

International Conference on Working-Class History

Ronald W. Schatz

Wesleyan University

The Eighteenth International Conference of Historians of the Working-Class Movement (ITH) met in Linz, Austria, from September 14 to 18, 1982. About one hundred people attended. Roughly half were from Austria or the Federal Republic of Germany, but almost every country in Europe (East and West) was represented. Six Japanese scholars (all specialists on German Social Democracy) and three Americans were also present.

The first two days were devoted to discussion of Catholic and, to a lesser extent, company unions before World War II. The choice of topic was a departure for the scholars associated with the ITH, who have historically considered "labor movement" to be synonymous with "socialism." The broadening of perspective doubtless reflects the rapprochement underway between Catholics and left-wingers in Italy, Latin America, and elsewhere.

I was surprised by the rudimentary state of knowledge about Catholic unions in Europe. The most common remark from the rostrum was, "We must learn more about this." However, Jos van Meeuwen of Holland presented an elegant paper on Catholic unions among Dutch shoe and leather workers. Van Meeuwen reported that 40% of organized Dutch workers belonged to confessional unions. He found that workers joined these unions to improve their economic lot and generally considered them effective for this purpose. Both findings contradict existing literature in Dutch labor history. Similar reports of unanticipated Catholic labor strength were presented by historians from Spain, France, Austria, Poland, and the United States.

The last full day of the conference was devoted to a proposal emanating from Eastern Europe for international collaboration on a historical dictionary of labor leaders around the world. To an American relatively new to international meetings, the most interesting feature of the discussion was conflict between Eastern and Western European Communists. "How can we have a dictionary when Bulgarian historians tell me that their government will not permit scholars free access to the Dimitrov papers?" the Spanish delegate asked. A Bulgarian historian protested that this was not so. Private discussions about the proposal for a dictionary were pursued that evening. It remains to be seen if the idea will be implemented.

As at any conference, the most valuable part of the meeting was the chance to mix informally with other scholars. A small affair held in comfortable surroundings,

the Linz conference provides ample occasions for convivial exchange. If only because of the opportunity to meet foreign scholars, I would urge other Americans to go to Linz in the future.

The topics for the September 1983 meeting are "The Working-Class Movement and the Question of Peace, 1917-1939" and "Spontaneity and Organization in the Working-Class Movement as a Methodological Problem." Anyone interested in the conference in Linz should write Helmut Gruber, the American member of the ITH executive board, by March 1, 1983. His address is 425 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10025. The ITH provides accommodations and meals. Subsidies for travel costs may also be available.