

Informe sobre el Congreso de los sindicatos españoles, presentado bajo forma de artículo por don Ness Edwards, M.P., el cual ha asistido al Congreso como observador británico (29 marzo 1961)

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# COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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# CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Paris, 29th March 1961.

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## CONSULTATIVE ASSEMBLY

### COMMITTEE ON NON-REPRESENTED NATIONS

Trade Union Congress at Madrid  
March 1961

Report on the Spanish Trade Union Congress,  
in the form of an article,  
by Mr. Ness Edwards, M.P., who attended  
the Congress as a British observer

To visit Franco Spain is no more to give approval to the régime, than a visit to East Germany, West Germany, Yugoslavia or Russia gives approval to Ulbricht, Adenauer, Tito or Stalin.

If the contrary argument were accepted, British democrats would have to shut themselves out from a great part of the world.

It was with this reservation that I accepted an invitation to attend and observe the six days conference of the First Congreso Sindical which has just concluded in Madrid.

This Congreso Sindical was the first time that all the Syndicates were to meet together for the purpose of hammering out both its constitution and aims as a permanent industrial organisation of the Spanish Constitution.

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This intended permanent Congreso Sindical was to be advisory to the Cortes on all economic and social matters.

Housed in its own conference hall, part of a building as large and modern as the British T.U.C. headquarters, it consisted of some 600 delegates, two-thirds of whom had been elected by workers and managements, the rest being made up of members of the Cortes, "social workers", and officials of the country-wide syndicates. It had similarities with the Turner-Mond Conference held here between the wars.

The exception, however, is that this form of organisation has been imposed by the Franco régime and infractions against the law imposing it may be punished by imprisonment.

However, for the first time in Spanish history the erstwhile fragmented Spanish workers are now represented in one organisation, as are also the employers, and if ever they acted in collusion, could become the determining factor in Spanish society.

Over it all presides the Franco-appointed Minister, Joseph Solis. Of his popularity with the workers' delegates there was little doubt. As head of the whole Syndical organisation, he has great power behind him.

He opened the Congreso with a very long speech, in which he begged delegates to make the organisation a reality, and to speak freely and frankly, always keeping in mind the interests of the Spanish people as a whole. It was this organisation, he said, that was to do away with the old social order, and establish a society in which social justice and social well-being was to be available to all.

By any standard it was a powerful speech and evoked very great applause.

There was a further shock to one's preconceived notions when the Franco-appointed Secretary-General, in the course of a long review of the work of the syndicates, appealed to delegates freely to speak their minds without fear or favour.

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One began to feel a bit like Alice in Wonderland. This really was an assault on one's preconceived ideas.

Day after day we listened to the delegates complaining about the workers' conditions. Few employers took part in the debates. One tartly told a woman workers' delegate that she talked like a Communist. He had no applause.

The crowning irony to non-Spanish observers was the insistence of the conference on inserting in its declaration of aims the words "Capitalism is an unjust form of society".

Later during the week the proceedings were interrupted for the reading of a message from the Pope giving his blessing to the work of the Congress, an event treated with great significance.

During one of the sessions, Don Carlos, the King pretender, occupied a seat in the gallery and had to listen to the debates about full employment, better unemployment benefit, and equal educational opportunities for workers' children. Social justice, social welfare, the injustices of capitalist society, were phrases that assailed his ears during the session.

But it was not until the last session, on Saturday, that the major event occurred. This was a visit by the Dictator himself to the congress. He was received with great rapture. Nearly all the delegates, workers' and employers' delegates alike, gave him a resounding standing ovation.

Franco is very small in stature and physically unimposing. He is obviously old, and spoke "off the cuff". He is no spell-binder.

To British ears his speech became more and more amazing as it came over the simultaneous translation headphones.

He complimented the syndicalists on their work. He had followed the congress reports day by day. The old order had to go. Injustices were to be banished from society. He roundly condemned imperialism and colonialism.

Then came the peach of the speech: "Only out of the conflict of opinion could agreed progress be made".

One did not know whether one was at Scarborough or in Madrid!

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Was this new Congreso Sindical to become the power house of the régime, or was it all bluff? Was it the conception of a new type of political institution, or was Franco seeking to build up a counter-balancing force to the Church and the Generals?

Only time will tell.

Behind the scenes we had many informal discussions. Both delegates and "social workers" were embarrassing in their eagerness to talk to the British Trade Union M.P.s. Not a conversation could end before another started.

Practically all the syndicate officials were Fabians, in the British sense. They wanted change at the speed of a revolution, but without a civil war.

The purely industrial representatives made desperate pleas for an understanding of their position, particularly from the British, whose way of doing things they regarded as the ideal. (The intellectuals regarded "The Observer" as one of their political bibles. It could be bought at most of the kiosks in the centre of Madrid.)

Nearly all we talked to expressed deep feelings about their isolation from the trends of modern thought in Europe. They resented very much that the hostility shown to Franco covered them too. They contended that the salvation of Spain could only be achieved by those living in Spain. Those outside Spain were still fighting the civil war that had ended twenty-five years ago. Extravagant campaigns outside Spain only strengthened the dictatorship and made the work of the progressives more difficult.

The Falange propaganda about the forthcoming Paris Amnesty Conference was highlighted by the propaganda sheet surreptitiously left for us at our hotel.

It consisted of a sheet the size of an "Observer" page with the legend:

LABOUR - Socialists - Communists  
All together in Paris against Spain

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This, we were told, was intended as an attack upon the labour and progressive views held by liberal forces, including the Congresso Sindical.

Within the shell of the dictatorship there were many deep conflicts.

In discussion with a workers' del gato, he told us that if he was to serve the workers who had elected him, he could only do it within the legal structure imposed by the régime. It was not a situation of his choice.. His only alternative was to desert the workers who trusted him. With great emphasis he declared, "I cannot serve the miners by deserting them".

Others, again, begged us to enable Spain to make contact with progressive opinions in Europe, particularly Britain. They wanted the ideas of democracy to blow through the cobwebbed windows of Spain. What they wanted intensely was sympathy and an understanding of their position. For too long we had isolated them, for too long they had been left to struggle alone.

we found it difficult to make our excuses sound reasonable.

Standing at the head of this progressive outlook is Joseph Solis, the Franco-appointed head of the whole Syndical organisation. This is another bit of quixotism of the régime. Before the civil war he was a syndicalist. A man in his late forties, a devout Catholic, he appeared head and shoulders above all the politicians who had gathered in Madrid. His significance on the Spanish scene should not be under-rated. If Franco allows it, and it is now difficult to see how he can do otherwise, we shall hear much of Solis and Spain in the future.

In Spain there are many political Canutes. The consequences of holding back the tide of political progress will be theirs.

Whether the wind of change that now stirs the Spanish scene becomes a whirlwind will depend very largely upon the concessions made to progress by the reactionary elements. It will equally depend upon Solis holding together the Syndical organisation, using it as a fulcrum to remove the restrictions upon the aspirations of the people, imposed by the dictatorship.

The problem progressive-minded people of Britain have to face is how to help the forces of progress that have grown up within the shell of the dictatorship, without being open to a charge of interference.

The Spanish people have suffered too much from interference in the past; they now suffer too much from a lack of friendship.