

# INTERNATIONAL LABOUR REVIEW

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## ALBERT THOMAS



The International Labour Office mourns an irreparable loss : Albert Thomas is dead. Such a blow, coming so soon after the deaths of Arthur Fontaine, Monsignor Nolens and François Sokal, is the cruellest of all. The man who created the Office, gave it life, and stamped it with his impress, has gone, snatched suddenly away from the work to which for more than twelve years he had devoted every moment of his life and all the energy of his great heart and soul.

When, at the end of 1919, Albert Thomas was called upon to be the Director of the International Labour Office, he could already look back, albeit he was still only in the forty-second year of his age, on a remarkably extensive career. Born at Champigny-sur-Marne on 16 June 1878, the son and the grandson of a baker, Albert Thomas distinguished himself as a youth at the Lycée Michelet ; in 1898 he entered the Ecole Normale Supérieure, where he studied history, and won a travelling scholarship which enabled him to visit Russia ; other educational distinctions followed, including brilliant degrees in literature and history at the University of Paris and scholarships which permitted him to spend some time in Germany and later to visit Crete, Asia Minor and Constantinople. On his return to France he devoted himself for a time to teaching.

During these early years Albert Thomas produced and published a number of writings. He found in Russia the material for his first monograph, *La Russie, race colonisatrice*. In 1901 he issued a memorandum on *Les idées populaires de réforme sociale qui se font jour de 1832 à 1834*. After his visit to Germany, in 1902, he published a volume on *Le syndicalisme allemand*. Later he produced a bibliographical essay on Babeuf,

studies on *Les conventions collectives des imprimeurs*, on *Le programme municipal du parti socialiste*, and other works. He wrote the volume of *L'Histoire socialiste* which covered the period of the Second Empire, and in 1913 he produced *L'Histoire anecdotique du travail*, which has recently appeared in a new and completed edition.

From 1904 onward journalism and political life claimed him increasingly. In that year he was appointed by Jaurès to the editorial staff of *L'Humanité*, and at the same time was elected a municipal councillor for Champigny, his birth-place, where he won his way eight years afterwards to the mayoral chair. As a journalist, he wrote for *L'Information* and the *Revue socialiste*, founded the *Revue syndicaliste*, and subsequently launched *L'Information ouvrière et sociale*.

In 1910 he was elected member of the Chamber of Deputies for one of the constituencies of the Department of the Seine, and in 1914 he was re-elected. During this period he took part in many important debates on financial, economic, military and political affairs. In his first session as a Deputy he was entrusted by Jaurès with the duty of expounding the programme of the Socialist Party in the new Chamber. He became a member of the public works, railways, and finance committees of the Chamber, and took an active share in the shaping of legislative measures, notably those relating to mines, workers' and peasants' pensions, and pensions for miners.

When the war broke out Albert Thomas had achieved an outstanding position among French parliamentarians. For a few weeks he served in a territorial regiment, to which he had been called. Then he was summoned to Paris, and placed in control of the railway services, acting as a link between the General Staff and the Ministry of Public Works. In October 1914 the Government gave him the task of organising factories with a view to the intensive production of munitions. In May 1915 he was appointed Under-Secretary of State for Artillery and Munitions, and at the end of the following year he became Minister of Munitions in the second Briand Cabinet, a post which he continued to fill in the Ribot Cabinet. In 1916, also, he accompanied Viviani on a visit to Russia, for the purpose of ensuring closer co-operation between that country and France. He went to Russia again the next year, as Minister and Ambassador, and collaborated with the provisional government under Kerensky.

In accepting these successive official positions Albert Thomas carried with him the approval of his party. He also acted in agreement with his party when, in September 1917, he declined to enter the Painlevé Government, whose composition and policy he could not endorse. About that time he embarked on an ardent campaign, both in political circles and in the country, in favour of a lasting peace, firmly safeguarded by the establishment of a League of Nations. All who came into contact with him in Paris during the peace discussions will remember the great efforts he made, by representations to those carrying on the negotiations, by speeches in the Chamber of Deputies, and by articles in the press, to promote the principles he had at heart.

He had just been elected Deputy for the Tarn, the seat left vacant by the assassination of Jaurès, when, in November 1919, during the First Session of the International Labour Conference (which was held in Washington and at which he was not present), the Governing Body of the International Labour Office chose him to be the Director of the Office.

From that moment Albert Thomas gave himself up entirely to the work placed in his care. To describe his life and his activities since that date would, in fact, be to tell the history of the Organisation itself. In a few years he created, out of a little group of officials housed in a private residence in London in 1920, an institution which reaches into all the world, with a staff of some 400 persons and with a building of its own, built for it, in Geneva. He found or trained the specialists it required, co-ordinated their researches, and gave to their studies that special character which, apart from their scientific value, makes the published works of the Office a unique source of universal information on labour matters.

In the Conference, where he filled the part of General Secretary, he proved an untiring source of energy, ever alert, guiding the detailed deliberations of the committees towards fruitful decisions and bringing the plenary meetings to grips with the dominant problems of the day. He traced the lines for the main discussion by his Report, and he closed the discussion with a speech which formed a landmark in the progress of each Session. With a masterly clarity he would review the main problems which confronted the Organisation, weigh the results already accomplished, follow and map out the currents of thought revealed in the debates, and point the

way to fresh fields awaiting conquest. It is impossible to express in words the irresistible charm of his eloquence, his wonderful persuasive power, the magnetic force of his passionate enthusiasm. The speech he made barely a fortnight before his death on the economic crisis and unemployment still vibrates in the minds of all who heard him.

Under his leadership the Conference has adopted many Conventions and Recommendations. More than 450 ratifications have been registered. Few people know by what patient and laborious effort this harvest has been reaped. Long ago Albert Thomas realised that, in order to persuade men, it is necessary to know them. He visited all the countries of Europe ; he went to North America and South America, China and Japan. In all these countries he cemented personal friendships with the men at the head of affairs, seeking to demonstrate to them why they should give their support to the Organisation and take a part in its work. By his travels, by the knowledge he acquired of the world and of men, and by the knowledge he imparted wherever he went, he came to be not only one of the greatest authorities on international matters but one whose reputation as an authority was most widely and firmly established.

Such was the man whom death has suddenly cut off. The void he leaves is immeasurable. In him the International Labour Office has lost the first and greatest of its chiefs, the whole Organisation has lost an incomparable source of strength. France mourns a citizen who loved and served her well, and the world is robbed of one of the artisans of understanding, peace, and social justice among men and peoples.

We offer our profound and respectful sympathy to the bereaved family of our beloved leader. May they find some consolation in the thought that the work to which he devoted his life and with which history will ever associate his name will not perish.

