

L É O N H A R M E L

**Congress of the Employers of the Nord
at Mouveaux, 15 and 16 July 1894.
Extract from the Shorthand Report,
published in mid-November 1894 by
the officers of the Congress**

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The text is given in full, translated from the 1894 edition. It has been typeset in the spirit of the original: title pages and headings follow the layout of the book.

The numbered notes are those of the original work; here they are numbered continuously from beginning to end.

Léon Harmel, *le Bon Père du Val-des-Bois*

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CONGRESS

OF THE EMPLOYERS OF THE NORD

AT MOUVEAUX, 15 and 16 July 1894

Extract from the Shorthand Report, published in mid-November 1894 by the officers of the Congress.

(It is well known what violent attacks Mr Léon Harmel has suffered on account of the words he spoke during these meetings. Their publication, exactly as the officers of the Congress give them, is the best answer to this flood of insults.

The reader will judge.)

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Mr Harmel. — We must proclaim loudly the necessity of these *Study Circles*. Everywhere, until quite recently, people said that certain questions should not be put before the worker... but the workers have the bad newspapers in their hands every day: we have nothing to teach them; they know everything, only they know everything the wrong way round, against all common sense. That being so, can one ask whether it is useful to bring them some light? In certain Catholic Workers' Circles I have found perfect Christians who were socialists to the very marrow of their bones! That is because no one had ever been willing to teach them those truths which are found neither in sermons nor in the catechism. We must therefore educate the people, the man between thirty and fifty who is a voter and who makes up the nation; otherwise he will elect bad deputies, because he will know nothing of what he ought to know, and that because we have not taught it to him.

You will tell me that some questions are dangerous for the workers? Very well! Take one, any one at all, dangerous or not dangerous,

and be sure that he has found it in his newspaper and that he talks about it in the workshop, for all the workers read the newspapers. We must therefore say that the first thing to do is to teach, according to the command of Jesus Christ: *Go and teach*. Thus was formulated the perfect method for the social reform of paganism; it is still the perfect method for the social reform of Christendom, of a Christianity led astray by error. If we do not teach the workers, they will remain in the error that leads them to disorder, for disorder is the error of the mind. You have read the speech of Henry before the Assize Court; that speech is striking, it is a perfect model of the error of the mind; this error of the mind makes our misguided workers into men absolutely capable of every crime, and yet men sincere in their ideas. And the proof is that all converted anarchists are saints! That is what has often struck me in my travels. Between a saint and a scoundrel there is the thickness of an onion skin! The onion skin is the *Social Study Circle*. In Reims we have seen a man who was once arrested by the police as an anarchist and who, once converted, has become a true saint...; converted, they are admirable men! We must therefore conclude that among the scoundrels there are some who are in good faith, because they have never known the truth, and I think with sorrow that one cannot say today, as in the time of Our Lord: *Pauperes evangelizantur*, for the people do not have the truth on social questions, and if it is not given to them, they will never have it!

Some time ago I was told, at a meeting, that the question of divorce was not taken up “*because it does not concern the workers*”; but every day they are called to commit that crime, and you do not want to concern yourselves with it? The other day, at the *Study Circle* founded at Lunéville, a worker stood up and said: “It is a law of the State, we can do nothing about it!” The State is everything to them. It is almost a return to paganism: the worship of the God-State. Everything has to be rebuilt; very well, then we must rebuild it all! Above all we must apply ourselves to the education of the workers,

but this education can only be achieved by founding Committees, *Study Circles*. In Reims we have six of these circles, and in each of them there are from twenty to thirty present. People can discuss, they can explain themselves, and a priest attends every meeting. You can read, gentlemen, the report of this year's Congress of Reims; you will see the progress these men have made since last year; you will find in it all sorts of things, sound and legitimate ideas, the rights of the employers respected and upheld.

At the Congress of Reims we had a much-debated session on *wages* and on *attachment of wages*. There was a Commission which said that *attachment* should not reach wages; some workers came and said: "We want part of the wage to be open to attachment." And the Assembly split into two fiercely opposed camps that wanted to reach two different solutions. It was argued very closely, and truly such a question deserved to be brought before the workers; they are so often exposed to committing flagrant injustices towards their employers! In the end the discussion was very fruitful.

In ten years all our workers will be either socialists or Catholics. If, meanwhile, you can save ten per cent of them, that will still be ten per cent saved. It is a work worth attempting; we must strike into the thick of it, and strike hard; we must take away from socialism all that we can by means of the *Study Circles*; all these groups are good, sound and useful.

Mr Gustave Théry. — We should state precisely what is to be understood by *Social Study Circles*. If one simply puts the workers face to face with one another, telling them: *Discuss the social questions*; one may end up with very dangerous discussions. If, on the contrary, by *Social Study Circles* one means meetings at which the workers are taught and prepared by someone who has sufficient ideas, knowledge and experience, nothing could be more useful. But it does not follow that teaching of this kind must be given in the form of a lecture to people who listen and say nothing; those who are being taught must

be invited to discuss for themselves, while taking care that someone is there who can strike the right note and prevent them from falling into error (*Applause*).

Mr Harmel. — But that is what is done everywhere.

Canon Fichaux. — Are all workers alike fit to be taught on these delicate questions? There are certain minds that will understand and retain only what they please of these Lectures.

Mr Harmel. — We do not give Lectures, properly speaking; we let them talk; the worker freely puts forward all the errors he has in mind; when he has finished, they are set right for him by reasoning: that is the way to teach.

Mr Théry. — And it is certainly the best.

Mr Harmel. — It is the Socratic method (*Laughter*).

Mr Fichaux. — Very good; but there remains another delicate question: should the questions disputed among theologians be brought before these audiences of workers?

Mr Harmel. — We are speaking only of the questions debated in the workshops.

Mr Fichaux. — Then will a free discussion on wages be encouraged? That is a very delicate question for workers to deal with.

Mr Harmel. — Read the report of the Congress of Reims; you will see that these questions were dealt with there and the solutions given with wisdom.

Mr Fichaux. — Indeed, but no one entered into discussions that were really irritating; I would gladly ask that workers' lectures always be kept away from these irritating questions.

Mr Harmel. — It is above all a question of skill; it depends on the man who leads the discussion. This morning we spoke of the priest in the factory, and it was very rightly said that, to succeed, he needs a great deal of tact; here it is the same thing, everything depends on the manner of doing it; unfortunately, when it is a clumsy man, the best thing he does will always be a blunder.

Mr Cardon. — How are Social Study Committees to be formed among the workers?

Mr Harmel. — We always proceed by grouping around an established nucleus; when we form a *Study Circle*, we already have in advance five or six workers on whom we can count absolutely.

Mr Fichaux. — What is the moral guarantee? Here is someone who wants to form a *Study Circle*; he takes its members from the workshop, but must he consult the employer and ask him for information?

Mr Harmel. — It is a matter of judgement and tact; when you have workers whose minds are rightly directed, you can form a *Study Circle* with them, even if there are only a few of them. What matters in an association is that its direction should be firmly set towards the good; then everyone may be admitted. With us, we have a friend of Mathieu the anarchist, who was converted in a *Study Circle*. We have reliable men, a reliable priest, good to the workers and not too rigid with them. With these men, this priest, and the good spirit that prevails, everyone can be let in. The workers come willingly; we let them speak, we listen to them, we answer them, we instruct them, and they are happy to be able to say freely all that they think. We never hold our *Study Circles* in the Catholic Circles, for some workers would not be willing to go in.

We work, and that is all. There we have the elite of the workers, and today I notice that since the creation of these *Study Circles* the workers feel the need to know; there is a movement of intellectual curiosity that never existed before. This is how you will have the elite of the workers; perhaps you will have only twenty out of eight hundred at the beginning, but those twenty will win over the others. The socialists do no differently: at Saint-Quentin there are fourteen schools where meetings of men are held; I know that in these schools they had the men write summaries of an absurd book by Karl Marx, and that these summaries were sent to Paris every fortnight. Those

are men whose minds are being forged for evil; they do not properly understand the ideas instilled into them, but they are very attached to them. The world is contaminated by ideas, and not by interest and passions; it is by ideas that it is led. Socialism has put forward two right ideas: the idea of justice and the idea of solidarity. Justice is outraged everywhere, they say; let us break up present-day society so as to put justice into it. Justice must exist everywhere, and everyone must have the exercise of all his rights. Yes, but along with rights there are also duties. The worker must be able to bring up his children according to the law of God; but can he do so everywhere? The first duty of the worker is the fulfilment of his religious duties; can he fulfil them, when we see poor wretches turned out of the factory or the workshop for having taken part in a procession? Injustice is permanent; well then, socialism has said: *Let us tear down, and we shall restore justice!*

Solidarity... that means that we acknowledge ourselves responsible for the faults of our brothers, as Jesus Christ was.

Solidarity... that means that one is responsible for the misfortune of one's neighbour. The socialists have said this, and they have carried the crowds along with them. And we, gentlemen, who have not only the word, like the socialists, but the idea, should we not make use of it!

Ah, gentlemen, if we were willing, we would carry the workers along with us, as the socialists do, and even more; you know their sorrows and you feel for them, but you must know that these sorrows are greater in the mind than in the body; questions of wages are the least of them. I have heard these words from the mouth of a worker: *We are quite willing to go hungry, but we will not be treated without respect.*

That is truly the heart of the social question; if we took more trouble to carry the workers along by the idea, we would have an irresistible power (*Applause*).

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EVENING SESSION

The session opens at half past two.

Mr Léon Harmel. — I ask leave to speak in order to express a few ideas about the reports that are read to us during meals, but to which we can make no reply; we are made to hear speeches about which there would be all sorts of things to say. Mention was made of the School of Liège, at the head of which is Mgr Doutreloux; then there was mention of lectures to workers in which they had been told about Siam; now, we maintain that there are at least two hundred questions that could be dealt with before the workers and that would be much more interesting: on trades, on hygiene, and so on. So I ask whether the Congress is made up of what has been read at table as well as of what is said here, and whether what is read at table is included in the Congress, for I need to speak about it.

The Rev. Fr Doyotte. — The employers of the Nord always have, at their meetings, many questions to study and very little time to clear them up; so these gentlemen ask each time for a summary of the movement of ideas and of the movement of works, and this summary has so far been read in the refectory; besides, it has always been agreed that any observations that might be made on this subject would be heard in session.

Mr Harmel. — In that case, I ask the President's permission to make a few observations.

In the reading given today¹, the Bishop of Liège was attacked.

Canon Fichaux. — Excuse me, Mr Harmel, it never entered anyone's mind to attack Mgr Doutreloux.

1. The reading in question here had been given at the meal of the previous day.

Mr Harmel. — Then it is Abbé Pottier. Now, everyone knows that the Bishop of Liège and Abbé Pottier are two heads under the same cap, and I will not stop to defend them; they are covered by the Pope. You know that admirable pamphlet, *Lettre pastorale de M^{gr} Doutreloux, évêque de Liège*, which was approved by the Pope; that spares me from insisting further.

I now wish to speak of the main subject of today's reading: *Talks to workers*. Catholics do not have all the influence over the workers that they ought to have, because they do not appear to concern themselves enough with their interests. Going to talk to the workers about Siam, or other subjects of the same kind, leaves them utterly indifferent, and they are right. From the point of view of hygiene, for example, there are much more interesting things to tell them; the worker feeds himself against all common sense; he must be made to understand it. As for the irritating questions, they must, we are told, be left aside. But is it a matter of economic questions? of moral questions? I say that they must be tackled. What is needed above all is to succeed in reforming the elections; we must leave the government alone, it is the people we must win; when you have the people, you will have everything: the people remain and governments change. Indeed, if the people were Catholic, we would have Catholic elections; now, how do you expect your readings to bring your workers back if you speak to them of Siam and avoid speaking to them of the so-called irritating questions? You have a considerable interest in instructing your workers; you must show them what all these fine strike leaders, all these so-called friends of the people, are worth and what they want.

I was told just now of a remark by a Catholic worker of Tourcoing, who said: "I am not a socialist, but it is a good thing there are people like that, for without them nobody would concern himself with our interests." They are right, for there are no more than two or three Catholic deputies who really concern themselves with the in-

terests of the people. It is for us to protest and to say: "We are not the Right, we are the friends of the people; we expect our representatives to concern themselves with its interests." The speeches of the deputies of the Left are sirens' songs that lead the workers into horrible chasms; Jules Guesde and his like, who travel about every Sunday, give them nothing but poverty and unemployment as they push them towards the abyss. If the people do not know all this, they will believe them.

The people have living interests. One must not talk to the workers about the moon, the sun and the stars; it is very beautiful, no doubt, but it is of no importance to them. There are so many living questions!

Money is mentioned? Wages? But that is the last of things! For you all know that the wage is an extremely complex thing: at the Hippodrome in Lille, last November, we set out the four parts of which the wage is made up; the least of them is the hundred-sou coin that is handed over.

Here is a vital question: Catholics must show themselves affectionate towards the workers and concern themselves with them from the moral as well as the material point of view; if you act in this way, the people will be yours. It is not by giving them lectures on China and Japan that you will have the people.

Therefore what was read to us today is inadequate; it is even an error; we can only do as the Pope does; he has grasped the nettle, he has raised irritating questions, and he has given them to the whole world, not only to a few but to everyone, like Jesus Christ, who delivered the irritating questions to the people, who spoke of the rich man in front of the poor. That is how we ourselves must act: let us not be afraid of irritating questions; let us show the people that we want their moral and material good, the good of families; let us show the workers that we want to bring back to life in the family that image of the earthly paradise which God willed to preserve in the

Christian home, in spite of our faults and our misfortunes; let us show them that we want to succeed, through saving and through co-operative societies, in giving them the modest comfort they need. That is how we shall find the people ready to listen to us; let us bring them closer to Jesus Christ; when we speak to the workers, let us speak to them of their interests; I could easily give you subjects for two hundred lectures dealing solely with the interests of the workers.

I conclude by saying: we must follow the Pope, we can do nothing better; we too must grasp the nettle; we must speak of the most dangerous things, and speak of them well, so as to succeed in giving them a solution.

Canon Fichaux. — I would point out to Mr Harmel that the Pope has the right to raise whatever questions he sees fit, but we do not have that right. You say that the Pope has raised irritating questions. I repeat that the Pope has the right to do so, but I would certainly reproach these gentlemen for taking that programme literally.

Mr Harmel. — What, then, are irritating questions?

Mr Fichaux. — They are questions that divide.

Mr Harmel. — The question of wages, for example? It is not dangerous; it is by discussing questions of that kind that you will gain the confidence of the workers; besides, they read the newspapers, they know what is being done and said everywhere. The truth is not in chains; it must be shown in broad daylight.

The Rev. Fr Doyotte. — I am surprised to have to defend the readings in the refectory and, in support of what I am about to say, I appeal to the close attention given throughout all the meals and to the good memory of all who heard these readings: I protest that not a single word was ever pronounced as a reading in the refectory, either today or on the previous days, that could be directly or indirectly interpreted as a criticism aimed at Mgr Doutreloux, Bishop of Liège, and I ask Mr Harmel to do us the honour of withdrawing the words he spoke just now, because they are not in accordance with the truth.

There was no question of the Bishop of Liège; the text of a socialist newspaper was quoted, and it was simply quoted...

Mr Gand. — That newspaper is not socialist, it is progressive, as is the “*Progrès du Nord*” in Lille.

The Rev. Fr Doyotte. — That article was simply quoted without taking responsibility for it. I therefore insist, and I ask Mr Léon Harmel to do us the honour, and to fulfil the duty, of withdrawing those words, which are not true. Next, it was also said — here, gentlemen, I am obliged to take up your defence — that there were in France only two or three men dealing with social questions in a practical way.

Mr Harmel. — I spoke of the deputies.

The Rev. Fr Doyotte. — Then I do not insist... There is something else that touches me to the heart: we are here an Assembly of priests and militant Catholics who, in this diocese of Cambrai, have always given their time and their money to the cause of the Holy See, and who adhere to all the doctrines that come from Rome,[?] an accusation has been raised against it which until now had not dared to show itself in broad daylight: it has been insinuated that we were not in agreement with the Pope. If the echo of it brought to us here should be true, I shall appeal to you, Your Grace; if we have here teachings, a direction, that lie outside the pontifical direction, Your Grace, I ask you to exercise your authority and dissolve the Assembly of the Employers of the Nord! (*Loud and prolonged applause.*)

Gentlemen, when we sent a telegram to the Sovereign Pontiff yesterday, on behalf of His Grace the Archbishop and on your own behalf, we were sincere; we would not be so if in our conduct we betrayed the expression we gave in it of our faith and our devotedness to the teachings and to the cause of Rome, as well as to the cause of the workers! I am therefore greatly surprised to hear, for some time now, the men of the Nord who are willing to concern themselves with their workers being put on trial. A strange thing, as I said yesterday

in opening your Congress, a strange thing indeed, that the great multitude of employers of this region who, for reasons I need not judge, do nothing for their workers, are left in selfish peace, and that the target should always be this handful of men, few in number but valiant, who here concern themselves in a practical way with labour questions.

Finally, Mr Harmel, I accept your last words: you said that you had two hundred subjects for Lectures to give to the workers; you will give pleasure to us all in general, and to me in particular, if you will kindly communicate them to us (*Loud applause*).

Mr Léon Harmel. — The Reverend Father does not answer what I said: I said that the School of Liège was with the Pope; let us set the facts straight, these are hard facts.

Canon Fichaux. — As one of the elders in the work of the employers of the Nord, I would ask you, if you have ever found in us a word or an act opposed to the Holy Father, to say so frankly and expressly! (*Applause.*)

As no one else asks to speak on the incident, the **Rev. Fr Doyotte** reads out several resolutions, as the outcome of the earlier deliberations.

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It can be seen that in the words of Mr Léon Harmel there was not the slightest attack on the employers gathered at Mouveaux.