

## THE INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATIVE ALLIANCE.

### ITS ACTIVITY DURING THE LAST YEAR.

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Internationalism, in an ever increasing degree, becomes the pass-word of the day. The politicians have their League of Nations, the social reformers their International Labour Office, and the co-operators have their International Organisation - the International Co-operative Alliance. By its aid the interests of Co-operation are defended in the international forum, and in its circles, aggressive as well as defensive, means are discussed whenever a common danger threatens. Its main task is, however, to serve as a peaceful educational and propaganda Alliance, in addition to which it is concerned with the exposition of co-operative principles.

It has been pleasing to observe how the interest in the International Co-operative Alliance has grown from year to year. It has been able to extend its influence to an ever-increasing number of new countries so that to-day it has become a real International Organisation. This is demonstrated by the fact that its membership now comprises 206 Co-operative Organisations in 39 different countries. And as there are at least 52 million individual members affiliated to these Organisations, one may estimate that the co-operatively organised persons, together with their families, who are affiliated to this World Alliance compose a co-operative world of about 200 million souls.

In addition to the external growth, the Alliance has also been strengthened internally. It is of importance that the finances of the Alliance have notably improved, enabling it to carry out its duties with greater vigour. Indeed, even its present annual budget of £8,000 is not worth special mention for an important international institution, but, in comparison with the conditions that existed even only five years ago, the progress has already been rather notable. This progress has, above all, enabled the Alliance to start to acquire additional strength to its staff, which is now able to pay attention to many matters that have hitherto, by the force of circumstances, had to wait their turn. As a sign of a more spirited time there is the prosaic fact that this growing institution will soon have to find new office premises in London for its increasing work.

The current business of the Alliance is conducted by the General Secretary, but the treatment of bigger questions and matters of principle are settled at the Meetings which, in addition to the Triennial Congresses, are held in the course of the year by the Central Committee as well as by the Executive. During one year, from the beginning of July, 1928, the Central Committee has held one meeting at Geneva, and the Executive four meetings, viz., at Liège, Geneva, Prague, and Paris. Below is found a short account of the most important matters that have been dealt with at these meetings.

## ECONOMIC QUESTIONS.

It is evident, by the very nature of the Alliance, that it pays great attention to the universal economic questions in close touch also with the Co-operative Movement. The Co-operative Movement is principally, indeed, an economic Movement, and consequently every step it takes brings it in touch with economic problems.

In the debates that have taken place in the organs of the Alliance, great attention has during last year been paid to the operations of Trusts and Cartels, and to the question of the most suitable methods to be applied against their menace to the consumers. International capital organising its activity systematically, the I.C.A. as a representative of the world's organised consumers has not been able to remain an indifferent spectator but has been forced to consider counteractions. The conviction has gained ground that but little can be gained by State action or by legislation in this respect. The only effective counteraction must come from co-operative quarters.

Our Swedish friends, in particular, have systematically considered this question. In their own country they have fought many a hot battle with Trusts and Cartels, and, consequently, it is but natural that they should have hoped for a joint deliberation on this question. On their initiative it was proposed that the I.C.A. would undertake a scientific investigation into this question, that it would start to gather material about the operations of these capitalistic world-wide Organisations, and that it would consider the necessary counter-actions. At the same time the Swedish C.W.S. suggested that a research institute of this kind would, under the control of the I.C.A., be established at Stockholm, unless other countries would be willing to carry out this work, and it offered to make a substantial contribution towards the expenses of such investigations.

The proposition was generally supported, and one felt thankful to the Swedes for having taken up the question. On the other hand, the idea that the work should be carried out at Stockholm gave cause to some misgivings, as it was considered to be of great importance that the work of the I.C.A. should not be scattered, but that it should be carried out at one place in London. The Central Committee decided to start the work and to create the necessary organs for the same. Subsequently it has progressed in such a direction that the Executive, in conjunction with the Executive of the International Co-operative Wholesale Society, have taken up the matter themselves, and they have now decided jointly to undertake this research work from a theoretical as well as a practical point of view. The work has already been started along certain lines.

An elucidation of the same question has been the aim of a series of articles which the Editor of the official journal of the I.C.A., the Review of International Co-operation, has obtained from some of the most prominent experts on this subject in different countries. This series of articles closed with one from the pen of the old co-operative veteran, Professor Charles Gide, in which article he examines the question from the point of view of the interests of the Co-operative Movement.

As the deliberation on economic questions from an international point of view is just now at a focal point at the League of Nations, which for the purpose has nominated two Committees, the Economic Committee, and the Consultative Economic Committee, the I.C.A. has wished to follow closely the work of these Committees, and to take care that there also due attention should be paid to the interests of Co-operation. This, too, has been made possible by the fact that a couple of Executive members are representatives on the last-mentioned Committee, besides which the General Secretary of the I.C.A. is present in a consultative capacity. These persons are at the same time acting as a Sub-Committee of the Executive of the I.C.A., the duty of which is to follow the development of the economic questions. This Sub-Committee has during the last year made numerous enquiries of which the most important one dealt with the business relations between the Co-operative Societies of Agricultural Producers and the Distributive Societies. The results of the last-mentioned inquiry were presented at the meeting of the Consultative Committee, held in the spring of 1929 at Geneva.

The question as to the business relations between the Agricultural Producers and the Consumers, which was an important debating question at the Stockholm Congress, has also been discussed by the administrative organs of the Alliance. This question has acquired an international character thanks to a journey which the General Secretary of the I.C.A. made to Canada in the summer of 1928, during which journey he paid particular attention to the Canadian Wheat Pools and discussed with their representatives the possibilities of an eventual co-operation between the producers affiliated to the Pools and the Consumers of Europe. The report of the General Secretary led to an extensive and interesting discussion at the Meeting of the Central Committee. Falling back upon the resolution of the Stockholm Congress at which closer relations were recommended between the co-operative enterprises of consumers and producers, the Committee was of the unanimous opinion that relations should be entered into with the Canadian Wheat Pools, which relations eventually might lead to business collaboration. It was decided to make an effort to call together an International Conference at which would be represented, on the one hand, the Consumers' Organisations of various countries, and, on the other hand, the representatives of the said Pools. Should this idea as to business relations some time be realised, then the producers of a big world article and the consumers would have been brought into contact with one another.

#### FUTURE ACTIVITIES.

When the I.C.A. was founded there existed no clearly defined economic programme for its future activities. During the first years, on the contrary, all kinds of tasks were pressed upon it which had little in common with the aims of Co-operation. However, the programme has slowly crystallized so that, from the Hamburg Congress in 1910, one can say that the I.C.A. has found its right field of activity.

But even after this a detailed programme was lacking for those matters and questions to which the I.C.A. should give its attention. Indeed, there have been efforts enough in this direction. At the Basle and Ghent Congresses in 1921 and 1924 wide resolutions were carried for this purpose. Consequently, it cannot be wondered at that there has been a general desire for a clearly defined programme, and this caused the Stockholm Congress of 1927 to carry the following resolution

of Mr. Albert Thomas: "The Congress instructs the Central Committee to appoint a Commission to consider the question of a programme for the future work of the International Co-operative Alliance".

The Central Committee has already taken measures to carry out this task. It has nominated a Special Committee to prepare, in conjunction with the Executive, a programme. The national member Organisations have been asked to send in suggestions as to the questions they consider to be most important, and suggestions have been amply supplied.

As far as one can judge by the present progress of the work, this programme will comprise questions going in two directions: firstly, the organisation of the inner activity of the I.C.A., and, secondly, those universal economic and other problems that just now are of interest to the world at large.

With regard to the inner activity of the I.C.A., one circumstance is of particular interest to the future, namely, should an effort be made to concentrate its inner activity in a higher degree than hitherto or should it be allowed to scatter its work upon numerous Commissions and Committees? Hitherto the development has been in the direction of decentralisation. For instance, International Wholesale Trading, Banking and Insurance, are all being prepared by special Committees which are all more or less independent of the central organs of the Alliance. And when new problems have appeared, an effort has been made to create special organs also for their solution. Against this development a reaction has now been started.

With regard to the other questions that figure on the programme for consideration, the following headings are likely to give some kind of idea as to the nature of the matters that have been suggested during the preparation of the programme. Among others, the following questions have been suggested: the Relations between Producers' and Consumers' Organisations; Problems of Co-operative Distribution; Problems of Co-operative Production; International Economic Policy; New Forms of Production (Trusts, Cartels, etc.); Banking and Assurance; Collaboration with other International Organisations, etc. A common point in all the propositions concerning this matter seems to be the demand that the I.C.A. with its affiliated Organisations should confess themselves to be supporters of Free Trade. The free exchange of goods between the nations is one of the first qualifications for better economic conditions. The Co-operative Organisations of all countries seem to be unanimous in their opinion that the consumers' position cannot be improved without Free Trade.

These suggested questions form only part of the enormous table of contents that have been collected at this first stage of the matter. It is to be hoped that the programme under preparation will be sufficiently ready in the course of next year so that it can be presented for discussion to the Congress. Then one would finally get a detailed programme for the I.C.A., and the complaints about vagueness in this respect would cease.

## THE PREPARATIONS FOR THE NEXT CONGRESS.

Though the next Congress is still fairly distant, it is to be held in August, 1930, in Vienna, one has, however, already had time to prepare a good deal of work. The Congress begins already to take a fixed shape, and one can see with what questions it will be concerned.

Considering what questions will be presented to the Congress for discussion, the opinion of the National Organisations was asked for to begin with. Among the number of questions they submitted, a couple of general interest were thereupon selected. One of these will deal with "The Principles of Rochdale Co-operation and Modern Systems of Credit Trading", and the other with "The Pooling, Financing and Marketing of Co-operative Production in Relation to the Consumers' Movement".

The Report of the Central Committee will, of course, also be an important question at the Congress, and will cause a lively discussion.

There having been some dissatisfaction in certain quarters with the sluggishness of the Congresses hitherto, the organs of the I.C.A. have, in the course of the last year, given considerable attention to the question of the Congress Procedure. Amongst other propositions it has been suggested that a system should be adopted according to which the Congress would divide itself into several sections, each section dealing with matters submitted to it, while the Congress itself would only confirm their decisions. However, this proposal has not received any general support. In one respect it is, however, likely that the old procedure will be changed. This proposal is that, while preserving the unity of the Congress, there shall be nominated at the opening of the Congress a special Resolutions' Committee, the duty of which will be to prepare, for the final plenary session, draft resolutions calculated to rally the majority of the delegates to their support. In addition, the proposal contains many practical stipulations, the aim of which is to simplify the Congress work.

A proposition will also be made to the Congress that the speakers should be allowed to use any other than the three official languages, provided they bring with them an interpreter who translates their speeches into one of the Congress languages. This is the result of the continued demands of the Russians that the Russian language should be recognised as one of the official languages. This wish will now partly be taken into consideration, though it will also be extended to all other languages. The same practice is already observed by the Central Committee and by the Executive.

## INNER ACTIVITIES.

It has already been mentioned that the improved financial position of the Alliance has made it possible to increase the staff. According to the decision of the Central Committee the aim has been to complete the staff of the Alliance by engaging a person for the treatment of certain economic questions, and another one for taking care of the publication and propaganda work. In this way it has been made possible to extend the field of work, one result of which is the publication of two regular News Services, one General Co-operative and the other Economic, for the benefit of the national co-operative newspapers.

A big achievement, to which, however, but little attention has been paid, is the fact that the I.C.A. has published its second comprehensive International Co-operative Statistics, the first having been presented to the Stockholm Congress. The drawbacks in this respect have been very badly felt, as there have been no kinds of useful International Co-operative Statistics. This effort is very successful and it is filling a badly felt gap. The intention is to continually improve the statistics so that we may have, 'ere long, quite reliable and useful International Co-operative Statistics. The achievement of same is still confronted with big difficulties, as the national statistics are of a greatly differing nature, besides which, the statistics of many countries are still lacking in many respects.

With regard to the International Co-operative School a big change has taken place during the last year, as from last summer it is altogether under the management and control of the I.C.A. Hitherto the British Union has mainly organised the School, though it has acted in the name of the I.C.A. and in collaboration with it. It was considered, however, that the time had come when the I.C.A. could undertake to bear the expenses of this School, and, of course, at the same time also the responsibility for its organisation. The deeply felt thanks were expressed to the British Union on account of the aid it has rendered hitherto. Last summer the School was held at The Hague under the Presidency of Mr. G.J.D.C. Goedhart, the late President of the Alliance. This turned out to be a very interesting occasion, partly on account of the fact that it was combined with an International Press Conference.

In connection with the inner activities of the Alliance, attention should also be paid to those institutions which are working in close connection with the I.C.A., and which for a long time past have prepared their programmes for their own activities. Of these the Joint Committees of the Co-operative Banks, as well as those of the Co-operative Insurance establishments, are still continuing their preparatory work, and they have already done a great deal of useful work in their own spheres of activity. The International Co-operative Wholesale Society already marks a notable step forward as a result of last year's activity. At its meeting, held at Geneva in November, 1928, it decided to take a decisive step, deciding in principle to start with the exchange of goods, at first in the shape of agents. For this purpose an office will be opened in London, and a suitable person is being sought for as a manager. At the time of writing this article the matter has, however, not yet been practically realised.

#### THE DEATH OF SIR WILLIAM MAXWELL.

On February 9th, 1929, Sir William Maxwell, who for many years had been a President of the I.C.A., died at a ripe age. Though for many years he had not taken an active part in the work of the I.C.A., his previous work for the benefit of the Alliance had been of such a value that he held a firm and honourable position in the history of the Alliance. Consequently, his death caused a deep sorrow, and members of the I.C.A. paid him a great tribute. The valuable work that Sir William had done for British Co-operation is so well known that it needs no explanation in this connection. And in his capacity as President of the I.C.A. he played a long and important part, presiding over the

activity of the I.C.A. right from the Cremona Congress in 1907, when a new career in a way began for the I.C.A., up to 1921 when he, on account of his age, asked to be relieved of his duties.

#### THE LONDON MEETING.

The Central Committee met in London in October, 1929, for the first time on British soil since 1913, or thus before the outbreak of the World War close upon 35 years since the time when the constituent Congress of the I.C.A. was also held in London. Right from that time this Co-operative World Organisation has become a powerful factor in the service of the Co-operative Movement. It may, perhaps, not in all respects have realised the hopes of its founders, but in many respects it has certainly surpassed them. The London Meetings constituted a notable event in the history of the Alliance, for many important questions, before all, the question as to the future activities of the Alliance, were debated. It is to be hoped that the decisions of the London Meetings will, on their part, bring the Alliance a big step forward towards the final goal, at the same time strengthening the importance of the Alliance as an Institution bringing the Co-operative Organisations of the different countries closer to one another.