National Women's Trade Union League of America

ENDORSED BY THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR AND THE TRADES AND LABOR CONGRESS OF CANADA

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LIFE AND LABOR—OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

November
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Miss Ida Tarbell,
Powhatan Hotel,
Washington, D.C.

My dear Miss Tarbell:

Mrs. Robins has written such an intensely interesting report of her preliminary work in connection with the Second International Congress of Working Women that I want to share with you these first hand impressions of labor conditions in Europe.

It is true that, being written to her Executive Board, there are references to certain individuals and situations which may not be clear to you, but the spirit of the whole communication will, I know, be of value to you in the understanding of Continental affairs.

Cordially,

Elisabeth Christman
Secretary-Treasurer.

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COPY

L'Athenee,
Geneva.
October 12th, 1921

Miss Elisabeth Christmann,
Secretary,
National Women's Trade Union League of America,
621 South Ashland Boulevard,
Chicago.

Dearest Elisabeth,

Here we are actually at Geneva and the Congress under way. I arrived on Monday morning, and found Maud Swartz and Miriam Shepherd waiting to welcome me. There are so many thousand things to tell you that I know I cannot possibly write them all; but before I go back to the days in Holland and catch up with Geneva, I want you to know how very beautifully we are situated here in Geneva. We have the hall, as you know in l'Athenee a very charming hall with benches and red velvet cushions which made me think of some of the old-fashioned churches in England and America. The hall seats about two hundred people and gives an impression of a place of friendly intercourse and not of a great business hall. Our offices are on the same floor and the Executive Committee room is the room where the International Red Cross was organised in 1867. We are surrounded on all sides by beautiful paintings. Adjoining the Executive room is Maud Swartz's room as secretary, and on the other side is a very charming room for five or six or eight young secretaries who represent our staff of workers. All this is on the first floor and then up above is the permanent art gallery, so you see that if we get terribly bored with our discussions we can simply disappear into a serene art atmosphere and catch breath again.

The Hotel de la Paix is directly oppowite Mont Blanc, and though he is hidden most of the day, we can see him early mornings and early afternoons, and at sunset, when he has a way of becoming a great mass of flaming colour.

Among our friends who have already arrived is Editha Phelps, and on Friday we expect a Chinese delegate and Mary Dingman and Edith Rockwood, as well as some of the Executive Committee of the Congress.

Now to go back to Amsterdam. You will remember that I wrote you that I stayed over several days so as to have an opportunity of meeting Alida de Yong, Secretary of the Tailors Union of Holland. I had gone on Saturday, October 1st, to the Tailors Union so that I might meet with some of the younger secretaries and get the hang of the work, and I was very glad indeed that I did so for it gave me quite a window on their conditions of work. I must confess that for the first time I saw some of the workers who really looked as if they had greatly suffered during the war. They looked haggard and worn and as poverty-stricken as looked some of our tailors before the great strike in 1911 in Chicago. When I returned on Monday and met Miss de Yong, I found an exceedingly lively, awake young Jewess, very charming, with fine dark eyes, who told me many interesting things about her work and the general great unemployment, and was most interesting as long as she talked to me. When I asked her to listen to the purpose of our International Congress of Working Women, I found that she had reached her conclusions regarding us long since, and that evidently it was very difficult for her to let her mind entertain any new version of the Congress. She was absolutely certain that we represented simply

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the suffrage movement. Well, I told her of our delegates, including those from England and France. She barely listened and inevitably returned to the charge that we were merely suffragists and had among our delegates such people as Madame Anna Pollack. As I understand it Madame Pollack is a leading feminist and opposed to all protective legislation for women workers. In spite of the fact that I assured Miss de Yong that she had not been invited and was not coming herself that I knew of, and that she had bitterly opposed our action at Washington, I made no impression whatever. I was simply told that in Europe women and men organised together in one union. Finally I got hot and said that I thought that what she was doing in refusing to let the working women of Holland participate in an International Congress of Working Women was shirking responsibility, and that if in Europe women trade unionists were willing to shirk responsibility in this grave hour, I for one refused to believe that such action on the part of the rank and file was due to anything but wrong leadership. This statement of mine did stir Miss de Yong, and she did finally agree to come if the German working women came, and especially if Gertrud Hanna o-kayed the Congress -- well, that has not happened yet. In spite of this we parted very good friends, and I would be grateful to have you send all important literature from our League with a letter telling of your Union and how the Unions in America are made up of men and women! The address is First Helmerstraat 66, Amsterdam. Miss de Yong is really exceedingly fine, but evidently the thought of an International Congress of Working Women is so new that it is difficult for them to grasp the idea. We ought to have had an organiser for the Congress, of course a trade unionist, in Europe for the past six months. A great deal of preliminary education is still to be done. The strange part is that they were quite content and are so still that there should be a Bureau for an International Congress for Working Women, but to meet face to face seems to them an extraordinarily new thought or achievement.

On the 4th October Dorothea and I left for Brussels, and were there welcomed by Mlle. Victoire Cappe, whom you will remember as the representative of the Christian Unions in Washington. She was most charming and gave us a very beautiful welcome. When you realise that in Holland there are five recognised divisions of the Labour movement, you will realise the difficulties of the trade unionists in Europe. In Belgium there are two great groups, the Socialist and the Christian group, and every group hates every other group with a cordiality of hatred that is amazing to meet, and which is yet no different, for instance, from the bitter hatred of some of our trade unionists for the Amalgamated. Well, Mlle. Cappe arranged for me to meet Monsieur Mertens, who is the Secretary of the Commission Syndicale du Parti Ouvrier et des Syndicats Independants (the National Federation of Labour for Belgium) and is also one of the Vice Presidents of the International Federation of Trade Unions, of which Monsieur Oudegeest and Monsieur Fimmen are the Secretaries. I saw M.Mertens on Wednesday morning, October 5th, at the Maison du Peuple -- that same wonderful place of which I have been telling the American workers straight across the Continent for the past eight years. M.Mertens is an exceedingly interesting and and delightful man to meet. He also had the same idea that we organised women into separate unions from those of men, but when I explained that this was not the case, and further explained the purpose of the Women's International Trade Union League, he not only did me the courtesy to listen, but actually understood what I was saying and gladly revised his earlier impressions. I had only, indeed, to discuss the Congress for a few moments for him to say at once that a Belgian working woman should be sent to Geneva. Here also I was told of terrible

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unemployment -- one-tenth of all the workers of Belgium are out of work. M.Mertens told me that of course no member of his organisation could be seated in a Congress to which delegates came from the Christain Unions. This is, of course, the same position taken by M. Jouhaux of France. The Christian Unions have formed their own International Congress but they are coming to Geneva to present their right to be seated in the Congress. You will remember that Poland has established a joint committee and among those seated on that joint committee are the representatives of the Christian Unions. Perhaps you are beginning to understand what discussions are in store for us in Geneva!

After my visit to M.Mertens and another visit through that wonderful Maison du Peuple, with its Library greatly increased since I was there before, and with its fine big coffee house packed with workers (out of work) at ten in the morning, and who here found a place to rest and read -- I went to the Headquarters of the Christian Unions. You will remember that the Congress at Washington voted that the Christian Unions should be invited to this Congress and that here we should decide what organisations be entitled to representation. If I could make my fellow-workers see it, I would be glad if our Congress could become a parliament of working women, to which all organisations of a given number of members, and of course with the same purpose in view, could send delegates, so that, for instance, we might have the Socialists, the Christians and the Communists send their delegates, just as in a parliament of a nation or in the Congress of the United States representatives of different points of view can be elected. However, I know that this is a dream impossible of fulfilment. At this particular hour everything in Europe is seething. Every group hates every other group, and it is an hour of destruction and the time for construction has not, it seems, yet arrived -- and yet we are bound that constructive action shall somehow take place here in Geneva.

At the Headquarters of the Christian Unions I found Mlle.Cappe and her fellow-workers, with about a dozen or fifteen students trained for leadership, for organisers, for positions in Government service, such as that of handling out-of-work benefits, and women inspectors. They were most attractive and alert young Belgian working girls. Belonging to the Christian Unions are the 60,000 lace workers of Belgium, and there is no question that the Christian Unions of Belgium are training for leadership among the working women of Belgium away and beyond any such training given in the Socialist group. Of course it is tragic to have the workers divided on the religious questions, but they are also becoming divided on economic issues, and the Communists are growing daily in strength among the trade unionists. The lace workers, by the way, are all home-workers, and of course are one of the most difficult groups to organise, but they are organised. I wish you might have been with us at luncheon in the lovely room on the ground floor opening out upon the garden, and have heard the interesting discussion about the many young lace workers who have won through organization a much higher rate of pay, though of course from our point of view it is very small. Among Mll.Cappe's fellow-workers is a secretary of the International Christian Union, a Mll. Bars, who is Flemish -- very able, very steady, very tolerant.

The following morning, Mlle. de Lalieux sent us her auto to drive to her home at Nivelles, and on the way to stop and visit Cardianl Mercier at his country home, L'Hermite. We reached the Cardinal's simple country home, looking out upon wide stretches of meadows and fields in the Vallon country, at eleven in the morning, and Mlle. Cappe and Dorothea and I were with him for about an hour. He is a very liberal man, keen that the workers should have full justice done them, and very eager that the trade

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unionists of the various groups should come to an understanding, for, as he said, the division of the workers makes it so easy for the employers. He has a lovely garden and retires to this simple home for study and work. He was born of simple fold a mile or so from where he is now living in the country.

We reached Nivelles and Mll. de Lalieux's home in time for luncheon, and how I wished that you might have been with us. Her father was Burgomaster of Nivelles, imprisoned by the Germans and as a result of all the physical conditions, though released later, he died before the end of the war, and her only brother was killed in the war. Mlle. de Lalieux is Chairman of the Christian Unions of her province and we were taken to their Headquarters, where there were classes going on, something like the Y.W.C.A. classes, in needlework, singing, physical culture, languages, history and so forth. We met about thirty of the young students. In this little town of about 30,000 inhabitants Mlle de Lablieux has been unanimously elected city councillor. She is a fine distinguished woman. That afternoon we drove to Charlerei, and thence took the train to Paris.

I had written Jeanne Bouvier and Georgette Bouillot of my coming but for the first day we missed connections. However, I went at once to La Bourse du Travail, and, although I missed Jeanne Bouvier there, I was welcomed b y the various officers of the organisations with a friendliness and courtesy and interest which would have satisfied even my fellow-workers in America. I was shown everything; I met the leading officers of most of the 150 Unions represented there; I was present at a great strike meeting of 2,000 workers in their great hall; and we discussed every question back and forth. Again the question of unemployment; again the great tragedy of the division of the workers; and the fact that the greatest number of the trade unionists of Paris had become Communists. The bitterness is very great. When I did see Jeanne Bouvier and Georgette Bouillot and had a visit with them of several hours, they told me that most of the women in the Trade Unions had left the organisation. It is an appalling fact. Among them, the most alive in the work have gone into the Communist group, the more conservative into the Christian group, and some have dropped out of the movement altogether. Jeanne Bouvier is so bitter about this division in her own ranks that she refuses to have anything to do with Madame Duchene because she insists that the latter is "red". She is bitter against Russia, bitter against our Czecho-Slovakia fellow-workers, because she insists they too are red; and bitter against the whole world. The latest plan is, as worked out by the Amsterdam Federation, that we are to become a section of the International Federation of Trade Unions. Do you suppose that I have fought and bled and nearly died for the cause to give the Congress of Working Women into the keeping of Messrs Oudegeest, Fimmen and Jouheaux?

You will be greatly distressed to hear that Georgette Bouillot has been very very ill. She looks as if she were ill with tuberculosis, and when I remember that radiant young girl in Washington and realise how pale and wan she now is, it hurts me to the quick. She said that the divisions and terrible battles royal among the labour people had so hurt her that she was not at all sure she could go on w ith life itself. At one of their great meetings the Communists and the Socialists became so violent that the Police had to be called in and one man was killed.

I also had a very lovely visit with Madame Duchene, and discussed

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all angles of our work with her, and she is coming as a visitor to the Congress.

It is time to close because this letter has become a book. I was at Chateau Thierry and Belleau Woods, where our American soldiers lie buried, and at Vaux and Bogeres, and then again at the cemetery at Chateau Thierry, where the French and American and German soldiers lie buried side by side. Of all that another time.

From Paris we came directly here.

With much, much love to you all, and the wish that it might have been possible for the entire Executive Board of our League to have been over here, so that we might interpret the purpose both of the League and the Congress.

Always affectionately your friend,

(Signed) Margaret Dreier Robins.

P.S. I have been writing under such full speed that I quite forget to tell you of two very important incidents.

First, I had sent word to Madame Curie to say I was bringing greetings to her from the organised working women of America and one of the very first tasks I had set myself in Paris was to visit her and to take her the beautiful illuminated greetings. I found her home very easily but she had left me a message expressing much regret that she had suddenly and unexpectedly been called to Boulogne and would therefore not be able to welcome me. I was greatly disappointed, as you can well imagine, and I wondered what I could do with our important bit of parchment. However an inspiration came to me, and I took it to Madame Duchene, who will have it framed and will then take it personally to Madame Curie.

On Tuesday morning at about a quarter past eight, Dr. Royal Meeker of Washington, who is now in the International Labour Office, came to see me and asked me to go with him to the International Labour Office and there meet the Director, M.Thomas, at nine o'clock. I scurried through breakfast and we drove out to the most beautiful gardens in the midst of which are the headquarters of the International Labour Office. The building used to be a boys' school, and reminds me somewhat of Navy Building in Washington. The trees and flowers are most beautiful. I had a very happy and interesting interview with M.Thomas, who has appointed Miss Sophy Sanger and Mrs Weaver as representatives of the International Labour Office to our Congress, and further has appointed Dr. Riddle, the expert of the Agricultural Department to present the Agricultural Agenda to us with all the information at his command; and still further M. Thomas is coming himself to address the Congress on October 18th.

Mr Oudegeest will address the Congress on Monday morning, the day of the opening. Nine delegates are coming from England, six from France, and among the other delegates and official visiters will be Mrs Ruxton of South Africa. Please let Miss Henry know how very glad I am to meet one of her friends.

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P.S. No.2

Just as I am closing this letter your cablegram and the cablegram from Ethel Smith have come. You can rest assured that we will do our best to get a European representative from the Congress sent to Washington, provided we are permitted to be alive after the great battle of division and theories and philosophies stages for the coming Congress shall have ended. The French Christian Unions are sending a delegate as well as the Belgians, and a delegate is also coming from their International Congress. They have one great point: they are willing to sit in the Congress with anybody, including Communists. The burden and curse of exclusion is put upon the other side. We are expecting delegates from Poland and Czecho Slovakia, Norway and Switzerland, China and Japan, and possibly the South African women will bring credentials to the Labour Congress. Of course I cannot be with you November 15th. We must see this thing through.

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