far as our industry was concerned; for weeks, we were kept in the dark about the progress of the discussions; only through the courtesy of foreign colleagues were we occasionally informed about the various stages of negotiations.

A few days ago, an important document summarising the discussions in progress was distributed. We have seen this document, entitled 'First draft of the proposed treaty' and dated 8 November, in the hands of foreign advisers who allowed us to read it and with whom we discussed certain articles. They were very surprised that we knew nothing about it. We therefore asked the relevant department in charge of the Plan to send us two copies; on 11 November, that department informed us that they were unable, because of the confidential nature of the document, to fulfil our request; yet that document, I must stress, is already in the hands of foreign advisers, and they have discussed it with us at great length.

We thus continue to be systematically excluded; on the few occasions when we have been consulted, consultation has been so perfunctory that we may legitimately believe that it was only to avoid any claim that we were being completely ignored.

May I remind you that, in a letter dated 17 June, Robert Schuman, Minister for Foreign Affairs, expressly said that he would keep me informed of developments in the international discussions that were to open in Paris on 20 June so that he could, at any time, seek my advice and opinion. The Chairman of the French Delegation seems not to share this view.

This situation, Prime Minister, is not acceptable; it would be humiliating if we were not aware that the dignity of the French steel industry remains untouched by such proceedings. At least, I refuse to believe that such an attitude could have been hatched by the Government; but the facts are there, and the public, in France and in the world, will judge for itself. Our foreign colleagues are surprised and hurt by the ostracism imposed on a group whose members occupy an important place in the worldwide steel industry; this official neglect of our cause will obviously not strengthen our position in the discussions which, sooner or later, will begin at international level. May I add that, after two world wars, the first of which was marked by the destruction of our industrial capacity in the North and East, the second by a four-year eviction from our factories in Lorraine which continued to be used intensively, without maintenance, the absence of the French steel industry from the present discussions does not go without comment, in the most varied circles both at home and abroad.

The problem is, however, not just a question of complete disregard for the dignity of an industry. People outside our industry are trying to decide our fate; is this acceptable? From day one, we let it be known that we, as much as any others, were supporters of the 'Schuman Plan' which was meant to eradicate traditional enmity and was founded on the integration, wisely planned, of certain parts of the European economy; but can a plan that we find out about by bribes and indiscretions, in the preparation of which we are not even asked to participate on an equal footing with our foreign counterparts and whose aim is to determine the fate of our industry have our support, and can the State or Parliament force it on us?

It will now be all the more difficult to gain our support since this plan, in its present form, threatens our vital interests. We set out our opinion on this matter in a letter and memorandum dated 12 October, addressed to Jean Monnet, copied to the President of the Council and the various Ministerial Departments concerned. My letter went unanswered.

I would add, finally, that our supporters have daily had to answer anxious enquiries from their works councils who are eager for information: the state of ignorance in which we are held and the questions left unanswered mean that all we can do is admit that we share their fears. We are talking here not only of the fate of our industry but the health of the entire French economy and the risk of social unrest.

I should be grateful, Prime Minister, if you would schedule a meeting with me at your earliest convenience, so that I may describe the situation in our industry to you in greater detail.

Yours faithfully,

J. Aubrun