

Joint Council of Southampton Trades Council, Labour Party and Co-operative Society

9th June 1937

CHILD REFUGEES FROM BILBAO AND BASQUE CAMP AT NORTH STONEHAM, NEAR SOUTHAMPTON.

About Thursday or Friday, 6th and 7th May, 1937, we received a report that about 2,000 refugees from Bilbao were coming to the town.

On Sunday evening, 9th May, we had the formal Opening, by the Spanish Consul in Southampton and a Conference of the Spanish Exhibition (from London) which continued from 10th to 15th, inclusive. The discussion at the Conference centred round the possibility of the children coming to Southampton, and I was requested to telephone the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, in London, the following morning (Monday, 10th) and get information, so that any assistance possible could be rendered.

I telephoned the Joint Committee and also wrote to Mr. Sams the organiser on the 10th. The Committee were still negotiating with Government Departments and could not say anything definite, but asked us to provisionally sound local organisations who could help with a camp etc.

We telephoned again on the Tuesday and early Tuesday evening, I received a message from Sams asking me to meet him the following day, Wednesday (Coronation Day) in Southampton about 12 noon.

On the Tuesday, we got into touch with the Secretary of the J.O.C. Boys Brigades, and made enquiries regarding sites for a camp and the possibility of getting large houses. We were able to get an offer from a Mr. H.C. Cole of Southampton of a large house at Moorhill, West End containing 12 bedrooms and many large rooms on the ground floor.

On Coronation Day, with Messrs. Brinton and Sams, Mr. Cole, Mr. J.M. Pavey, Asst. Secty. Development Committee, Southampton Co-operative Soc. Ltd., I spent the afternoon and evening inspecting various possible sites for a camp.

The understanding then was that the 2,000 children might arrive on Monday, 17th May. It was decided to hold a "practical" small gathering on Thursday evening, 13th May. I interviewed the Mayor, who whilst willing to help, could not see his way to take the chair at such a gathering, but gave the free use of a room in his suite for the Conference.

On Thursday afternoon, I introduced the National Joint Committee representatives to Mr. G.H. Brown (Farmer) and it was decided that the camp should be at North Stoneham, with the large house at Moorhill as the "Infirmary" for the Camp.

I sent out invitations from the Joint Council for the "practical" Conference, and this was attended by representatives of Boys Brigade, Boy Scouts, Round Tablers, Rotary Club, Trades Council, Labour Party, Co-operative Society. The main business was the setting up of the Camp at North Stoneham.

On the following evening an all-in Conference of Political, Religious, and Social organisations was held and one of the Conference rooms at the Civic Centre was packed to overflowing.

Notice for this was sent out by us, but in the name of the National Council Committee, and signed by Mr. Henry Brinton. We assisted the Committee representatives with many local enquiries regarding assistance, supplies etc.

On Thursday or Friday, Mr. R.W. Jones (District Secretary, Plumbers Union) and Mr. P. Blanchard (Organiser, Painters' Union) volunteered to superintend the organisation of the sanitary part of the camp - latrines, water, waste pits etc.

On Friday, 14th May, the Joint Council, sent out an appeal by circular letter to all trade union branches, Labour Party Ward Associations, and some individuals, in Southampton and district, and as many addresses of trade unions etc. in Eastleigh as were available, to come to the Camp on Sunday and Monday (Bank Holiday) for digging and carpentering, etc. work.

An appeal was also made by the Joint Committee in the "Echo", and private car conveyances were arranged for the civic centre.

There was a splendid response on the Sunday and Monday, of trade unionists and Labour Party members, who were also members of one or more of the following organisations, Co-operative Society, Communist Party, Clarion Cycling Club. On Sunday, this section, reinforced by Boy Scouts, Boys Brigade members, Round Tablers, Toc H, College students, etc. toiled with pick, fork, and shovel, in digging trenches for latrines, and the carpenters and mates constructed the latrine shelters of wood and hessian. Plumbers meantime were busy with water pipes, taps, etc.

This work was continued on the Monday, when the Camp was practically ready for the reception of 2,000 children.

On the Sunday morning, a large contingent of members of the Boys Brigade, assisted by Boy Scouts, etc. erected 220 Bell Tents, and several marquees, in less than 4 hours - a splendid achievement.

On Tuesday, 18th May, the Organiser of the Camp advised us that an additional 2,000 children were coming, and preparations must be made for duplicate accommodation.

Fortunately we had taken the names and addresses of helpers who were in the Camp on Bank Holiday, and a circular letter was sent out to them at their home addresses, also to all trade union branch secretaries and Labour Ward Associations.

The response on Wednesday evening was again remarkable, and labour supporters, with members of other organisations, dug the pits for all the necessary latrines that same night.

On Friday, 21st May, the second lot of bell tents, 250, arrived, and the majority were erected Friday evening. It was decided to arrange a meeting at the Guildhall, and this was mainly organised under the direction of Mr. J.M. Pavey, of the Co-operative Society, with clerical assistance loaned by several organisations.

The Labour Party Women's Sections, with members of the Women's Guilds, got busy on Weds. 19th May, in organising the collection of children's clothing, and the response from these sections, and also from other people to this appeal, and the request for furniture was very good.

The rank and file response to the call for work, as far as the trade union, labour and co-operative movements are concerned, was very good indeed. Apart from Jones and Blanchard, with Goulden (Carpenters), and myself, I do not think any other organisers or leaders assisted, so that it was definitely the rank and file who responded, to the urgent appeal for work.

There were a few from Eastleigh, and other districts; the first week-end, but the following weekend there was quite a strong contingent of Eastleigh trade unionists.

We were told by the National Joint Committee representatives that they were anxious to get all parties, creeds, and social bodies, interested and working on this Refugee work, so that much work has been done without it being definitely under Labour auspices. Despite this we did feel after two days had passed and no mention had been made of our spade work, that some acknowledgment should be given, and a reference was made in the daily report by the Organiser in the "Echo".

It must be said that the response for personal and other service from all sections of the community of Southampton and district was remarkably good.

Organisations and individuals responded, all types of firms gave assistance with supplies, in most cases at cost price or reduced price.

In the work involved in connection with disembarkation of the children from the "Habana" on Sunday, 23rd May, men and women of the trade union, labour, and co-operative movements assisted, with members of many other organisations. This work included dealing with the children at the baths, and receiving them at the Camp. Bands of women helpers, — Labour Party Women's Sections and Co-operative Guildswomen, from Southampton and Eastleigh, formed the majority of the Meal Assistants, and worked very hard during the first week of the Camp.

As was perhaps inevitable with such a large number arriving at the Camp on Sunday - 3,300 - there was some delay and chaos the first day or two in the serving of meals, etc.

The habits of the children with regard to sanitary arrangements on the Sunday was the sole cause of the Eastleigh Borough Council from a health point of view dealing with the situation.

Mr. R.W. Jones, District Secretary of the Plumbers Union, had directed the provision of latrines, water supplies, etc. consistently and well, and these facilities were approved by the Eastleigh Health and Sanitary Authorities on the day prior to the children arriving.

Mr. Sams was compelled, owing to breakdown, to relinquish the position of Organiser of the Camp, on the Tuesday after the children arrived, and since then under the direction of Mr. Henry Brinton, the organisation of the Camp has been improved very much indeed until now every section works smoothly and well.

Just over a week after the arrival of the youngsters, in order to provide more work for the older Spanish boys and girls it was decided to ask the day women volunteers to make way for them. This they did, and the work of serving of meals, washing up, etc is now in the hands of the refugees themselves under the direction of helpers in attendance all day and resident in the Camp.

Many additions have been made to the Camp, for better organisation, in the way of chestnut paling to divide the children's tents from the food, etc. marquees; laundry, kitchens, etc. erected, by the trade union and labour section under Mr. Jones.

The general health of the children is improving rapidly. By helping with meals and other camp duties, by regular daily lessons from their own teachers, they are much more occupied than at the commencement, and the Camp has now the appearance of order and contentment.

Cinema shows, Conjuring and Punch Judy, Dancing Displays, and other Entertainments have been staged. We have borne in mind that this has been a rush job. Action was required and there was no time in the first two weeks to call meetings of organisations.

Willing people have turned up and have worked night after night to get the camp ready for the little children. L. Witt Hon.Sec. Joint Council, Southampton Trades Council, Labour Party, and Co-operative Society.

P.S. It should be mentioned that the Local Co-operative society has rendered all assistance possible, by loan of lorries, etc.

The following resolution passed at a recent meeting of the Joint Council:

"That the Joint Council place on record its appreciation of the splendid and enthusiastic assistance given to the national Joint Committee in preparing to receive the Basque child refugees, by the Secretary, Mr. L. Witt and Mr. R.W. Jones.

The Council further records its thanks to the members of the rank and file of our movements for their prompt response to the urgent appeal made at short notice, and to their unselfish, enthusiastic work."

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