

The 1919 Session of the ILO Governing Body

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As this issue of World of Work goes to press, the 300th Session of ILO Governing Body is in progress. What was the first meeting like, in November 1919? When US President Franklin D. Roosevelt addressed the International Labour Conference in November 1941, in the middle of the Second World War, he recalled:

“Apparently someone had fallen down on the job of making the necessary physical arrangements...I had to find office space in the Navy Building, as well as supplies and typewriters...

“In those days the ILO was still a dream. To many it was a wild dream. Who had ever heard of Governments getting together to raise the standards of labour on an international plane? Wilder still was the idea that the people themselves who were directly affected – the workers and the employers of the various countries – should have a hand with Government in determining these labour standards... now, twenty-two years have passed. The ILO has been tried and tested...”

A major task of that first meeting was to elect the first Director of the International Labour Office. It was thought that the Directorship would go either to Arthur Fontaine or to Harold Butler. Edward Phelan takes up the story:

“The meeting opened calmly and even casually, though it was soon to become dramatic. Only twenty-one members of the Governing Body were present, as no provision had as yet been made for deputies or substitutes, but they included practically all the outstanding members of the Conference – Fontaine, a little aloof, with the bearded dignity of a gentle and slightly fatigued Olympian; Delevingne, alert as a terrier; Mayor des Planches, gentler even than Fontaine, with a courtliness of another age; Carlier, with a long, square-cut, white beard and a royal appearance...; Jouhaux, who combined a thunderous voice and a buccaneer appearance with an acute political intelligence...”

It was suggested that a provisional Director might be appointed until the next meeting, but “Jouhaux was on his feet at once, and there was a note of menace and determination in his great thundering voice. Things were going too slowly. Were the promises to the workers not to be kept?... A provisional Director?... Let the Governing Body do its duty and make a definite appointment at once!”

After an adjournment, it was agreed that the Governing Body should immediately elect a Chairman and a Director. When Arthur Fontaine was elected permanent Chairman, “by that decision he was eliminated from the list of possible Directors. [His] tenure of the Chairmanship of the Governing Body lasted for ten years, and he filled that office with the highest ability and distinction.

“When Jouhaux demanded that they should now appoint the permanent Director, Delevingne made a further attempt to stem the tide: the matter was one of the most important decisions the Governing Body would have to take: they had had no time to consider it: they had no names before them.

“‘If you have no candidate, we have,’ interrupted the impulsive Mr. Guérin, and the atmosphere became immediately more electric.

It was thus that Albert Thomas made his first appearance in the International Labour Organization. No great man surely ever made such an unexpected and dramatic entry upon what was to prove so great a stage,” writes Phelan.

And the rest, as they say, is history.