
The creation of the ISSA and the ILO

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Abstract *The creation of the International Social Security Association was strongly influenced by the International Labour Organization, clearly the rising star in the world of international organizations in the period between the two world wars. It would, however, be a mistake to think that the ILO was the only institution to make its voice heard in the establishment of the ISSA. The precursors of the two organizations, the CPIAS and the AIPLT, as well as others active at the time, such as the International Professional Association of Physicians, together with the internationalization of the social insurance movement, helped found this new association, but it faced some difficult moments in its first few years.*

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Very little has been written about the work of international organizations and associations active in the field of social security, or earlier in that of social insurance. The International Social Security Association (ISSA), initially called the International Conference of National Unions of Mutual Benefit Societies and Sickness Insurance Funds (1927 to 1936) and then the International Social Insurance Conference (CIMAS) (1936 to 1947), has since its inception made considerable efforts to raise public awareness of its work (ISSA, 1958; 1986), but it should be realized that without these organizations the development of social insurance institutions at the international level would have been considerably less marked, and while they are now a part of everyday life, they would have taken much longer to come into being.

The human factor is often of crucial importance in the creation of a new organization. Clearly, without the support of Albert Thomas, first Director General of the International Labour Office, and the first Presidents of the ISSA — Helmut Lehmann, Mathias Eldersch, Leo Winter, Georges Petit, Léon Heller and Arthur Jouniaux — the creation and early growth of the ISSA would not have been possible in the interwar period. The major role played by Adrien Tixier and Osvald Stein, the first Secretaries General of the ISSA, is also significant (ISSA, 1958, p. 94).

The purpose of this paper is, however, not to focus exclusively on the role of the outstanding individuals of the period, but to show what were the internal and external factors that affected the birth of this new international body. For the birth

of the ISSA was no foregone conclusion if one considers the wide variety of opinions at the time and the growing role of the International Labour Organization. The creation of the ILO brought a sense of achievement and satisfaction among workers' movements and in the social sphere. One result was, however, that the activities and commitment of social campaigners were considerably reduced. The ISSA came into being in this difficult context of peace and calm. Only a detailed analysis of the interaction between those involved and the role played by some key players will give a full understanding of the ISSA's beginnings, and in particular of how they determined its entire future.

The context

The message of Wilhelm I to the German Reichstag on 17 November 1881 meant the arrival of social insurance not only in Germany but throughout Europe, and subsequently the rest of the world (ISSA, 1986, p. 22). In his message, which was read out by Chancellor Bismarck, the Kaiser stressed that the role of the State could not be limited to repression, but was also to promote the well-being of all social classes in the country. The ultimate aim was to achieve national peace by offering everyone greater security and more meaningful support from the State. These ambitious goals could only be achieved through the creation of social insurance schemes (Kaiser Wilhelm I, 1881, p. 2). However, the growth of social insurance bodies, which was enshrined in law in Germany between June 1884 and June 1889, did not happen overnight, and the establishment of social security systems in the rest of Europe took several decades. In Germany, legislation on sickness insurance was adopted on 15 June 1883, accident insurance on 6 July 1884 and invalidity and old age on 22 June 1889. Naturally, it was the part of Europe influenced by Germany that was first to take up its ideas. Between 1881 and 1919 social insurance was introduced at various levels in Switzerland, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Luxembourg and the United Kingdom. The rest of Europe — the Netherlands, Belgium, France and the entire southern part of the continent — was initially untouched by this extension of workers' rights (Dupeyroux, 1966, p. 39). Only after the First World War did this part of Europe see social insurance come into being. Every country in Europe set about adopting social legislation. In some rare cases, such as Alsace-Lorraine, which was German before the war and became French in 1918, it was transferred from one country to another. In order to avoid such widely varying levels of social development between different regions, France also introduced social standards for the rest of the country (Dupeyroux, Durand and Rouast, 1961, p. 12). However, on the whole each country introduced its own social insurance to meet national needs according to national conditions.

This development of social insurance at the national level in the immediate postwar period was accompanied by major international developments. The

Versailles Peace Treaty created not only the League of Nations but also the ILO. The former had great difficulty in winning global acceptance, but the ILO was rapidly accepted by member States, since it met a need that was regarded as urgent and their rulers worked hard to ensure that it played a major international role in obtaining social peace on a global scale (Stewart, 1970, p. 31). Many countries did not yet have the necessary capacity to introduce efficient social systems, and exchanges of ideas in this new field of activity for States were still rare and difficult to organize. The ILO was hence able to play a fundamental role not only in spreading new ideas but also in developing genuine associations and organizations, which in the long term were able to give a major thrust to the extension of social insurance.

As already stated, social insurance in many cases developed according to national features. Bismarck introduced social insurance in Germany not only to prevent one part of society falling into poverty but also to secure the support of all workers for the new German State (Sandmann-Bremme, 1964, p. 9) and as a weapon against the Socialist Party. All forms of social insurance established in the German-influenced world were largely inspired by the German model, whereas France (Barjot, 1965, p. 370) and Belgium (Durand, 1953, p. 127) tried to organize their systems around existing structures — mutual benefit societies — which were essential partners in the initial phase of creating social insurance institutions and subsequently managing them. In view of the variety of such systems, the internationalization of social insurance could only mean a greater role for the ILO, all the more so since the organization led by Albert Thomas now had the largest concentration of experts with knowledge of international social systems. Before turning to the actual creation of the ISSA, a brief overview is needed of the international associations that preceded the International Conference of National Unions of Mutual Benefit Societies and Sickness Insurance Funds.

The ISSA's precursors

While social insurance spread considerably at the international level after the First World War, thanks in particular to the creation of the ILO, there had already been significant activity before 1914 in this field. Three organizations should be mentioned: the International Standing Committee on Social Insurance (Comité permanent international des assurances sociales, CPIAS), the International Association for the Legal Protection of Labour (Association internationale pour la protection légale des travailleurs, AIPLT), normally referred to as the Basel Association, and the International Association to Combat Unemployment (Association internationale pour la lutte contre le chômage, AILC) (Comité permanent international des assurances sociales, 1913, pp. 7-9). Some have regarded the AIPLT as the precursor of the ILO (Shotwell, 1919, p. 128), and others consider that the CPIAS played a similar role for the ISSA (ISSA, 1986, pp. 7-12). The analogy is not,

however, entirely satisfactory, for two reasons. First, the CPIAS and the ISSA had completely different memberships. The CPIAS was mainly composed of individuals with academic and political knowledge of the subject, whereas the ISSA only admitted as members organizations actually managing social risks (ISSA, 1986, p. 16). It is also difficult to see any real historical link between the CPIAS and the ISSA in the early 1920s, which saw the creation of a new organization out of what was left of the CPIAS, as described below.

The CPIAS was created in 1889 following a French initiative (Comité permanent international des assurances sociales, 1913, p. 14). This organization was mainly a group of experts, industrialists and economists, supported by major figures in politics such as Léon Bourgeois and Henri Poincaré, who were keen to address social insurance issues. It made possible exchanges between the various countries represented, of which there were nine on the eve of the First World War. The CPIAS survived largely owing to the individual commitment of those members, and in particular Professor Edouard Fuster, who was its Secretary General for many years. However, the First World War brought an abrupt end to those efforts. After the creation of the ILO and the development of the structures necessary for the effective functioning of its secretariat, Albert Thomas himself tried to relaunch the organization, and approached Edouard Fuster in a provocative letter which began: "What has happened to the International Social Insurance Association?"¹ Fuster was unable to give adequate effect to the request from Thomas, who then tried to relaunch international interest in social insurance through an internal initiative. At a session of the ILO Governing Body in July 1921 he proposed the creation of a committee of experts on social insurance (International Labour Office, 1921, p. 25). While his ultimate goal was to re-establish an international social insurance network, he tried nevertheless to limit the role of his staff at the International Labour Office (which still constitutes the secretariat of the International Labour Organization): "Let us not give rise to suspicion that our aim is by ourselves to re-establish international relations"² Moreover, neither the first meeting of the social insurance experts nor the second, held in December 1923 (see *ILO Historical Archives*, Files SI 10-1 and SI 10-2, 1921-23), brought any return to the pre-war level of activities. Not until the middle of 1924 were any changes perceived at this level. Even though the CPIAS had not yet resumed its pre-war level of activities, the other two organizations, the AILC and the AIPLT, continued to develop and organize their annual activities with some degree of regularity, such as reviews and international meetings. In order to lend them greater weight at the international level, the Secretary General of the AIPLT, Stéphane Bauer, proposed the establishment of a new association, the International

1. Letter from Albert Thomas to Edouard Fuster, 3.8.1920, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 10-1, p. 1.

2. Internal note from Albert Thomas to M. de Roode, 24.8.1921, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 10-1, p. 1.

Social Policy Association (AIPS), which would bring together the two remaining pre-war organizations, AIPLT and AILC, and would also include the remaining members of the now defunct CPIAS.³ This plan was finalized in Prague in October 1924, but since its initiator, Bauer, had shown himself to be extremely hostile to the ILO,⁴ it was clear that a different solution, more favourable to the ILO and taking greater account of those active in the sphere of social insurance, would have to be found. This became clearer in 1925, when the ILO was not officially invited to the second assembly of the AIPS, held in Bern.⁵ Moreover, some social insurance experts seemed ready to follow a different path, since they decided to organize unofficial meetings with ILO officials on the margins of that assembly.⁶

In this highly volatile context, in which everyone was trying to find the best solution, the first attempts were made to create the ISSA.

A promising start

At the end of 1926 the Department of Health of the Swiss Canton of Basel City, at the instigation of one Dr. Huber, proposed “to hold an International Congress in Basel during 1927 or 1928 on sickness funds and mutual benefit societies”.⁷ To publicize the organization of the conference, Dr. Huber had already obtained favourable responses from the representatives of the most powerful sickness funds on the European continent — the National Federation of French Mutual Benefit Societies and the National Federation of German Sickness Funds.⁸ It was clear to all concerned that no international solution was possible without the Germans or the French:

The Germans know full well that it would be harmful to create an international organization solely for countries that have adopted the German model of social insurance. Now that France and Germany are at peace — not to deny that there will be problems on substantive issues and methodology — the others, the Austrians, Czechoslovaks, Poles, etc. . . . will come of their own accord.⁹

In view of its geographical position and its role as a precursor in the internationalization of social insurance, it is no surprise that Switzerland should have tried to bring together around the same table the representatives of different social systems

3. Letter from Henri Fuss to Edouard Fuster, 19.8.1924, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 1-22-1, p. 1.
4. Report by Adrien Tixier to Albert Thomas, 18.12.1924, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 1-22-1, p. 5.
5. Letter from Adrien Tixier to Edouard Fuster, 3.9.1925, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 1-22-1, p. 1.
6. Letter from Adrien Tixier to Edouard Fuster, 17.6.1925, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 1-22-1, pp. 1-2.
7. Summary in *Internationale Zeitschrift für Sozialversicherung* (Prague, Korkisch), 1926, No. 12, pp. 301ff., in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 22-1-1, p. 1.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
9. Report by Osvald Stein on his mission to Berlin, 10.12.1926, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 22-1-1, p. 7.

from the greatest number of European countries. Moreover, the strategic choice of Basel by the Swiss authorities was a logical one, since it borders both Germany and France, lies in the centre of Europe, and had also served as the headquarters of an earlier and quite separate International Labour Office attached to the AIPLT (Files on AIP, in the *ILO Historical Archives*).

In the preparatory stages the Swiss planned to meet only with their German and French colleagues. An initial meeting planned for 15 November 1926 to prepare the main conference, to be held in 1927 or 1928, was cancelled owing to problems on the French side.¹⁰ The Basel City Department of Health then proposed meetings with the Germans and French in Basel¹¹ or Strasbourg¹² in February or March 1927. Preliminary negotiations between the representatives of the three countries to agree on a common basis took time: “For several months we were vaguely aware of negotiations between sickness funds in different countries on an international meeting of the funds . . . to examine the possibility of organizing permanent relations between them”.¹³

The ultimate aim of these meetings was thus highly ambitious, especially for organizations that as yet hardly knew each other and still faced difficulties in establishing themselves at the national level. Moreover, national differences were such that it was not easy to find a common platform. It was also clear that the existence of more than one such fund in certain countries could lead to problems in international forums: “The difficulties seem quite large in countries which, like Belgium, have several national sickness fund federations of different political and confessional tendencies”.¹⁴

Apart from the desire to have a joint global organization, three other reasons can be advanced to account for this sudden upturn in international activities among European sickness funds: the internationalization of insurance, doctor activism, and the ILO agenda.

The internationalization of sickness insurance and doctor activism

The term “internationalization of sickness insurance” should not be taken to imply any coordination between sickness funds or the creation of insurance policies that were valid worldwide, but rather the organization of those active in this field at an

10. Summary in *Internationale Zeitschrift für Sozialversicherung* (Prague, Korkisch), 1926, No. 12, pp. 301ff., in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 22-1-1, p. 4.

11. Letter from Adrien Tixier to Georges Petit, 19.11.1926, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 22-1-1, p. 2.

12. Report by Osvald Stein on his mission to Berlin, 10.12.1926, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 22-1-1, p. 2.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

international level within the same organization. Alongside governments, trade unions and employers' organizations, which were represented in the ILO, doctors and sickness funds were the most significant pressure groups in this sector. Sickness funds had for some time played a major role at the national level, but they were fairly slow to organize on an international scale.

Doctors had realized that they could not make their voice heard at the international level unless they organized within an association that afforded them representation in the international organizations. For this reason, in 1926 they set up the International Professional Association of Physicians.¹⁵ This newly created organization set itself as its main task the defence of the interests of medical practitioners. Its objectives were diametrically opposed to the ILO's proposals. The Association was opposed to any form of compulsory sickness insurance, and a free choice of physician was their main rallying cause.¹⁶ This sudden international mobilization of doctors brought a swift reaction from sickness funds and the ILO. The highly conservative stance adopted by the doctors made them to some extent a significant threat to the ILO, which had to react. By contrast, the sickness funds, whether compulsory institutions or free mutual benefit societies, were left helpless by this new lobby. The ILO and sickness funds had adopted largely similar positions, favouring compulsory sickness insurance for all workers, enshrined in law, with a scale of fees for medical examinations. So strong was the doctors' defiance of the ILO that they refused to set up their headquarters in Geneva so as to "avoid any so-called influence by official international institutions".¹⁷

The creation of an association to represent sickness funds was now a necessity as a counterweight to the International Professional Association of Physicians and as a step towards coordinating the representation of the interests of such institutions at international level.

The International Labour Conference of 1927

The agenda of the tenth session of the International Labour Conference (ILC) of 1927 included the discussion of an international Convention on sickness insurance. Logically, the sickness funds of ILO member States wanted at all costs to be able to influence the course of the discussions. However, that could only be ensured if they could agree to defend a common position. Any major dissent would clearly have sapped the fighting force of the sickness funds among delegates at the ILC. It should be understood that only governments, employers and trade unions were entitled to attend the ILC. Each country's delegation could include a number of experts, but

15. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

nominated by the national government. However, many national organizations realised that their chances of being represented at the ILC in 1927 were fairly small, and set about establishing “international relations between them, and even an international federation”.¹⁸

It would therefore seem that the agenda of the 1927 ILC was a clear wake-up call for organizations managing sickness insurance, enabling them to organize on an international scale. The activities of the Swiss and campaigning by physicians were also of importance, but it appears from available historical documents that the determining factor in the organization of the sickness funds and mutual societies was the ILC of 1927. In the following chapter, however, it will be seen that this process was often difficult, and that the first steps of this new organization were not without friction or setbacks.

The first setbacks: The ILO enters the ring

Despite the commitment by the Basel City Department of Health, Dr. Huber’s efforts did not succeed. There are several reasons for this:

- The sickness funds wanted to coordinate their efforts for the ILC of May-June 1927. It was, however, very difficult to maintain momentum, and it quickly became clear that no genuinely constructive preparatory meeting could be organized before the ILC.
- The Swiss sickness funds acted as links between the German and French traditions. The German-speaking Swiss looked after the Germans, and the French-speaking Swiss looked after the French. Disagreement soon surfaced between the German- and French-speaking Swiss on the advisability of a meeting with the sickness funds of neighbouring countries, which seriously reduced the chances of French participation.¹⁹
- For lack of interest or organization, the French sickness funds were only slightly involved in this process, and their lukewarm attitude was certainly partly responsible for delays in the process of creating a joint international organization.
- The ILO made major efforts to impede the creation of any international organization of sickness funds that did not accord with its vision of current needs in this field. The ILO wanted to maintain control of the process, to try to rally the main actors around a single cause, and hence to prevent the success of the Swiss initiative.²⁰

This last point was probably a determining factor in the failure of the Swiss efforts. As soon as the ILO realized the seriousness of the initiative, it sent Dr. Osvald

18. Letter from Adrien Tixier to F. Sokal, n.d., in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 22-1-1, p. 1.

19. Letter from Adrien Tixier to M. Valadier, 28.12.1926, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 22-1-1, p. 1.

20. Letter from Adrien Tixier to F. Sokal, n.d., in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 22-1-1, p. 1.

Stein, an official from its Social Insurance Branch, to see Helmut Lehmann, Secretary General of the National Federation of German Sickness Funds in Berlin. He succeeded in convincing him that the Swiss proposals should no longer be supported.²¹ Stein was even able to bring the National Federation of German Sickness Funds more into line with the ILO's views, and made two proposals. First, it was necessary to try to convince national governments to allocate at least one of the seats in their national delegations at the forthcoming session of the ILC to a representative of the sickness funds. Second, in participating in the ILC the sickness funds no longer needed to organize a conference separately or elsewhere during 1927. They could simply call on the assistance of ILO international officials to organize a preparatory meeting before the ILC. In this way the ILO killed two birds with one stone, since it could now exert some influence on the European sickness funds while also organizing a preparatory meeting with a view to the establishment of a permanent organization.²²

The National Federation of German Sickness Funds did not waste time. At a meeting between Stein and Lehmann, it welcomed the ILO initiative through its Secretary General, and asked the ILO to contact other sickness funds and their respective governments so as to ensure their participation in the ILC and preparatory meeting.²³ At the same time it rejected Dr. Huber's proposal, arguing that there was no longer any basis of trust to continue working with the Swiss, since they had already sent circulars to all the sickness funds.²⁴

It should be noted that the ILO used all possible and conceivable arguments to convince the National Federation of German Sickness Funds. An extract from the Stein report is revealing:

In such a compromised situation, it was necessary to use arguments of all kinds in succession: that permanent relations between the funds were the ILO's ideal, and that it wanted to serve what it saw as a good cause, but that obviously it wanted to ensure it every chance of success; this meeting, held before our conference, might not satisfy the German Federation, which might feel forced to accept proposals that were contrary to its previous line; that such a meeting might compromise the chances of the funds being included in Conference delegations, since they would have to declare their views beforehand; that the German Federation could not verify whether delegates of other countries were sufficiently representative and that its prestige might suffer if it sat alongside representatives of minority views; that international action by the funds would achieve its aims only through

21. Report by Dr. Stein on his mission to Berlin, 10.12.1926, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 22-1-1, p. 6.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

24. Letter from Helmut Lehmann to Dr. Huber, 4.1.1927, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 22-1-1, p. 2: "The realization of the plan as such thus finds itself, in our opinion, facing insurmountable obstacles, a development that we regret in the keenest manner, given such promising beginnings."

our Conference, and would consist in pushing for the ratification and application of the draft Convention on sickness insurance, etc.²⁵

This change in position by what was at the time Europe's largest sickness fund, with 11 million insured persons, finally torpedoed the efforts of the Swiss, who nevertheless continued to stand by their initial plans and hoped to organize a conference in 1928.²⁶

The National Federation of German Sickness Funds was so convinced of the importance of the ILO as organizer and the spirit that would prevail at the ILC that it felt that any meeting before 23 May 1927 would be pointless.²⁷ The perseverance of the German-speaking Swiss, and particularly of Dr. Huber, should nevertheless be noted, since the ILO tried on a number of occasions to block their initiatives. One reason explaining the strong commitment of ILO officials to thwarting the German-speaking Swiss was clearly the latter's desire for the new organization to be based in the German-speaking part of Switzerland.²⁸ This would clearly have reduced the possibilities for the ILO to influence it, and led to additional efforts by the international community in Switzerland.

The essential role of the ILO

Once the ILO had made itself understood by the directors of the main sickness funds, their influence grew continuously, and all major decisions were taken with the ILO's blessing. It has already been mentioned that the organization of an initial informal meeting of Europe's largest sickness funds had been assigned to the ILO, which was to contact them and obtain their views.²⁹

Through Adrien Tixier the ILO enjoyed full control over the main players, while remaining out of the limelight. Although the historical documents available do not fully confirm it, it would seem that it was the ILO's Social Insurance Branch that prepared the initial draft constitution of the new organization to be established, or that it was at least responsible for distributing the text to potential members.³⁰

The growing influence of Tixier and Stein can also be seen in the structure of the Campaign Committee for the organization of international relations between

25. Report by Osvald Stein on his mission to Berlin, 10.12.1926, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 22-1-1, pp. 5-6.

26. Letter from Adrien Tixier to M. Valadier, 28.12.1926, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 22-1-1, p. 1.

27. Letter from Osvald Stein to H. Lehmann, 24.12.1926, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 22-1-1, p. 1.

28. Internal note from Adrien Tixier to M. Maurette and to Albert Thomas, 19.2.1927, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File G 900-30-2, p. 1: "Twice we have demolished the plans of Dr. Huber in Germany, France and Belgium; but Dr. Huber is tenacious. He will not give up the fight and seems to be resuming his efforts in Germany and Czechoslovakia, and also probably in Austria and Poland . . . He seems particularly keen to ensure that the headquarters of the planned federation should be a Swiss German city (Bern or Basel)".

29. Letter from Osvald Stein to Helmut Lehmann, 24.12.1926, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 22-1-1, p. 1.

30. Letter from Adrien Tixier to Georges Petit, 14.12.1927, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 22-1-1, p. 1.

national associations of mutual assistance and sickness insurance funds and the creation of such an international organization. The Campaign Committee comprised representatives of the sickness funds and mutual funds of France, Great Britain, Luxembourg, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, but its secretariat was provided by the ILO's Social Insurance Branch and it used the ILO's address.³¹ The sickness funds were always accompanied by ILO experts, who offered unique expertise since they were the only ones to have international experience in this field and knowledge of the workings of international diplomacy and of all sickness insurance schemes. These qualities also played a major role in the ensuing conferences.

Foundation of the ISSA

Between the first initiative launched by the Basel City Department of Health and the actual holding of the conference to found the International Congress of Sickness Insurance nearly one year passed, since it was held in Brussels on 4 and 5 October 1927. The original aim that this serve as a preparatory meeting for the ILC held in June 1927 was thus not achieved. Nevertheless, the sickness insurance and mutual associations maintained their efforts and were able to complete their work shortly after the Geneva meeting with a different purpose in mind, that of finalizing plans to be represented adequately at the international level.

The number of countries represented was also impressive, since "17 national unions from nine countries representing some 20 million insured persons"³² participated in the conference. The proposal to create an international organization was adopted unanimously.³³

The active principles adopted by the conference — the necessity of compulsory insurance and the independent management of social insurance — were fully in line with the ILO's recommendations. Moreover, Adrien Tixier noted in his report that "the declaration of principle by the conference bore a strange resemblance to certain passages in our recommendation of last June"³⁴

Even if all the ILO expected was the restatement of concepts and principles that it had developed, it was nevertheless surprised by the snowball effect it unwittingly created. It was clear that certain countries (Belgium and the French- and Italian-speaking parts of Switzerland, among others) would be largely opposed to

31. Communication by the Secretariat of the Campaign Committee for the organization of international relations between national associations of mutual assistance and sickness insurance funds concerning the programme of the first international conference of 4-5 October 1927, 12.9.1927, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 22-1-1, pp. 1-4.

32. Report by Adrien Tixier, International Conference of National Unions of Mutual Benefit Societies and Sickness Insurance Funds, Brussels, 4-5 October 1927, 19.10.1927, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 22-1-1, p. 1.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

compulsory insurance. However, the Italian- and French-speaking Swiss voted in favour of compulsory insurance at the conference, probably as a result of influence from other federations.³⁵ The Minister for Science, Arts and Education of Belgium, Camille Huysmans, who attended the conference, was highly impressed by the unanimous vote in favour of the principle of compulsory insurance, and confirmed that this would have obvious consequences in Belgium.³⁶

It should also be noted that Tixier had a more long-term vision of the organization, since it seemed clear to him that this international association should not be limited to the field of sickness insurance, but should extend its reach to all forms of social insurance.³⁷ By extending its field of activity to all social problems, the organization would provide even more valuable support to the ILO.

The composition of the various statutory bodies of the International Conference of National Unions of Mutual Benefit Societies and Sickness Insurance Funds shows that not everything went as the ILO wished. Its officials would have very much welcomed securing two places on the management committee. However, they did not have their way. Instead, they had to take responsibility for its secretariat at the insistence of their main contacts. Stein and Tixier were accordingly elected secretaries of the organization, which enabled them to control its operational activities closely. Tixier added in his report: “We will rectify this situation as soon as the organization is solidly constituted”.³⁸ It was not until 1949 that a Secretary General working full time for the ISSA was elected as head of the organization (Guinand, 2003, pp. 95-96).

Finally, the outcome of the conference and the guiding principles and future orientation of the organization showed that the ILO’s influence was considerable, and it would have been difficult if not impossible to organize the movement of social insurance funds at the European or global level without it. Yet the final outcome, in which the decision went against the ILO’s preferences, shows that even though it played a dominating role in international relations in the field of social insurance, the new body had already acquired its own momentum independently of the ILO.

The (too) close links between the ISSA and the ILO

The participation of the sickness insurance funds and mutual benefit societies in the first conference did not automatically mean that they would become members. Each organization taking part subsequently had to confirm that it would accede to the organization. Its success speaks for itself, however, since of the 17 participants in the

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Brussels conference, 15 decided to join.³⁹ A significant absence at the international conference was, however, that of the major sickness insurance unions of the United Kingdom.⁴⁰ Otherwise the ILO's representatives seemed quite satisfied with the way things were going for the new organization. Its member organizations took this new entity very seriously, since the International Committee, its managing body, was composed of individuals "who in their own country enjoyed a certain degree of authority and who actually managed sickness insurance".⁴¹

Preparations for the second conference clearly show that dependence on the ILO was considerable. In addition to the preparations by the secretariat, which entirely comprised ILO officials, the ILO had to make available to the conference three interpreters to ensure its effective functioning.⁴² The hopes that the ILO placed on the future role of the organization are also reflected in the presence of the ILO Director General, Albert Thomas, at the second conference.⁴³ In this way the ILO gave a clear indication that it regarded the sickness insurance funds as full partners in the social system and that its basic hope was that they would support the activities that it launched.

Moreover, the second conference was regarded by ILO officials as a genuine success: "We wanted unblemished success. We got it."⁴⁴ It might even be said that in a certain sense ILO officials had managed to develop this new organization for their own benefit:

Everybody realizes that the federation has a twofold aim: to aid the ratification of international conventions setting out minimum standards of insurance; and to carry out pioneering work in the development of social insurance, and thereby prepare the ground for the adoption by the Conference of new international conventions of a higher level.⁴⁵ The support of the new organization for the ILO was clear in ideological terms, but it also quite significantly depended on the ILO in terms of both logistics and financing, since it officially requested technical and documentary assistance from the ILO and left Tixier and Stein at the head of the secretariat, in particular because it did not (yet) possess the 50,000 to 60,000 Swiss francs necessary for an independent secretariat.⁴⁶

Tixier and Stein had also strongly marked their presence at the second con-

39. Report by Adrien Tixier to A. Maurette and Albert Thomas, 14.3.1928, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 1000-11-2, pp. 1-2.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

42. Internal note by Adrien Tixier, 13.7.1928, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 1000-11-2-1.

43. Address by Albert Thomas, International Congress of Sickness Insurance, Vienna, 10-14 September 1928, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 1000-11-2.

44. Report by Adrien Tixier, International Congress of Sickness Insurance, Vienna, 10-14 September 1928, 20.9.1928, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 1000-11-2, p. 4.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

ference. First, they were the only ones with any experience of an international conference, whereas most of the national representatives were only taking part in such an event for the second time. Second, “we exerted pressure on the committee to ensure that no burning issues concerning sickness insurance were included on the agenda” and “we collaborated closely in the preparation of all the reports, toned down any opinions that reflected too clearly certain national or sectoral tendencies, and reviewed the texts of the resolutions prepared by the reporters”.⁴⁷ The strategic position of ILO officials enabled them to control virtually the entire proceedings of the conference and to ensure that everybody had the impression that all sickness funds were moving in the same main direction.

The role played by Tixier and Stein at the first conferences was quite substantial but probably necessary in order to lay sound and essential foundations for the ISSA’s future success.

The absence of the English-speaking world

Despite the considerable success of the ILO and the new International Conference, the emerging structures had a conspicuous gap: the absence of the English-speaking world. In the case of the United States, both the ILO and the League of Nations had had problems with the emerging superpower during their creation following the Treaty of Versailles (1919), and it was therefore no surprise that the country was hardly interested in participating in or joining them (Alcock, 1971, pp. 120-123). It was in fact difficult to imagine that the American sickness insurance funds would play an active role in the ISSA when the United States was not even a member State of the ILO, not joining until 1934 (Alcock, 1971, p. 125). Moreover, before Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected President in November 1932, the United States was totally absent from the international scene, and refused to participate in the ILC even in an observer capacity. It was only when Roosevelt took the reins that there was any significant change in US international or social policy, but by then the International Conference had already been in existence for several years.

While the absence of the United States can be explained by its policy of isolation and relatively undeveloped social system of the time, the reluctance of the British is far more surprising. Together with Germany, Great Britain at that time had by far the most advanced social institutions. Nevertheless, those active in the international sphere expressed regret that the British funds did not show more commitment to this new international initiative. Tixier also noted, at the second meeting of the International Committee of the Conference, that “the main shortcoming is, as in

47. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

most international movements, the absence of a major English federation".⁴⁸ The two main British federations had in fact declined to join. The third, representing only one-tenth of insured people in the country, only participated in the first two conferences and withdrew in 1928 (ISSA, 1986, p. 16). While this was regretted by ILO officials, it would seem that they were not entirely reluctant to leave the British funds outside the International Conference during this initial phase. At the second congress, Tixier explained the absence of the British funds as follows:

Should we greatly regret the absence of the English? Obviously we should at first glance. However, on the other hand, if they now join, and numerous English delegates come to future congresses, we will have very serious difficulties in our discussions and in drafting resolutions. As in Geneva, the English, defending their very special systems, will oppose everything or ask for derogations on everything. As a result, the new international federation's function as a pioneering international organization will be considerably undermined.⁴⁹

As regards the tactics used by the ILO officials, it is interesting to note that they focused almost exclusively on the participation of the French and German sickness insurance funds in the first conference, but made hardly any effort to ensure any greater participation by the British unions. This is particularly surprising in view of the fact that one of the officials in the ILO's Social Insurance Branch, Maurice Stack, was himself British and could have easily played a liaison role with his government. There is a striking contrast between this and the activities deployed by the ILO to secure the commitment of the Germans through the frequent missions by Oswald Stein, another official of the Branch.⁵⁰ Hence, even if a major British presence had been desired, the international officials, in view of the considerable differences between the British system and others, devoted significantly fewer resources to securing the participation of the British, in particular so as to avoid endangering this new international initiative.

It would therefore seem that the ILO was forced to choose between two mutually exclusive options. The first would lead to the inclusion of the British, which would certainly have reduced the effectiveness and dynamism of the work set in motion in 1927. The second would have involved considerable efforts by international officials, without any guarantee of success in view of the lack of enthusiasm of the British. It is thus quite logical that the first option was chosen, even if it is not fully clear whether this was a deliberate choice or one imposed by the course of events or British reluctance.

48. Report by Adrien Tixier to A. Maurette and Albert Thomas, 14.3.1928, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 1000-11-2, p. 2.

49. Report by Adrien Tixier, International Congress of Sickness Insurance, Vienna, 10-14 September 1928, 20.9.1928, in *ILO Historical Archives*, File SI 1000-11-2, p. 3.

50. Mission request forms, 1927-1928, in *ILO Historical Archives*, Files P 1289 and P 1188.

Conclusion

The international social movement of the interwar period was not limited to the sphere of the ILO. However, the various social actors involved were slow to organize. It should be noted that in relation to sickness insurance funds the ILO played a dominant role, not only thanks to its officials, who had acquired considerable experience in a relatively short space of time, but also thanks to its moral authority and expertise, which was unique in the world at that time. Moreover, that moral authority, both among the social actors and among the various governments, shows to what extent the organization, created in 1919, had within a decade already won the respect not only of its supporters but also of its initial detractors. This shows clearly that the ILO met a genuine need of the time, since a great many countries simply did not have the necessary experience or adequate structures to develop social insurance instruments to meet the social needs of their citizens.

Nevertheless, it is worth considering whether the sickness funds would have been able to establish any effective structures without the aid of Albert Thomas and his organization. It is obviously extremely difficult to answer such a hypothetical question, but it is clear that the sickness insurance funds would have had to deal with a great many different factors, including physicians, national governments, political parties, trade unions and employers' organizations, which at that time were considerably better organized than the sickness insurance funds. Without the help of the ILO and its officials, the task of establishing the International Conference would have been much more painful. In addition, the international officials became closely involved in this process in order to ensure that the ideologies adopted by the ILO and the future CIMAS were not diametrically opposed. Had there been any such opposition between the two organizations, the successful foundation of 1927 would probably have been impossible. Major ideological conflict would have made the representation of insured persons at the ILC and the work of lobbying government bodies at international conferences much more complicated. For these reasons close operation between the ILO and the International Conference was from the outset totally logical, and was hence pursued with success for many decades. It made it possible to provide a solid foundation for the ISSA, which even today enables it to play a fundamental role in the increasingly internationalized world of social security.

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