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Schreiben Carl Legien an Robert Lansing (24.10.1920)

Brief

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Formalia:

Maschinenschriftliches Briefdokument. Der Brief ist in einem guten Englisch abgefasst, dürfte also professionell übersetzt worden sein.

Regest:

Dieser Brief, den der Vorsitzende des Allgemeinen Deutschen Gewerkschaftsbundes Carl Legien kurz vor seinem Tod (15.12.1920) an den US-amerikanischen Außenminister Robert Lansing schrieb, ist ein gutes Beispiel für die aufgeheizte, stark politisierte Atmosphäre in den internationalen Handelsbeziehungen nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg. Die Maßnahme, sämtliche Dieselmotoren in Deutschland zu zerstören und ihren Neubau zu verhindern, stellte in gewissen Kreisen eine Antwort auf den unbeschränkten U-Boot-Krieg dar. Sie stand im Zusammenhang mit ähnlichen Sanktionen, die konkret die Rüstungsproduktion betrafen. Ob diese Maßnahme allerdings durchzusetzen und zu kontrollieren gewesen wäre, ist eine andere Frage. Zugleich ist die Quelle ein gutes Beispiel für die angespannte Lage, in der sich die Gewerkschaften befanden, nachdem sie sich im Zuge des Stinnes-Legien-Abkommens eindeutig zur deutschen Republik bekannt hatten, sie zugleich aber auch nicht in die nationalistische Rhetorik der politischen Rechten einstimmen wollten.

Sir Robert Lansing 24. Oktober 1920

State Secretary of the United States of America

Washington U.S.A.

Honoured Sir,

the General Federation of German Trade Goods¹ is presenting nine million of organised male and female workers and other employees, begs leave to approach the High Allied Governments in the following matter:

From conformable reports of the political daily papers and official publications it appears that the Conference of Ambassadors appointed by the High Allied Governments, has the intention of demanding of the German Government the destruction of all high speed Dieselmotors existing in German industrial establishments, and prohibiting the further manufacturing of same.

In the interest of the entire class of German workers and other employees, as well as in the interest of the whole economic life of Germany, and last but not least, in the interest of the carrying out of those regulations of the treaty of peace which deals with Germany's liabilities of reparation, the General Federation of German Trade Union addresses to the High Allied Governments the emphatic request to refrain from carrying out the measures in question.

In support of this request the General Federation of German Trade Unions would wish to point out the following facts and considerations : the number of male and female workers and[2] other employees in Germany who are either altogether out of work or who only work with reduced hours, at present amounts to several millions,- it

1 Gemeint ist hier der im Juli 1919 gegründete Allgemeine Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund, deren Vorsitzender Carl Legien war. *Führer, Legien*, 233–238.

is estimated to be about four millions. The means which the German Reich has to bring up in order to protect these millions who are partly bare of all means of living, from starvation, amount to milliards of money. Any further increase in the number of unemployed will also increase the expense necessary to keep them.

Thus, instead of being used for the reconstruction of German economic life, i.e. for productive purposes, further enormous sums have continually to be spent for unproductive purposes. The destruction of the Dieselmotors in use, and the prohibition of any new construction of such motors, would by necessity, directly and indirectly, lead to a further considerable increase in the number of unemployed and would hence in heightened degree produce the above mentioned phenomena. At the same time, numerous hands that are able and willing to work would be forced to rest which otherwise could be productively employed for the reconstruction of European economic life and especially for reparation of the destruction of the war.

But also from the point of view of the economic life of Germany would the carrying out of the proposed measures have the most ruinous consequences. The existing Dieselmotors represent an economic value which amount to milliards of Marks. Their destruction means nothing less than a senseless smashing to pieces of an essential part of the scanty remains of the German national capital, and would still further increase Germany's economic misery. Under these measures the German workers would again have to suffer most.

[3]

And also in another respect would German economic life be injured by discarding the Dieselmotors. It is known that these motors can be heated by the most inferior oils, whilst all other starting machines require pure and good oils or coals to heat them. If the use of Dieselmotors is prohibited, the result would be that Germany would have to use expensive heating oils which it would partly have to import from other countries. It is however questionable whether it would be in a position to pay for them. Or on the other hand, it would have to increase the combustion of coal, which would also not be possible if Germany is to deliver up coals as required by the treaty of peace.² Thus, in any case, the result would be an enormous injury and damage to German economic life and a great harm to the German working classes.

The carrying out of the measures in question at the same time means the utter impossibility of fulfilling the liabilities of reparation imposed on the German people, by the treaty of peace. The whole world is of the opinion that the German people can only fulfill their obligations if they considerably increase the returns of their industry. But such an increase cannot possibly be achieved if the physical work to be performed is heightened. English authorities in the question of economic life before all others, estimate the decline of the German power of work brought about by the five years hunger blockade, at thirty percent. This estimation is on the whole correct. Hence, it is not possible for us German workers to-day and for a long time to come, to regain their former productive power, for even now the German people have not enough to eat. If nevertheless the German people shall and must increase their economic returns in order to fulfill[4] the obligations of the treaty of peace, this can only and alone be achieved by improving the methods of production. If, however, its best and most productive machines are taken away – and these are unquestionably the Dieselmotors – the German people lose the last hope and chance of ever being able to fulfill the obligations imposed on them. But on the other hand, the German people are almost daily threatened with the hardest coercive measures if they do not fulfill the financial and economic obligations of the treaty of peace. That is a dilemma of the most terrible kind, from which there is no escape if it is not in the last minute recognized that the means of working must be left to those who are to work and atone.

The General Federation of German Trade Unions will moreover not fail to point out the great political danger which would result if the measures regarding the Dieselmotors are carried out. The burdens of the treaty of peace weigh terribly hard just on the German working classes. If the latter are forced by the action of the High Allied Governments to gain the conviction that all their efforts and labours for reparation will be in vain, as the means for the intense work therefore necessary are forcibly taken from them and destroyed, the political consequences which must arise from the conviction are such as will in their effects certainly not remain confined to Germany alone.

2 Der Versailler Vertrag legte zwar keine konkrete Reparationssumme fest, verpflichtete aber in § 231 das Deutsche Reich zur Lieferung von Kohle an die Siegermächte. Steiner. *The Lights that failed*, 31–40.

If in support of the measures in question it is asserted that the high speed Dieselmotors could be used for the construction of submarines, it may on the other hand be said that the High Allied Governments certainly have a great number of other possibilities of preventing these from being built, without destroying the existing motors and prohibiting the manufacture of new ones. The High Allied Governments dispose of such a great[5] number of controlling organs in Germany – official and inofficial³ – that a warlike design of any circles in Germany could not remain unknown to them for an hour. But above all, the German workers have obtained for themselves a political position in the democratic Germany of to-day, which enables them to prevent any war, even if some circles in Germany should dare to play with the idea of a fresh war, which is however not the case in reality. The mental condition of the German workers is the best guarantee for a lasting peace. For they above all, more so than any other class of society – not only in Germany but in the whole world – are imbued with the idea of the League of Nations, have most deeply taken up the pacific ideas which form its foundation and who are resolved to uphold these ideas most energetically. This fact is a greater security for the peace of nations to the High Allied Governments, and in the end to the whole world, than any measure which, considered from the point of view of social policy, of economics and politics in general, would be nothing less than an act of crude and thoughtless vandalism that yet could never attain the purpose aspired. We beg to sign, honoured Sir, The General Federation of German Trade Unions,
C. Legien

3 Mit "offiziellen" Kontrollorganen meint Legien die Ende 1919 eingerichteten sog. Interalliierten Militärischen Kontrollkommissionen. Was mit "inoffiziellen" Kontrollorganen gemeint ist, wird nicht ganz klar.