

## Albert Thomas at ICA Congresses

*A snapshot coordinated by the ICA Global Office to mark the 100 years of ILO COOP*

- I. The following is mostly based on the seminal work co-authored by Dr. Rita Rhodes and Professor Dionysos Mavrogiannis, titled Thematic Guide to ICA Congresses that chronicles the congresses from 1895-1995. The following also carries an important section under VIII on page 3, which is an excerpt from a paper titled Analysis of the ILO Notion of Work related to that of Cooperatives by Dr. Claudia Sanchez Bajo. This paper was written for the ILO and ICA International Research Conference on the World of Work and Cooperatives in Antalya on 10 November 2015. The full paper is available [here](#). The paper was also one of the chapters of the ICA book published by Routledge in 2019, under the title 1. Work and cooperatives: A century of ILO interaction with the cooperative movement, Claudia Sanchez Bajo, available [here](#)

Prof. Mavrogiannis was a member of the ICA Advisory Committee for the Basic Values which aided Sven Åke Böök's Report to the ICA Congress in Tokyo in 1992, titled Cooperative Values in a Changing World, as well as the Committee for the Cooperative Identity and Principles that aided Ian MacPherson's Report to the ICA Centennial Congress, Manchester. He served as Director of ILO's office for countries in Central African, South and South East Asia from 1962-76, before heading the Section of Legislation, Studies and Documentation of the ILO Cooperative Branch in Geneva, from 1983 – 1992.



Dr. Rita Rhodes is an expert and authority on the life and times of the ICA and lives in England.

She was a Lecturer in Cooperative Studies at the University of Ulster. She was chair of the British Society of Cooperative Studies and gained her PhD on the topic 'ICA During War and Peace 1910-1950'. She had had held several educational posts in the British Consumer Cooperative movement as well as at the ICA where she served as Secretary of the Women's Committee. She had carried out education, training and evaluation assignments in Egypt, Malaysia, Mongolia and Sri Lanka. She also worked closely with Prof. Ian Macpherson on the review of the Cooperative Principles that culminated with the adoption of the ICA Statement on the Cooperative Identity in 1995.



Claudia Sanchez Bajo is an alumni of the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) Erasmus University Rotterdam. She is a Lecturer, research and PhD in Development Studies associated with several universities across the world. She is a member executive of the ICA Global CCR. Her main areas of teaching and research are entrepreneurship, cooperatives, social and solidarity economy, peacebuilding, international political economy. In 2013 - 2015, she was the Inaugural Chair in Cooperatives Enterprises at the University of Winnipeg, Canada.

- II. ICA was a relatively new organization in 1913, when during its 9<sup>th</sup> Congress in Glasgow, Scotland, it grappled with the fact that an unprecedented war was imminent. Albert Thomas, then a representative of French consumer cooperatives and member of the ICA Central Committee (present day ICA Board), had in support of G.J.D.C. Goedhart (Holland), William Maxwell (U.K.), Adolf von Elm (Germany), spoken vehemently for peace among nations, and contributed to the ICA Peace Resolution that read *“This [9<sup>th</sup>] Congress fully endorses the action recently taken by the Executive and Central Committees of the ICA in order to manifest that it is in the interests of the cooperators of all countries to do their best to uphold peace. The Congress emphasises once more that the maintenance of peace and goodwill among all nations constitutes an essential condition for the development of cooperation and the realization of those ends which are aimed by this movement. The Congress further desires to impress upon the public opinion of all nations the fact that the reasons for the continuance of armaments and the possibility of conflicts will disappear as the social and economic life of every nation becomes organized according to cooperative principles, and that, therefore, the progress of cooperation forms one of the most valuable guarantees for the preservation of the world's peace. The Congress therefore exhorts the people of every country to join our movement and strengthen their power. The international cooperative alliance declares itself in Amity with all the Cooperators of the world and welcomes any action they may take in this direction or in which they may participate. Congress also welcomes all demonstrations made or to be made by other organizations with the same aim.”* The resolve of this Congress to reconvene in Basel, Switzerland, in 1916, never materialized.
- III. The Congress was eventually convened after nine years in Basel from 22-25 August 1921 against the backdrop of a world that had witnessed the fall of three empires, Russian, German and Austrian, and a heavily weakened Western Europe. Revolutions had occurred in Russia, and Baltic States had gained their independence. The world was also witnessing the advent of a new world order with the setting up of the League of Nations, and within its system, the International Labour Organization. Albert Thomas had become the first ever Director of the ILO, and he continued ICA Central Committee and represented the French consumer cooperatives. This Congress welcomed the idea and setting up of the League of Nations and the ILO. Thomas proposed a paper on the Policy of International Cooperation during the discussions. ICA has advocated for production based on consumers’ needs during the inter-war years, to ensure such production was neither exploitative, nor speculative. ICA had therefore condemned Governments that developed protectionist policies which restricted trade. Thomas, in his paper had argued the antithesis of protectionism was free trade but was wary of ICA supporting it fully as he feared that would increase the danger of economic nationalism. As an international civil servant, he reported to the ICA, the concerns of the League of Nations and that of the ILO, about post war problems with the efficient distribution of food and raw materials. He supported the League’s proposed establishment of an International Statistical Office to record commodity movements. He had realized long back the deficiency of statistics and collection of data, within the cooperative movement. Thomas argued that cooperatives should oppose war in all its forms, including trade wars. He also denounced competition if it weakened association between all nations, so beloved by cooperators since Robert Owen.
- IV. The 11<sup>th</sup> Congress in Ghent, Belgium was where the Rainbow flag of cooperation was first hoisted. Albert Thomas presented a paper here on the relations between different types of cooperation. The paper strongly reflected cooperatives’ continuing pre-occupation with the concept of a ‘fair-price’. As Thomas observed, cooperators wished to establish a fair price, rather than have to rely on the blind play of economic forces which is itself often thrown out of gear by combinations of private interests.

Thomas focussed on two areas in this context, one, to fix reasonable prices for transferring the produce of agricultural societies to consumer cooperatives, and second on making the wage-system more cooperative. He argued that in both cases the heart of the problem was what cooperatives should do if they felt that existing market rates inadequately distributed just regards. He argued further that cooperators should develop reciprocal services and show a just respect for labour. Fair pricing was also one of the central concerns of the Rochdale pioneers. Their mechanism of the dividend was used not only to blunt the hostility of private traders, but also to trade with fair, or just, prices, a concept which they had taken from Robert Owen who in turn had been inspired by the English political economist, David Ricardo (1771-1812). This had remained at the heart of the struggles between producers and consumer cooperation, and still concerned cooperators in 1924. Thomas questioned the then prevailing belief that consumer societies could organize and manage agricultural production. He did believe this as a case of over-simplification as there was an evident diversity of agricultural production among countries, and that international cooperation may possibly emerge through the consumer movements' wholesale. On industrial producer cooperatives, Thomas wanted to see more such societies as a means to cooperatives the wages system. Like Charles Gide, he too recognized shortcomings in such societies, like administering capital. He therefore proposed a form of workers' cooperative that might get around this problem. It would be self-managing inasmuch as it contracted for work, organized its members to perform it, and equitably distributed the payment received for it.

- V. It was reported to the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress in Stockholm, Sweden, the League of Nations in 1927, had organized a three-week World Economic Forum in Geneva, and had invited the ICA to send two delegates. Agricultural cooperatives made a very strong mark during the Agricultural commission at this conference, and a related resolution called for the fostering of closer relations between consumer and agricultural cooperatives by setting up joint committees at national and international levels in order to develop programmes of research and documentation. This resolution could not materialize by the League, but in 1931, the initiative was taken up by the ILO that was headed by an ICA Central Committee member, Albert Thomas, who persuaded the International Commission of Agriculture to join with the ICA to establish an Inter-Cooperative or Joint-Committee. Seven representatives from each organization comprised the Committee, which was chaired by Albert Thomas himself, and serviced by the Cooperative Service of the ILO. Harold Butler, Thomas's successor took over after latter's untimely death. This Joint Committee worked until the second War broke out in 1939.
- VI. An important paper presented in the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress in Vienna, Austria in 1930, by Sir Thomas Allen of the U.K. titled Marketing, Pooling and Financing of `cooperative Productions in Relation to the Consumers' Movement alluded to Albert Thomas's paper to the 11<sup>th</sup> Congress in Ghent, and echoed an important part of it, which was the diversity of agriculture permitted no simplistic view od agricultural cooperatives' trading relations with European cooperative wholesales, and that large wholesale cooperatives were not trading with local farmers and rather trade was happening on an inter-continental level.
- VII. By this time, George Fauquet, the Head of the Cooperative Section of the ILO attended the Congresses just like Albert Thomas, i.e. as a member of the ICA Central Committee.
- VIII. Excerpt from Dr. Claudia Sanchez Bajo's paper on the Analysis of the ILO Notion of Work related to that of Cooperatives

### First ILO Director Albert Thomas on work and cooperatives

The ILO was created by the Peace Treaty of Versailles just after the end of World War I in 1919. Following a period of globalisation and liberalisation, colonisation and imperialism at the end of the 19th century, nationalism and rearmament had led to the World War I. Besides, in 1917, the Russian revolution had taken place. Europe had millions of displaced refugees, poor and disabled soldiers. Production and supply of almost everything was disrupted.

The Peace Treaty of Versailles gave two justifications to the ILO. First, the one which is most well-known, that “peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice” while conditions of labour were so unjust, hard and causing privation as to produce unrest. Second, there was an argument about unfair trade competition through a race to the bottom: “Whereas also the failure of any nation to adopt humane conditions of labour is an obstacle in the way of other nations which desire to improve the conditions in their own countries” (Peace Treaty of Versailles, Part XIII, Section 1).

From the start, the ILO was set as a permanent institution with a membership of nation-states (Peace Treaty of Versailles, article 387) that would work on the basis of a tripartite dialogue along corporatist interest representation (article 393) to “deal with questions of industry and employment” (Idem, article 397). Its main functions were based on data collection and treatment of “all subjects relating to the international adjustment of conditions of industrial life and labour... with a view to the conclusion of international conventions” (Idem, article 396). Thus, the ILO came to enjoy two types of power, a soft persuasive power through tripartism and a harder power through international conventions that are binding. During the first period, the ILO documents effectively include a huge number of conventions, special studies and building of databases.

According to the ILO Timeline by Igor Vocatch-Voldirev, ILO official at the Cooperative Unit, ICA General Secretary Henry May suggested to Albert Thomas that the ILO should have representatives of the cooperatives “to close a gap in the ILO’s constitution” in 1919.

In March 1920, according to Albert Thomas, the first ILO Director, a unanimous decision by the ILO Council of Administration led the ILO “to monitor the cooperative movement... a mass movement... a movement of ideas... that moves towards the goals of fairness, order and worker emancipation... The ILO... had to exploit this treasure of practical experiences that represent the cooperative movement... almost all general problems of labour concerns cooperation or involves solutions that cooperation can provide” (Thomas, 1931b, page 290).

Albert Thomas was a French socialist reformist with direct ties to German thinkers who regarded cooperatives as one of the highest expressions of self-conscious organised labour. Cooperatives, in his view, were formed by workers (ouvriers) who took their destiny into their own hands, conscious of their knowledge and needs. He was himself a cooperator and he gathered extensive knowledge on the cooperative movement during his travel throughout Europe. He was also an active local French politician and a historian of modern times aspiring to bring about common happiness (le bonheur commun) within the Republic. Both Bernstein and Thomas assessed cooperatives in utilitarian fashion as a movement towards ‘happiness’ and ‘progress’. However, “Bernstein’s ideas themselves are not included, they are reduced to their simplest components and then reintegrated in different pitches... consumer cooperatives (were) rejected by orthodox Marxists... Bernstein, defends them after finding that social and economic developments require a change of doctrine... there can be no socialization of the means of production through cooperation without achieving democracy, and vice versa... (But) The bottom of Bernstein’s argument on consumer cooperatives is abandoned, its name is used to justify a position that is not his” (Aglan).



Among the many valuable documents gathered at the ILO Archives, three key speeches by Albert Thomas on cooperatives between 1919 and 1931 stand out during the period in which he was the first ILO Director. They have been selected due to their prominence and logic. These speeches were written in French and some extracts are translated by the author of this document into English to show the conceptualisation of work and of cooperative under Albert Thomas' mandate, signifying first and foremost his personal concerns about solutions for a world having gone through World War I and the Great Depression.

Concerning the ILO, Thomas "opposed the original design in which the protection of labour is presented solely in terms of distribution of the wealth produced, in favour of considering... the place of work in the process of production itself" (Maupain 2013, page 68). This further explains his interest in cooperatives as the latter were so important in the construction of the work place and of workers in the processes of production and distribution. A century later, Thomas' position could not be timelier. Let's think of transnational companies, CSR, Uberisation, subcontracting and traceability debates, to mention a few.

### Cooperatives' presence at the ILO during the first period

In the first years of existence of the ILO and as long as Albert Thomas lived, cooperatives had exactly the same representation within the ILO as workers and employers had, as shown in the ILO Organizational Yearbooks. There were many written and personal exchanges between Albert Thomas and representatives of both national cooperative movements and the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA). Exchanges took place mainly with Europeans both west and east, but also the USA, the Joint council of cooperative organisations in Tel Aviv, at the very start. Afterwards, exchanges included Latin America, and much later became world-wide. Yet, "consultations never reached the status of those with the employers' and workers' organizations" (Fazzio and Ullrich, 1996).

The ICA tried to assert cooperatives as a social movement in favour of labour interests, workers and consumers. Debates between the ICA and the International Federation of Trade Unions were immediately reported to the ILO. A meeting of 9<sup>th</sup> December 1922, for example, was archived on 1<sup>st</sup> December at the ILO. The ICA had requested a) an 'entente' and exchange of delegates, b) joint propaganda demonstrating their economic interdependence and reciprocal action, c) the promotion of 'consumers' councils' to oversee "methods of production and supply in the interest of consumers", d) a joint committee to regularly discuss not only wages and labour conditions but also "questions of Peace, war, disarmament, free trade, protection, etc." and e) "joint action to secure direct representation of both movements on international economic bodies, such as the International Labour Bureau, the economic section of the League of Nations, etc." Success was elusive.

From the beginning, we can observe a steady network of contacts and exchanges between the ILO and selected cooperative movements, with Albert Thomas at the centre. But there was a tension between being a social movement widely and largely present in the economy and society and being an epistemic community with specific expertise (letters). Albert Thomas discussed this question with cooperators. While the French and Italian tried to secure and maintain the same position of employers and workers, a letter from England to Thomas explains that there is little advocacy even from fellow cooperators (UK letter).

In the first period, in 1937, the ICA revised for the first time the "Rochdale Principles". Autonomy and democratic control remained central issues to the shared identity. Other key issues were the treatment of capital, neutrality, voluntary will and participation, and education. The ICA Special Committee of 1930-37 sought to "maintain the Co-operative Movement's autonomy vis-a-vis political parties and governments".

<http://www.uwcc.wisc.edu/icic/orgs/ica/pubs/Other-ICA-Publications1/Report-of-the-ICA-Commission-on-Co-opera1/Part-I---Introduction--1966-1.html>

*If the word 'autonomy' does not appear in these principles, "the Special Committee have come to the conclusion that the following seven points may be considered from the historical point of view as the essential Principles of Rochdale and the characteristics of the autonomous system founded by the Pioneers" (The Present Application of the Rochdale Principles, Studies and Reports, ICA, London, 1964, 24-25)*

*After Albert Thomas passed away in 1932, his Deputy Director Harold Butler, from the UK, succeeded him. The latter had been active in the ground work to create the ILO as well as Secretary General of the first ILO Conference. Yet, while Thomas was a visionary, Butler did not carry Thomas's position through (see Maupain 2013, page 68-69). In the case of cooperatives, they disappeared from the partners pages and sent way down in the ILO Yearly Organisational Books as a 'problem', as can be observed from 1934 onwards, to never return to their original place.*

*Besides, the ILO had a new member. As geopolitical tensions mounted, Butler believed that the "greatest single reinforcement that could be looked for was the entrance of the United States into the Organisation, which it did in 1934. The world was already turning bipolar and the only ILO study in 1932 on cooperatives was a major study on Russian cooperatives.*

*Butler continued the work of building direct relations with countries outside Europe in order to assess their situation and provide them with technical assistance. ILO officials were sent on missions to Latin America, Asia and the Middle East. An ILO Overseas Section was to work on 'special problems' of those countries, which we read at the end of each ILO Organizational Yearbook, mainly cooperatives, the agrarian question and indigenous peoples. In January 1936, the first ILO Regional Conference took place in Chile, and during World War II, it was only feasible to work with countries in Latin America.*

#### Preliminary conclusions of the First Period

*What is Albert Thomas' idea of happiness and social justice about, and how did he connect that idea to cooperatives? There is corporatism in his discourse and his call for a "necessary entente" with industrialists, government and workers. In his view, the state should and could be the catalytic force to achieve economic development on the basis of rational socio-economic organisation that required first social peace as a foundation.*

*As for progress, Thomas seems to naively praise the idea of technical progress and utilitarian productivity, but he was also worried about the competition stemming from the new Taylorist and Ba'ta systems, and acknowledged the disastrous consequences of wars, financial crises, crises of overproduction and undersupply. He was also concerned with the Russian revolution which he did not favour.*

*Thomas speaks of ouvriers (workers), not of labour in abstract terms. Solidarity in values and in practice is high in his mind, if not mentioned as such, and can be traced in all the relations, connections, services and general organisation for mutual help among the people and their families and communities through cooperatives, in both rural and urban areas, that he mentions. Thomas was not concerned with nature, but he was concerned with the workers' environment to be healthy, nurturing, emancipatory, and most of all, with the inter-generational nature of the cooperative enterprise, that by having in part an indivisible capital it could outlive its members and include new ones. The concern for a sustainable enterprise is very present and, again, Thomas was well discerning. Unfortunately, after he passed away, geopolitical considerations would have stark consequences for the place of the cooperative movement within the ILO.*

*Albert Thomas spelt out what would be the ILO focus during the XX century as far as cooperatives were concerned: first of all, the ILO would become one of the most important international centers of study on*



cooperatives (page 291). Such studies were to “offer to the ILO itself, for the achievement of other tasks, advantages not to miss, due to the contacts that they will guarantee with the multitude of small units in the agricultural economy, the artisanal economy and the household economy” (page 295). A changing ILO relationship with cooperatives can be observed, from a movement to a focus on building of an epistemic community.

David Mitrany, the father of functionalism, praised the “whole activity of the ILO” (Mitrany 1943, page 105 and 109), advocating a peaceful world organized on the basis of functional relations through a network of agencies and their activity that would integrate nations in a ramified and flexible manner. Transnational cooperation seeking to solve problems common to various states would bring about interdependence (Mitrany 1943). Thomas mentions that ‘cooperation’, namely experts or specific persons of contact in the cooperative movement, had taken part in the 1927 International Economic Conference. This will turn out to be a community of experts built with some representatives of cooperatives but also a community of knowledge internal to the institution that will assure its autonomy and specificity.

