Note from the Chairman of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions, V.V. Kuznetsov to Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, I.V. Stalin [circa 3 August 1946]

To Comrade STALIN I.V.

INFORMATION ON RECEIVING THE DELEGATION OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE LABOUR PARTY AT VTsSPS[[1]](#footnote-1) ON

2nd & 3rd AUGUST 1946.

On the 2nd of August the delegation of the Executive Committee of the Labour Party was received at VTsSPS. Present: Harold J. Laski, Morgan Philips, Harold Clay and Alice Bacon. Present from VTsSPS: Kuznetsov V.V., Sidorenko E.Ya., Kazakov p.F., Stepanov A.P., Shulga E.G., Rostovskiy S.N., Olyunina N.R. The conversation was very lively and amicable.

The guests talked about Labour Party activity and aimed to specifically underscore [*sic*]the close relationship between British trade unions and the Labour Party. Many current ministers, secretaries of ministers, MPs, and Labour Party leaders were named, who had previously been leaders of the trade union movement. Clay mentioned several times that he had been deputy General Secretary of Transport Trade Union, and that Philips had emerged from the Mining Trade Union. Clay and Laski boasted about the success of the Labour Party and its popularity among the people. To prove this, they reminded us that in the latest local council elections Labour had got the majority of posts.

The Labour Party secretary Morgan Philips reported about the work of the Labour Government aimed at implementing the Labour Party programme. He noted, inter alia, preparatory work for nationalisation of the main industries. He said that, apart from the Bank of England, metal and mining industries, gas, electricity, and railways were either nationalised or being prepared for nationalisation. Speaking about the Government’s work on social legislation, he said that according to the new law 2 million people would become exempt from income tax. Furthermore, legislation was being developed on increasing benefits to the unemployed, elderly, disabled, families with many children, benefits for permanent disability following an accident, etc. He said, inter alia, that benefits to the elderly had been increased by 50% and would be paid upon reaching 65 years, and not 70 years, as before.

Philips said that the Labour Government aimed to raise the birth rate and to increase the population size of Great Britain. In this respect he quoted the following data on the age composition of the population:

In 1901 one person in seventeen was receiving a pension due to old age, in 1931, one person in ten and in 1946 - one in six.

He also said that a legislative act was being prepared on introducing free medical service and creating state and municipal clinics and hospitals.

The Labour Government also strives to solve the housing problem; Philips noted that the shortage of housing was as acute in Britain as it was in the Soviet Union. He mentioned the number of 4.5 million of homes that had been destroyed and pointed out the big difficulties stemming from the lack of construction materials, especially timber, and labour. Laski said here: “We want your timber”. According to Philips, woods in Britain had been cut to such an extent during the war that there could be no further cuttings during the next 80 years.

The Labour Government promised to provide housing to 250,000 families this year.

During the war, which means during the last six years, no new construction workers were trained in Britain, and it was the task now to train 1.25 million of construction workers. Philips said that along with stone housing many standard homes were presently built in Britain of aluminium and steel; however, this construction was not cheaper than building brick houses and metal is deficient owing to coal deficiency.

Philips also noted a shortage of labour in the mining industry and said that young men did not want to work at the mines. He later said that the miners’ wages had increased from the 88th place before the war to the 6th place.

The British were asked about the wages paid to agricultural workers, the least paid occupation. Philips said that agricultural workers currently received at least 80 shilling per week. Laski corrected him and said that the amount was not 80, but 93 shilling per week, while Clay added that farm workers received part of their wages in food products. This made their wages higher than if they were paid cash only. Furthermore, he said that due to the shortage of labour supply in agriculture, the farmers were forced to pay as much as the workers demanded.

Further Philips reported that the Labour Government had already adopted the law on mandatory education for children until 15 years of age and expressed the hope that soon it would become mandatory education until the age of 16. (A law on mandatory education until the age of 14 had existed previously[[2]](#footnote-2)).

According to the delegates, the importance of the Parliament had significantly increased nowadays. The public was interested in parliamentary debates. There were always large queues for tickets to Parliamentary sessions.

According to Philips, student intake to Universities would be increased, and larger numbers of young people would be able to get higher education. The Universities would be given more opportunities for research, as, according to Philips and Clay, the Minister for Finance promised them support in their undertakings.

When asked whether equal remuneration for equal work to men and women had been introduced in Britain, Clay responded that this issue had not been resolved yet, and women were receiving lower wages in most industries. However, he said that certain enterprises had reached local agreements, according to which women were being paid same wages as men. Clay said that women received equal wages in the transport industry. The members of the delegation reported that a Royal Commission had been set up in Britain with the aim to study the issue[[3]](#footnote-3); however, although two years had passed already since its inception, it had not yet submitted its report to the Parliament. All the members of the delegation, especially Alice Bacon and Laski, made jokes about this long-awaited report and quoted instances when entrepreneurs refused to set equal wages for women, referring to impossibility of taking such steps before the Royal Commission submitted its report. Alice Bacon said that when they want to bury a certain issue, they handed it to a Royal Commission.

Bevin’s health was mentioned in the conversation. Clay, who is his enthusiastic supporter, said that Bevin was a very strong man, and that he had to be well soon and would be able to take part in the Peace Conference.

Labour increased the wages paid to MPs. Previously MPs received 600 pounds per year, presently they received 1000 pounds. Free transportation was granted to MPs for use only from London to their abode. Laski compared this situation of Britain’s MPs to the situation of US Congressmen, who receive wages of 15 000 dollars per year and benefit from free transportation on all American railways, free mail and free distribution of their speeches printed at the state’s expense.

The British then asked about the role of trade unions in a socialist state.

The delegates were informed about the work of central and local trade union bodies with regards to wages, labour safety, social insurance, about different VTsSPS departments’ work, for example, departments for culture propagation work, social insurance, and physical culture and sports.

The guests asked which occupations had the lowest and the highest wages, how much engineers, interpreters were paid. For example, Clay asked about trolleybus driver wages in Moscow.

Philips asked about the difference in wages of workers working in mines and overground. The British were surprised to learn that miners working underground received wages two or three times larger than those of overground workers; they said that in Britain the difference was very small: miners received 5 pounds, overground workers - 4 pounds 10 shilling. The British people were told that in the Soviet Union miner was the most highly paid occupation.

Harold Laski asked which authors were mostly admired by the Russian readers. When Russian authors, both classical and contemporary, were named to him, he asked: “And what about foreign authors?” Shakespeare, Jack London, Galsworthy were named. He added: “Bernard Shaw, Dickens”.

Regarding Citrine[[4]](#footnote-4) leaving the post of the President of the World Trade Union Federation and General Council of Trade Unions, the delegates said that they would allocate another good candidate for these positions, although there were less good-quality workers in trade unions, after many had left for positions with the Government and various governmental bodies.

On the 3rd of August the Labour delegation was invited to a breakfast organised in the Round Hall of the House of Unions. The breakfast was attended by the members of VTsSPS presidium, Minister for Higher Education Comrade Kaftanov[[5]](#footnote-5), Chairman of VOKS[[6]](#footnote-6) Comrade Kemenov[[7]](#footnote-7).

Philips told our interpreter that he was greatly discontented by the fact that the press called Laski the head of the delegation, although no one had either selected nor appointed Laski as such a head. Philips said he was the General Secretary, and, as it is known that the secretary position is the highest in Britain, he himself must be considered the head of the delegation.

During the breakfast the British made speeches supporting friendship between the Soviet and the British people, successful co-operation of trade unions within the World Trade Union Federation, raising living standards of workers all over the world.

Laski proposed a toast to Stalin, Attlee, Bevin, and Molotov making every effort to achieving sustained peace.

Philips hailed miners of the whole world, mentioning that he was a miner previously and that Alice Bacon’s father was a miner too. He said that miner was the most exploited occupation in the capitalist society, and now the British “socialist” government had nationalised mines and would create good working conditions for miners.

Laski proposed a toast to MFA[[8]](#footnote-8) workers, who guard the foreign guests “as shepherds guard their flock, so that the sheep do not get lost”.

Greeting the head of the VTsSPS Department of Housing and Living Laski expressed his hope that the housing problem in the USSR would be successfully resolved.

Alice Bacon said that in the morning on 3rd of August she went to commercial shops and was surprised by the high prices. She would like to buy something, but she could not afford it from her salary. She did not quite believe the explanation that most of the goods were sold through common shops and enterprises, where the prices were significantly lower.

The British readily supported the call for strengthening the friendship between the people of Britain, the USA, and the USSR.

To conclude, Laski said that after the reception the British delegation had been shown in Moscow he was sure that a common standpoint could be found in the interest of both nations.

Chairman of VTsSPS [signature] (V. Kuznetsov)

[APRF, f. 3, inv. 64, file 398, pp. 36–42]

Keywords: post-war USSR, inter-allied relations

1. All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The so-called Butler Act of 3 August 1944. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Royal Commission on Equal Pay was established in 1944 and made its report in 1946. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Citrine, Walter McLennan (1887 – 1983) – British trade unionist, General Secretary of the British Trades Union Congress (1925 – 1946), President of the World Federation of Trade Unions (1945 – 1946). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kaftanov, Sergei Vasilyevich (1905 – 1978) – Soviet statesman. Minister for Higher Education of the USSR (1946 – 1951), First Deputy Minister for Culture of the USSR (1951 – 1957). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. All-Union Society for Foreign Cultural Relations. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kemenov, Vladimir Semyonovich (1908 – 1988) – Soviet statesman. Chairman of the All-Union Society for Foreign Cultural Relations (1940 – 1948), Deputy Minister for Culture of the USSR (1954 – 1956). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)