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COUNTRY Portugal

SUBJECT Labor's Reactions to May Day 1954 and September 1953
Elections

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SOURCE

1. I was in Portugal [14 months in 1953-54], I had an opportunity to observe the reactions of labor on two specific occasions. May Day (1 May 54) and the general elections of September 1953 afforded these opportunities.
2. I was working with a cloth finishing company (Campos Mello) in Covilhã, a city of about 25 thousand, on May Day 1954. In all the time I spent in Portugal, I had not observed the mill hands as agitated and bitter as they were that day. Several days prior to 1 May, a notice had been placed on the company bulletin board indicating that the mill would work a full day on May Day. Further, should the people not come to work, drastic measures would be taken against the mill. (I did hear of one mill in a nearby town where the workers did not report, and the plant was closed indefinitely.) The workers at Campos Mello, Covilhã, reported as instructed but under obvious protest. Although they did not give vent to their feelings where they could be overheard by the soldiers or police, many grumbled to me. Comments ranged from their "lack of freedom" to statements about being treated "like animals." Salazar was verbally torn apart.
3. Local police and soldiers were all over town and out on the roads leading in from the hills. As far as I could find out, there were no demonstrations in the town. The presence of the soldiers was a definite deterrent to open expressions of hostility, for individually, the people were aroused.
4. Knowing how disturbed the people were on May Day, I could not help but notice the complete reversal of form that took place the next day. There was no grumbling and as far as I could see, any resentment had disappeared. It was almost as if the storm of the previous day had blown itself out and it was again calm. It remained that way the remainder of my time there.

Contrasted with May Day 1954, the elections of September 1953 were very quiet. There were few if any comments on what I thought was a highhanded way of conducting the voting. The workers seemed to accept the fact that they had no vote and that only those on an approved list could cast a ballot. The city was full of soldiers and police, but labor presented no problems.

The attitude of most of the mill hands with whom I came in contact was most favorable to the US. They asked all kinds of questions and were thoroughly impressed with the lack of a "quota" system in US industry. They bowed and doffed their hats to any company executives and would not think of engaging in conversation with them. Almost without exception the workers would like to get to the US. Many have relatives now residing here. The local paper carries a column almost exclusively devoted to the New Bedford and Fall River area of Massachusetts. However, they are aware of the fact that on wages of 60 cents to US\$1 a day, they will never make it. But dreamlike, the hope exists almost as a trip to the Promised Land.

There was some talk of Communism but the thought was farthest from most of the workers' minds. On two occasions that I can recall, I heard men talking and heard them say that they certainly could not have less freedom with Communism. But no one gave the thought serious consideration. Undoubtedly, the 100 per cent Catholic population and the strong influence of the Church acts as a deterrent; at least I heard that idea expressed.

I noticed that the Portuguese are taking advantage of the Canadian immigration quota and are moving to that country. The local chief of police in Covilhã told me that it was the hope of those he knew who had left for Canada that they could eventually get to the US.

Of interest to me was the reaction of the workers to the Rosenberg case in the US. It was given considerable space in the newspapers and although there exists a high percentage of illiteracy among the workers, they were nevertheless well-acquainted with the case. In a rather rough estimate I would say that 80 per cent of those with whom I talked or heard discussing the case thought the Rosenbergs got what they deserved.