

Letter from Joseph Retinger to Morgan Phillips (London, 10 March 1948)


Caption: On 10 March 1948, Joseph Retinger, Secretary-General of the International Committee of the Movements for European Unity, sends to Morgan Phillips, Secretary of the British Labour Party, a letter in which he refutes all the Labour Party’s criticisms of the Congress of Europe held in The Hague.

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Draft letter from Joseph Retinger to Morgan Phillips

At our conversation on March 2nd you were kind enough to suggest that I should send you an explanation of all the problems connected with the Hague Congress, in order that you might place it before the Executive Committee of the Labour Party at its meeting on 15th March.

I understood from our conversation that the considerations which influenced the Labour Party Executive in dissuading its members from attending the Hague Congress were, firstly, an objection to the method of selecting the delegates to the Congress, secondly, that controversial matters might be raised which would have an extremely bad effect on the public mind at this crucial moment in Europe, and thirdly, that the work of the Congress might prove to be a source of embarrassment to the respective Governments of Western Europe.

You also mentioned that there were objections to some of the British personalities who would be attending the Congress.

I gained the impression that you were under a misapprehension as to the method of selection of the British element for the Congress, because you had been consulting a document which was in fact unofficial notes drawn up by Mr. Duncan Sandys (the Chairman of my International Committee) for circulation to the members of the Committee and not for official use. This point seems to me to have been cleared up by the wide publication of the officially agreed document explaining exactly how the various elements from the different Western European countries would be chosen. In agreeing on this method, my Committee co-operated with all the international and national bodies which form the Co-ordinating Committee in conjunction with some individuals who have been co-opted because they are leading personalities in the public life of their respective countries.

Arguing from the private draft in your possession, you suggested that the method was no different from that of the Communists, but in view of my explanation as to the official approach by the Committee you will, I am sure, agree that it could not be in any way described as Communist.

As far as your second point is concerned, that controversial matters may be raised during the deliberations of the Congress, I informed you that three main Sub-Committees had been formed under the general headings, Political, Economic and Social, and Cultural and Spiritual. These Sub-Committees, which contain representatives from different countries in Europe, are preparing reports for circulation to all the participating bodies, and it is proposed by this method that a general agreement on the main issues to be discussed can therefore be achieved. I emphasised to you that the only democratic way of conducting the work of the Congress was to allow free discussion of the main problems facing Western Europe at the present time. The suppression of free discussion would indeed invite the criticism that the Congress was being conducted in a totalitarian manner.

My answer to your third objection, that we should embarrass the Governments of Western Europe by holding the Congress, was to convince you that we had done everything in our power to inform the Foreign Ministers of the respective Governments concerned, of the aims of the Congress and the method which we proposed to follow in making the arrangements. We are most anxious to have any advice and criticism which they may care to offer us. It is, of course, obvious that the Committee must reserve its right to accept or reject the advice of the Governments concerned, and allow itself to criticise their attitude if it thinks it so desirable.

My Committee has tried to gain the support of leading personalities in Western Europe for the Congress, and it cannot be influenced by the adherence of such personalities to any particular party, creed, or chivalries. It is anxious only to invite those who would best contribute to the idea of the unity of Europe.

My Committee would welcome any reasonable suggestion which the Labour Party Executive might wish to put forward with a view to avoiding a division of opinion on these matters which, at least on the Continent, might mean a division between the Right and Left sections of public opinion, and this may be misunderstood

in the United States of America. Such a misunderstanding, I am sure you will appreciate, might even imperil the material and moral help which we expect to receive from our American friends.

A compromise between our different points of view should certainly be possible of achievement - even if a coalition of forces is not possible. Such a compromise would not be between Socialism and what you called "reactionary forces", but between the different Democratic elements of Europe, whatever political label they may bear. As long as such elements base their activities on real democratic principles, surely it is imperative at this time to achieve a compromise which can unite them all.