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*The ILO as organizer : shaping the transnational housing scene in the 1920s*

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It's been a couple of years now since globalization studies have made ways for historical approaches to the interconnected and entangled aspects of our world. Political scientists, economists, geographers, sociologists and anthropologists who had indulged into prophecies loaded with a very short chronological perspective have integrated the idea that these aspects were not to be merely considered at the light of trends and patterns from the last 30 years, with the post 1945 world in the role of prehistorical times. More and more people are acknowledging the existence of institutional, cultural, economic and political paths that connect the evolution of the 'globalized' world we are said to live in with other similar moments in the history of human kind. Historians themselves have stepped forward to take part to these discussions. One of the many results of this increased sensitivity to history has been the exploration of the historical nature of the much vaunted or assailed 'global civil society'. While a large number of studies about international non governmental organizations are still focused on last 30 years and a couple of good causes and fields such as humanitarian relief, human rights or the environment, a growing number of studies underscore the interest of considering a time range of some two hundred years, to capture some enduring repertoires of action, organizational forms and interactions with nation states that have been shaped in the rank and file of

temperance, abolitionism, feminism and labour cross border activism, but also by the networks of eugenics or crime.<sup>1</sup>

Because of its idiosyncratic conception, constitution and operation, the history of the International Labour Office (thereafter 'the Office') relationship with these groups may contribute to the ongoing development of this historical gaze, by exploring the operational relationship between second generation international organizations and voluntary groups.<sup>2</sup> After an overview of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) structural propinquity with such groups, I will explore the field of housing where the Office mingled with them, up to the point of impacting their existence and operation.<sup>3</sup>

### **ILO and NGO: beyond the acronyms**

It has often been said that the Office seems to be the less governmental of the inter-governmental organizations created by the Versailles Treaty. Just like many inter-governmental Unions had been shoved into being during the

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<sup>1</sup> Iriye A. 2002. Global community. The role of international organizations in the making of the contemporary world. Berkeley : California University Press ; Charnowitz S. 1996. 'Two centuries of participation: NGOs and international governance', Michigan Journal of International Law, 18, 183-286; Boli J. & Thomas G. Eds. 1999. Constructing world culture. International nongovernmental organizations since 1875. Stanford : Stanford University Press ; Keck M.E. & Sikkink K. 1998. Activists beyond borders : advocacy networks in international politics. Ithaca : Cornell University Press.

<sup>2</sup> "First generation" international organizations are the different Unions borne out of inter-state treaties in the late 19th century, e.g the Universal Postal Union. "Second generation" international organizations are those which emerged from the Versailles Treaty. Their relationship with voluntary groups has been explored in specific fields like feminism, child welfare or relief. On child welfare, see the work of Dominique Marshall, 'Children's right in imperial political cultures : missionary and humanitarian contributions to the conference on the African child in 1931', *The international journal of children rights*, 12, 2004, 273-318 ; and 'Tensions nationales, ethniques et religieuses autour des droits des enfants : la participation canadienne au Comité de protection de l'enfance de la Société des Nations', *Lien social et politique. RIAC*, 44, automne 2000, p.101-123

<sup>3</sup> These are the first results of this ongoing research, and I hope to have completed archival work before the Conference takes place.

last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the constant pressure and suggestion of professional, scholars and economic interests groups, the International Labour Conference and the International Labour Office were prompted by the requests of different groups well beyond national governments officials. The Socialist and trade unionists had gathered in Berne to remind the war aims of labour to the peace makers in Paris in their Labour Charter. Some of them, like the Frenchmen Albert Thomas and Edgard Milhaud, of whom more will be said later, were protagonists at the socialist Berne conference.<sup>4</sup> The scholarly and administrative reformist networks of the International Association for Labour Legislation also found their way into the making of the new institutions: Arthur Fontaine, the French civil servant and secretary of the commission (and later the president of the Office governing body), was an old hand of the Association, and many members were included in the delegations at the first International Labour Conference in Washington in 1919. National labour delegations to the third commission of the Peace conference, that on international labour legislation, were also vital in shaping the constitution of the International Labour Organization and Office, and trade unionists of various brands from the American Federation of Labour to the French Confédération Générale du Travail contributed to steer and drive the commission's work.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Patrizia Dogliani, in « Progetto per un Internazionale 'aclassista' : i socialisti nell'Organizzazione Internazionale del Lavoro negli anni venti', *Quaderni della Fondazione Feltrinelli*, 34, 1987. The author, was among the first who have pushed the study of the relationship between the socialist movement and the second generation of intergovernmental organizations beyond the study of intellectual attitudes towards the League of Nations or the International Labour Office, to study the practical involvement of socialists within the organisations.

<sup>5</sup> Jasmien van Daele has dissected the operations of the commission in "Engineering social peace: networks, ideas and the founding of the International Labour

The Office's original constitution was broadly shaped by these convergences and pressures, with the well known tripartite contribution by government, employers and workpeople delegates.<sup>6</sup> This original structure was matched onto national delegations to Conferences, the Office Governing Body, or the Commission of Inquiries which could investigate complaint by national governments about the non implementation of labour conventions. In fact, it might have been in the labour provisions of the Peace Treaty that the negative definition of 'non government' members appeared for the first time.<sup>7</sup> This terminology, which would emerge as a category of its own with UN Charter article 71 about the arrangements between the UN Economic and Social Council and 'non governmental organizations', seems to have been occasionally used in labour reformers circles and ILO early vocabulary. Sophy Sanger, formerly the secretary of the British section for the International Association for Labour legislation, wrote of 'non government organizations' to refer to this Association and other groups.<sup>8</sup> Sanger was a member of the Washington Labour Conference secretariat, and one of the first officials of the ILO, where she was in charge of the *Legislative series*. The importance of the connection with such groups were clear for many other ILO officials, and when Thomas sketched the forthcoming activity of the Office scientific and

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Organization', *International Review of Social History*, 50, 2005, p. 435–466, while Victor Yves Ghebali, in *L'Organisation Internationale du Travail*, Genève : Georg, 1987, has underlined the connections of the Office with the Peace conference commission.

<sup>6</sup> Treaty of Peace between the allied and associated powers and Germany, articles 387 sqq.

<sup>7</sup> Article 389: 'The Members undertake to nominate non-government delegates and advisers chosen in agreement with the industrial organisations'.

<sup>8</sup> Sophy Sanger 'Practical problems of international labour legislation', in John Solano, ed, *Labour as an international problem*, London : Macmillan, 1920, p.136

intelligence section, it placed it under the aegis of the International Association for Labour Legislation past work.<sup>9</sup>

The operation of the ILO would confirm such views, in that trade unions, scholarly groups, the cooperative movement and employers' organisations would be very present in all the different stages of its work, including the Office modus operandi. For Thomas, who had been a socialist, trade union and cooperative leader, this connection seems to have been a central concern, lest the Office would be nothing but a bureaucratic organization. The Office staff, that included many members of labour and labour reform activists groups, by no means only socialists ones, did share this concern out of conviction and affinities. The breadth of information that circulated between the ILO and trade unions, which can be tracked in the Office's periodicals and in workers' movements periodicals all over the world, is but a tiny clue of this operational propinquity between the Office and 'non government organizations'.

True, the League of Nations also developed such an intense communication with voluntary societies in its early years. This was stamped with two traits: one was the blunt instrumentality of the relationship, as the private groups were seen as channels through which the word about the importance and usefulness of the League could be spread; the other was that the League's nature as an inter-governmental organization geared towards high politics was soon reminded to those in the League who were enthusiast about cooperation with non public and semi public organizations. From 1924,

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<sup>9</sup> Albert Thomas, "The task of the International Labour Office", in Solano, p.254

a restrictive application was given to article 24 of the Covenant that could be used to develop such relationship.<sup>10</sup> The Office's own link with the world out there was certainly not deprived of tactical purposes: the more business and workpeople groups would be anxious to enter into discussion and exchange with the Office, the better for the standing of the latter. But it is argued here that there was more into it. This was part of the Office's genetical code. In fact, League of Nations people sometimes smeared their Office colleagues for the stain of amateurism they saw in the participation of employers' and workers' representatives to their international activities.<sup>11</sup>

This paper will focus on a specific aspect of the interaction between the Office and 'non government organisations', that is its role in shaping the landscape of voluntary groups in his field. Another inter-governmental organization, UNESCO, and another Thomas, Jean, are best known for this proactive policy. Jean Thomas and Julian Huxley, as associate director and director of UNESCO, led an active policy to create, support and maintain international non governmental organisations in the orbit of UNESCO in its early years. The creation of the International Theatre Institute, the International Music Council, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the International Council of Museums and a couple of others was the result of the interaction between Huxley, Thomas and the stakeholders in

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<sup>10</sup> on this turn, see Charnowitz, p.220 sqq. This view, based on League Council decisions, is confirmed by archival work on the relationships between the League sections and non-government groups.

<sup>11</sup> An ILO officer would later report the opinion of a League staffer and friend : 'In the early days, people in League of Nations circles used, frankly, to regard the International Labor Organization as rather ridiculous', quoted in Charnowitz, p.219 from David Blelloch, 'The international labor organization', in *World organization, a balance sheet of the first great experiment*. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Public Affairs 1942, p.321.

these fields. UNESCO subsidized these groups and maintained a thick working relationship with them, using their expertise to cooperate into policy making, their networks to spread its gospel and their presence to nag government members and balance the pressure of the latter on UNESCO.<sup>12</sup> There are, in fact many interesting common points between UNESCO and the ILO, beginning with constitutional even if heatedly contested features (the idea that delegations to conferences are made of specialists, the idea that members of delegations do vote as individuals and not as nationals...). But the most salient commonality might be that these two first directors wanted to remake the world and saw the institution they had to invent as a touchstone for this endeavour. Both embodied a highly visible and charismatic definition of directorship, epitomized by the intensity of their publishing, speaking and travelling activity. Their conception of the work with groups beyond states governments seems to have been strengthened by this worldview.

### **Exploring the workers ‘conditions of life: housing as a contested field**

No organizational chart of the ILO ever included a section on the conditions of life of the workers. Though, Albert Thomas had made it clear very early that he would take it for granted that the Peace Treaty was

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<sup>12</sup> There are still a number of these groups that are housed in the UNESCO buildings in Paris, and subsidized by it. See Richard Hoggart, “UNESCO and non governmental organizations”, in Peter Willetts, Ed., *The conscience of the world : the influence of non-governmental organisations in the UN system*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution 1996. See also Julian Huxley, *Memories*, vl.2, London: Allen & Uniwin, 1973.

entitling the International Labour Organization to seize up more than shop floor living conditions. In 1920, he put it on paper that the co-operative section might be the most adequate platform to engage with this “wider sphere”, as the co operative movement was dealing with domains that were part of the conditions of life of the workers. Among these, wrote Thomas, housing and transport facilities were vital aspects in the welfare of workers.<sup>13</sup> Despite of this early announcement, the Office was too busy with its initial forays into labour conditions and regulations to follow up. Only an opportunity seems to have triggered explorations in the field of housing.

The archive and library of the ILO bear witness for the number of individuals and organisations who wrote to the headquarters and branches in the hope to get attention, cooperation or even subsidies. Signore Magalodi, the president of the executive committee for the International Housing Congress of Rome, was one of these. Probably after some preliminary talks (Thomas was in Rome at the time Magalodi wrote his letter), he wrote to the Office’s Italian branch in March 1922, to ask for the Office’s contribution to the preparation of the Congress (planned for the end of September 1922), underscoring the importance of the ‘healthy, merry and cheap house’ for the workers, and hence for the Office’s mission.<sup>14</sup> Magalodi expressed the wish that the Office would contribute to the Rome Congress either by helping the congress to recruit fee-paying member, or by preparing a report, or even through some financial subsidy. It is quite likely that previous contact had

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas in Solano, p.259–260

<sup>14</sup> ILO archives, Geneva, W 1000/8/1, Documents, Magaldi to Rome branch, 18 March 1922.

been made before, and that Magalodi knew that financial support was out of the question. This point was in fact not even addressed in the correspondence between the ILO officers who contributed the Office's answer. From the start, Albert Thomas said that the ILO would only be able to contribute by providing documentation, and logged the file onto the Scientific Division. The latter, under the direction of US economist Royal Meeker<sup>15</sup>, devised a plan for research that encompassed the adoption of a frame that would direct the establishment of national reports on housing, and the edition of a general report. That is, the kind of process that had been set up for the Genoa conference on the 8 hours day. The general report would be presented at the Rome Congress by an Office representative.

The process began in earnest early in May 1922, when Meeker explained to Thomas that the Office's report would focus on workers' housing legislation and workers housing statistics. The reporting task was assigned to two Austrians. Hugo von Haan, a statistician, was put in charge of collecting the data while Karl Pribram, the head of the research and statistical department, was to represent the Office at the Conference.<sup>16</sup> Once the documentation work had begun, Thomas thought that housing was a touchstone from where to develop the Office's activities in the field of 'industrial welfare' and asked Meeker to explore possibilities beyond the report. Meeker, after canvassing

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<sup>15</sup> Meeker, a Princeton professor of economics, was appointed as US Commissioner of Labour Statistics by President Wilson. He joined the ILO in 1920 to lead the Scientific Division and left in to become the Pennsylvania secretary of labor and industry. He was a member of the American Association for Labor Legislation

<sup>16</sup> Pribram (1877–1973) had been chief of the Legislative Division for Social Policy in the Austrian Ministry for Social Administration, 1918–21. Before the war, he was general secretary of the Centralstelle für Wohnungsreform, and attended the International Housing conferences as a representative of the Austrian Government. In 1910, he had been the secretary of the organising committee when the congress took place in Vienna.

the situation with Pribram, suggested that the Rome congress offered the Office with a chance to contribute to the creation of a coordinating organisation for all countries with an interest into workers' housing: 'It is highly appropriate in my judgment that the ILO should become the permanent secretarial office for an international organisation on industrial housing'.<sup>17</sup> This possible organisation, as well as Von Haan's report, should develop in a new subdivision of the Office dedicated to 'Housing and Welfare', which Von Haan would supervise. The proposal being vetted by Thomas, and Von Haan having been entrusted with the task to present his report at the Rome Congress, the latter began his campaign to gather documents and data.<sup>18</sup> Additional strategy was later imagined to orient the housing activist in the direction of Geneva: Imre Ferenczi, a figure of municipal housing policies in pre-war Budapest<sup>19</sup>, a standing member of the Comité Permanent des Congrès Internationaux de l'Habitation (therefore The Comité), and a member of the Office staff was to go to Rome with Von Haan, in order to use his connections to 'orient the Congress' towards the Office.<sup>20</sup> Early in August, Von Haan handed out reports on housing in 11 European countries plus the

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<sup>17</sup> ILO, W 1000/8/1, Minute, Meeker to Thomas 29 May 1922

<sup>18</sup> I will focus on housing for the sake of this paper, though Von Haan made significant explorations or studies in the field of leisure and welfare work. This included his attendance to the International Conference of Welfare Workers at Argeronne in France (1922) and his subsequent appointment as expert adviser of the committee which emerged from this meeting to give birth to the Association Internationale de Service Social Industriel. In a note where he listed his activities to ask for a promotion, Von Haan claimed his presence was important in 'closely connecting this new international movement to our organisation' (ILO, Hugo von Haan staff file, Documents, Von Haan to Thomas 16 June 1924)

<sup>19</sup> Susan Zimmermann. *Prächtige Armut: Fürsorge, Kinderschutz und Sozialreform in Budapest; Das 'sozialpolitische Laboratorium' der Doppelmonarchie im Vergleich zu Wien 1873-1914*, Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1997.

<sup>20</sup> There was in fact competition from Ferenczi to seize up the housing work inside the Office, but this does not need to be detailed here.

United States. The news from the postponement of the Rome Congress, at the end of August 1922, while fascist *squadristo* violence reached a peak, did not alter the momentum.

In fact, Von Haan's housing studies were given a go ahead for expansion precisely because of this postponement, and the Office stepped on the accelerator. During the 4th session of the International Labour Conference, in November 1922, two Italian delegates presented a resolution project that asked the Office to launch studies about housing.<sup>21</sup> The resolution had been prompted directly by Ferenczi and its text approved by Thomas. It was part of a tactic devised earlier in the summer. This included the publication of an article stressing the Office legitimacy in entering the housing sphere, its distribution to some delegates of the Labour Conference, and the presentation of a resolution to the latter.<sup>22</sup> In the absence of the Rome Congress where 'public opinion' support would have been mustered from, the resolution was to manifest such support to an activity that was already being developed by the office !

The resolution was deferred to the Office Governing Body, where Thomas built from previous notes by Pribram, Meeker and Von Haan to present the case to the 17<sup>th</sup> session of the latter in February 1923. He made his point by insisting that housing was an international question and a labour question, and thus qualified for the Office's attention under the heading of Article 427 of the Peace Treaty that invoked the 'welfare of the workers'. Despite the

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<sup>21</sup> Resolution 8, p.147 in *Conférence Internationale du Travail, Compte rendu définitif, IV<sup>e</sup> session, Geneva : ILO, 1922.*

<sup>22</sup> Ferenczi's article, 'Die Wohnungsfrage und die Internationale Arbeitsorganisation', was published in *Soziale Praxis*, 41, 12 October 1922. The whole episode is documented in ILO archives, CAT 10-41 'Incident Pribram-Ferenczi'.

financial difficulties of the Office, and beyond the blunt opposition of a number of members, whose word was carried by the conservative parliamentary secretary to the British Ministry of labour, Archibald Boyd Carpenter, the pursuit of the studies was voted by the narrowest margin (9 vs 7).<sup>23</sup> Thomas nevertheless had to insist that the Office would focus on comparing methods, in order to avoid to mingle with national policies. At the same session, Thomas had presented his note on leisure to the Governing Body, in the hope that the subject would be placed in front of the 1923 Labour Conference delegates. The fact that the Governing Body postponed the examination of this note until the 1924 conference gave Von Haan free reign to dive into the housing question.

He subsequently drafted a plan for pushing his research onto a more ambitious plane. The idea was to publish the existing national studies separately in the Office *Etudes et Documents* series, to launch a new set of investigations on a larger number of countries, and to publish a general synthesis on the housing problem. This scientific program was accompanied by a political assessment, where Von Haan sketched the range of possible actions in the field, which tension he located between the return to free enterprise mechanisms and the development of public policies. The whole program, suggested von Haan, asked for a sustained documentation activity (bibliography, collection of designs, clipping of periodicals), intensive

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<sup>23</sup> *Procès verbaux de la 17<sup>e</sup> session du Conseil d'administration du BIT*, discussion du 17 février 1923, p.66

correspondence and connections with specialist networks to ‘stabilize studies about workers’ housing in its (the Office) own sphere of activity’.<sup>24</sup>

Thomas gave his green light in May 1923, and Von Haan pushed the fires: he sent his report to in house and external experts, and began to get personally acquainted with the networks of housing reformers in Europe.<sup>25</sup> As he added the investigation of workpeople leisure on top of this, he became, in the word of his superior ‘a little service on his own, in charge of housing and welfare’.<sup>26</sup> The publication of *European housing problems since the war 1914–1923* in 1924, followed early in 1925 by a much smaller volume about the United States situation, had a deep impact on the field: while Von Haan was, until then, seeking information from individuals and associations, the latter now asked for the ILO publications to be made available for their own use.

### **A field in disarray**

The new presence of the ILO as an authority was made easier by the situation of the other protagonists in the exchange of housing practices and data across borders. After the war, the Comité found it very difficult to organize a new congress. Since the first congress in Paris in 1889, 9 congresses had taken place, but the Comité was just a committee without

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<sup>24</sup> ILO W 1000/8/1, minutes, report Von Haan, February 1923. My translation

<sup>25</sup> During the summer of 1923, Von Haan attended the Congrès International d’urbanisme et d’hygiène municipale in Strasbourg in July, where he discovered that such meetings were not specialist sessions devoted to discussion and study, but friendly encounters where many if not most of the registered members and speakers were not present (ILO, D 600/693, minutes, von Haan to Thomas 27 July 1923). He also asked to attend the International Town Planning Conference in Gothenburg (Sweden), but this was denied (ILO, W 1000/5/7).

<sup>26</sup> ILO, Hugo von Haan folder, Documents, Meekers’ grading report for 1924.

any physical location and financial means, whose role it was to designate the place and the agenda of conferences, leaving it to local committees to actually organise the congress. This role was not strong enough to overwhelm the different cleavages that ran through European housing reform networks after, and because, of the War. Some had to do with the conceptions of housing, as the private nature of housing provision was disputed by supporters of a growing governmental intervention, themselves arguing about whether the later should be led by local authorities or by the national state.<sup>27</sup> Others were opposing specialists of housing strictly speaking with up and coming professionals of town planning who considered housing an aspect of comprehensive planning, as in the Netherlands.<sup>28</sup> Last but not least, the members from Germany and Austria who spurred the organisation before the war, had not been invited back into the Comité after it reconvened in Brussels in 1920. At a time when major public housing projects were completed in Red Vienna, this did cut the Committee from the spearheads of the housing scene. Completed with a creeping mutual irritation between continental and British housing leaders, based on language problems and different cultures of public debate,<sup>29</sup> this was a lot to get along with for a

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<sup>27</sup> For leads and clues, see "Architecture et politiques sociales 1900-1940", *Cahiers de la Recherche Architecturale*, n.15/16/17, 1985, and Nicholas Bullock & James Read, *The movement for housing reform in Germany and France 1840-1914*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1985

<sup>28</sup> See Stefan Couperus, "Amsterdam 1924: a stage for municipal internationalism", paper presented at the European Association of Urban Historians Conference, Stockholm, August 30 - September 2, 2006.

<sup>29</sup> F.M Wibaut papers, International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam, "Internationale Volkshuisvesting", Inv. nr 23, Hudig to Wibaut 18 December 1922. Warmest thanks to Stefan Couperus and Renaud Payre for having shared their notes on these documents with me.

weak organization. The postponement and cancellation of the Rome Congress was the death blow.<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, different other groups were showing a sheer interest for housing. Specific cities organized housing conferences and exhibitions, like the city of Lyon in 1919, 1920 and 1921.<sup>31</sup> Other international associations also included housing on their agenda, from public works firms associations to property unions and municipal groups. While housing was a pressing issue on the agenda of governments, trade unions, firms and professionals, the Comité's inability to restore its previous central role as an arena for discussion and exchange of experiences, conceptions, designs and regulations left the stakes out for grab.

This happened at the very moment when the Office was looking for partners to develop its housing studies and, beyond that, the expansion of its activity the welfare field. As we have seen, the Comité had been identified as the specialist network that should be captured and placed in the orbit of the Office. Encouragements by Albert Thomas or Von Haan to the faltering Comité were numerous.<sup>32</sup> But they also made connections with some of the other international societies which were making their way into the housing field. The International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation (thereafter The Federation) was one of these, and Von Haan began to exchange publications and documentation with their London secretariat, and

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<sup>30</sup> The Belgians Lepreux (president of the *Comité Permanent*) and Velghe (secretary) tried to find another location, but this proved impossible precisely because of all the other problems. See the correspondence in F.M Wibaut papers, International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam, "Internationale Volkshuisvesting", Inv.. nr 23.

<sup>31</sup> Pierre-Yves Saunier, "Changing the city: urban international information and the Lyon municipality, 1900-1940" *Planning perspectives*, vol.14, n.1, 1999, p.19-48.

<sup>32</sup> One example in W/1000/8/1, 'Documents, ILO to Velghe, 16 February 1924

to get acquainted with some of its leaders who attended the International Labour Conferences, like the Swedish diplomat Eric Sjöstrand.<sup>33</sup> Through other channels, the Bureau also connected with the International Union of Cities – thereafter The Union), whose creation in 1913 and revival after the War had a lot to do with the European socialist network.<sup>34</sup> Emile Vinck, the Belgian director of the Union, was an old comrade of Thomas', like the Dutch Florentinus Marinus Wibaut. Even closer was the French Henri Sellier, who cooperated with Albert Thomas in the Groupe d'Etudes Socialistes, the French urban and municipal socialist think tank of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>35</sup> Edgard Milhaud, another French socialist who taught economics at the University of Geneva and was an Office staff member, was also a long time acquaintance of Sellier and Vinck, and had taken part into the Union founding congress.

These Union's leaders were very active in national housing associations and institutions: Wibaut was in charge of housing as an alderman of Amsterdam, Vinck was the founder of the Société Nationale d'Habitations à Bon Marché, and Sellier was the administrator of the Office Départemental des Habitations

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<sup>33</sup> Hans Kampffmeyer, another member of the Federation executive committee, was placed in charge of the ILO study on the cooperative movement by the Austrian government of the national aspect.

<sup>34</sup> On these two organizations, see Pierre-Yves Saunier, «Sketches from the Urban Internationale. Voluntary societies, international organizations and US Foundations at the city's bedside 1900–1960”, *International Journal for Urban and Regional Research*, (Grande-Bretagne), vol.25 (2) june 2001, p.380–403. A forthcoming doctoral thesis on the history of the International Federation (Michel Geertse, VU University, Amsterdam) will shed a comprehensive light on the history of this society.

<sup>35</sup> On Sellier and his connection to Thomas, Katherine Burlen (Ed.), *La banlieue-oasis. Henri Sellier et les cites-jardins*, Saint Denis: Presses Univesitaires de Vincennes, 1987, and Christophe Prochasson, « Entre science et action sociale : le réseau Albert Thomas et le socialisme normallien 1900–1914’, in Christian Topalov, *Laboratoires du nouveau siècle. La nébuleuse réformatrice et ses réseaux en France 1880–1914*, Paris: Editions de l'EHESS, 1999, p.141–158.

à Bon Marché in Paris since 1916. There again, it was the Office who sought the Union resources for documenting the housing studies.<sup>36</sup> A first result was that Milhaud attended the Union conference in Amsterdam in July 1924, a couple of days before the Federation's congress.

It seems that the Amsterdam conferences were also the first opportunity to consider the merging of the old Comité with another group. Cross membership among the Comité, the Union and the Federation was very common, because housing, planning and municipal policy had often been conceived as facets of a single issue in the panoply of urban and social reform earlier in the century.<sup>37</sup> Emile Vinck, the Union executive director, was thus a member of the Federation Executive Council and connected with the Comité. This propinquity seems to have offered possibilities for some Comité members to look for solutions while their organisation stalled. The merger with the Federation, a dynamic group with a growing presence beyond the Atlantic Ocean, and a focus that entangled with housing (the garden city) emerged from a series of informal discussions in The Hague in 1924 and in New York in 1925. One by products of these talks was the growing presence of housing subjects on the 1925 and 1926 conference agendas of the Federation. After the final crash of the Comité, following its failure to hold a conference in Brussels in 1925, the Comité opened negotiations to discuss the creation of a housing section within the Federation. Emile Vinck was the leader of the Comité negotiating party that also included the French Sellier and the Dutch Hudig, a close partner of Wibaut. Formal talks began in London

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<sup>36</sup> ILO, S 01/2032, documents, Von Hann's note, February 1923

<sup>37</sup> See the different contributions in Topalov, *Laboratoires*.

in June 1926, which confirmed the nature of the possible deal : the housing reformers were above all anxious not to see their concerns merely absorbed within planning matters, and wanted their own autonomous section, while the Federation officers stressed that unity in the expanded organisation was to be paramount.<sup>38</sup> Promises were made on both sides, and the end of the Comité was proclaimed during the International Congress of Housing and City Planning in Vienna, in September 1926. This is when the merger history reconnected with ILO concerns.

### **The watchtower**

Prospects looked good after Hugo von Haan first housing studies were published.<sup>39</sup> They were widely circulated, read and commented. And the Director was working on a 'recommendation' about leisure to be submitted to the VIth session of the Labour Conference and circulated to member governments if approved. The proposed recommendation included housing among its items, and praised the provision of healthy and affordable housing 'if necessary through the action of local and national administrations', among other articles dealing with after hours work, education or anti alcoholism work. The commission in charge of elaborating the final draft met several times, amidst the opposition of the employers group and a request from the UK government to limit the subject matter. The result was nevertheless a confirmation of the proposed recommendation, the housing bit being even

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<sup>38</sup> Details are available in the papers of a US member of the Federation who received all documents. Cornell University, Kroch Library, John Nolen Papers, box 70, 'International Garden city and town planning Federation April 1923-April 1927'

<sup>39</sup> Almost at the same moment, Hugo von Haan was shifting to studies on scientific management and looking forward to get promoted, and his involvement into housing studies faltered.

promoted to a section of its own. The recommendation was adopted without opposition by the 1924 Conference. It was nevertheless partially edged by the additional message given by the Governing Body during its following session. Humbert Wolfe, the British principal assistant secretary of the Ministry of Labour, insisted that housing was a border line aspect of the Office work, almost impinging on the field of public health that belonged into the League of Nations domain.

Though, new possibilities were enticing. When Edgard Milhaud participated to the Amsterdam conferences, discussions had taken place with the Union leaders about possible cooperation with the Office. On 17 December 1924, Vinck went down to Geneva to meet with Thomas and his service directors. Beyond polite contact and promises to exchange documentation, it was about housing statistics (that is, about 'methods', as decided by Thomas since 1922) that practical scientific collaboration was decided.<sup>40</sup> Vinck, Thomas and Pribram agreed on a common study of housing statistics to build up comparability of data through the uniformisation of statistical categories. The workflow foresaw a study by Pribram's statistical section, followed by a conference of Office staff members with a group of statisticians gathered by the Union. The purpose was to contribute to the establishment of common categories for housing statistics, to be endorsed by specialists. Despite the lack of actual cooperation from the Union, the Office went ahead on its part. A first draft of the statistical report was ready in September 1925, and

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<sup>40</sup> ILO, S 01/2032/1, Documents, 'Entrevue avec Mr Emile Vinck, Directeur de l'Union International des Villes', memo by Edgard Milhaud.

Office statistician Robert Guye developed it further.<sup>41</sup> In April 1926, the adjusted plan was to use the Union as an endorsement agency, to seek further approval by the International Institute of Statistics, and to present a report to the General Conference of Statisticians of Labour, so that its suggestions can be transformed into recommendations for the national governments. Thomas exposed the whole idea in his report to the Labour Conference in 1926.

The housing studies had by then already developed beyond the mere study of housing statistical methods and categories. Since the end of 1925, in line with Von Haan's scientific plan, Guye was at work to comb the literature from 30–40 periodicals to feed a 'Chronique du Logement' in *Informations sociales*, one of the Office periodicals. He was also maintaining a file of housing legislation in the different countries, and an 'index of personalities and institutions that take an active part in housing policy'.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, a new series of study about housing policies were on their way. This ambitious plan included a volume on housing in the urban centres, another one on housing in rural areas, and a possible extension to extra-European countries.

For all these reasons, Pribram seized up the opportunity of the 1926 Federation Congress in Vienna to attend its housing sessions with Guye. This visit allowed Pribram to reconnect with the developments in the associative housing field. He ran into Vinck, Sellier, the town councillor of Vienna Anton

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<sup>41</sup> Idem, Documents, Milhaud to Maurette, 16 April 1926.

<sup>42</sup> ILO, Guye staff file, Documents, memo by Guye to get a promotion to rank A, 30 April 1929.

Weber or the British architect Raymond Unwin and many municipal and national officials to whom he explained the Office's studies and interest.<sup>43</sup> His general judgement on the congress was severe, as he underscored the fact that no focused discussion had taken place and no conclusion had been voted. But he also captured the different conceptions of housing that framed the field: cottagers against apartment building supporters, free market rules vs public authorities subsidy or construction policy. He also mentioned that the Federation now intended to integrate housing in its field, taking over from the Comité, but concluded that the specific housing questions such as finance, tenants rights, rents or construction costs were not branched upon, the Federation seeming by and large not well equipped to develop them. Pribram's reading of the Federation's congress was coherent with the attitude of the Office since 1922: the whole question was to identify a strong movement that could interact practically and rhetorically with the Office to push for the development of its work in the housing field. After the Comité had proved a no show, the renamed International Federation of Housing and Planning was a fresh opportunity to contract with such a partner.

The new organization was almost immediately plagued with a fundamental conflict. Between November 1926 and October 1927, it fell into pieces. The question of the autonomy of the new section vis a vis the London headquarters was the crux of the problem as both parties feel their initial understanding had been betrayed: former Comité representatives resented the attempt of the London headquarters to make the new housing section a

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<sup>43</sup> His report in W/1000/5/10, Documents, "Rapport pour le directeur".

mere appendix of a centralized organization, while some in the Federation stressed the housers and their quest for an autonomous headquarters backed by public subsidies would destroy the independence and unity of the Federation.<sup>44</sup> This organizational conflict also sparked other conflict lines within the groups that the Federation had gathered under its aegis: between national civil servants/elected officials, between continentals and Brittons, between socialists and liberals, between cottages and apartment building supporters, between private market and active governmental policies, between supporters of different cultures of associative life. These were too many lines for anything else but a very confusing situation to develop, where even the fiercest antagonists struggled to find their way, and outsiders got lost.<sup>45</sup> But the Office saw its way through.

The Office's contribution was actively sought after by the protagonists of this turf battle. Because they had heard that the Office was setting up 'an international event dealing with housing',<sup>46</sup> they got in touch officially in 1927. The organizers of the new section wanted to know more, warned against overlap and waste, and offered the cooperation of their group to the common effort for housing progress. Thomas sent confirmation of the Bureau's schemes for some international event (about which no other mention has been found yet in the Bureau's archives), but he stressed that the main concern was to carry on with the work of the old Comité to study

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<sup>44</sup> IISG, Wibaut papers, "Internationale Volkshuisvesting", Inv. nr 23, Hudig to Wibaut 24 November 1926 and Wibaut to Hudig 25 november 1926. John Nolen Papers, box 70 folder 'International Federation 1923-1928', captures the view from London.

<sup>45</sup> As shown by the diary of Rowland Egger, a US Political scientist who worked for the merger of the two groups later in the 1930s (parts of the diary are available at the Rockefeller Archive Center in Sleepy Hollow, other parts at the Special Collection and Manuscripts department of the Regenstein Library, University of Chicago)

<sup>46</sup> ILO, W/9/4, Documents, Bruggeman to Thomas 9 février 1927

housing and deliver practical results. He embraced the idea of cooperation with the new section, and suggested that its foundation meeting, scheduled in Luxembourg in June 1927, would be a great opportunity to discuss the possibilities of cooperation. Karl Pribram's was sent there, and the welcome he received contrasted strongly with Von Haan's fate in Strasbourg in 1923. He met with the Executive Committee of the Federation, presented the Bureau's studies of housing to the preparatory conference of the new housing section, received public praise about the Office's work and connected with various housing executives who were very keen to bring their contribution into the Bureau's studies.<sup>47</sup> The result was a gentlemen's agreement about the collaboration between the Federation and the Bureau.<sup>48</sup> But Pribram was also lucid. He did realize that the housing section was far from being able to establish or even discuss a working schedule, and reported that the structure of the section was uncertain, with its leaders not having prepared discussions well enough to avoid 'painful' discussions about the location of the headquarters and the rival bids by the municipalities of Berlin and Amsterdam to host it. In Vienna, Pribram was able to get the low down about the tensions that were opposing a group with a strong continental, municipal, socialist and housing component to another with a core among British professionals or government officials and old hands of the Federation. It was precisely this tension that brought the first group to trigger proposals to host and finance a headquarter, in order to make it clear

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<sup>47</sup> ILO, W/1000/2/5, documents, report by Pribram

<sup>48</sup> Pribram suggested that the most pressing issues were those of the role of states, municipalities and cooperatives in housing construction, the financial aspects of loans for constructing programs and the rights of tenants.

that the new housing section should be autonomous from the London Federation secretariat. Old Thomas' comrades Wibaut, Sellier and Vinck were the leaders of this group, while Sjöstrand of the Swedish embassy in Geneva and the German socialist and housing activist Hans Kampffemeyer played vital roles, together with Kloti the director of the City of Zürich Housing Office. All of them had been in touch with the Office and its leaders, and time was ripe to go ahead with the 'Geneva project'.

### **From the Geneva project to the Frankfurt connection**

In 1927, Albert Thomas had prophesied in front of the International Labour Conference that the moment was close where progress in housing would benefit from 'a great movement of international public opinion'.<sup>49</sup> He meant the creation of the housing section, and this made for bold moves in 1928. On one hand, the Bureau would reap the fruits of the study about housing statistics that Guye and Pribram had finished. *Les Méthodes de la statistique de l'Habitation* was published in the end of 1928.<sup>50</sup> It was a survey of the different national and municipal ways to organize housing statistics, and included proposals to build common categories to allow for comparability of data. Further steps were to seek endorsement by statisticians in the field. A meeting was scheduled for May 1928 in Munich with the Union Internationale des Villes and municipal statisticians, and the Institut International de Statistiques was to take a resolution on the in the Fall, based on the report prepared by one of its commissions. The rapporteur of this

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<sup>49</sup> Conférence 1927, Rapport du directeur, p.129

<sup>50</sup> Etudes et Documents, série N statistique, n°13.

commission was no other than Karl Pribram. The visibility of the Office statistical study was also expanded by a visit to a housing conference organized by the Kommunale Vereinigung für Wohnungswesen, which Pribram and Guye attended together after the Munich session.<sup>51</sup>

On the other hand, the new round of housing studies by Guye and Pribram were progressing. The fact that Pribram was to leave the Office to take a professorship in economics at the University of Frankfurt was not enough to darken these bright perspectives.<sup>52</sup> The forthcoming establishment of the Federation's housing section, to take place in Paris in July 1928, was eagerly expected. It was to demonstrate that the movement of public opinion in favour of public housing was growing and that the Bureau was the right institution in the right place to provide fuel, impulse and direction to this movement.

This is what Thomas endeavoured to demonstrate in his Director's report for 1928. He insisted that the housing question had clearly entered a second phase that was in the making since the end of the war, that is the provision of new housing by public authorities and non for profit organisations.<sup>53</sup> To conclude, he wrote that the Office was working on new studies of housing,

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<sup>51</sup> This participation was proposed by Pribram to present the statistical work.

<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately, it has not been possible to consult Pribram's papers at the State University of New York at Albany. Pribram left Germany for the USA in 1933, and was still giving lectures and publishing articles about housing there, so he might have been connected to the housing scene in Frankfurt while he was there, and have had some earlier role in the proposal by the Frankfurt municipality to host the International Housing Association.

<sup>53</sup> Christian Topalov wrote that 1928 was indeed a peak in the apparent favour for public housing, with the vote of the Loucheur Law in France and before the recovery of the private sector in Germany and the United Kingdom. See his « La politique de l'habitat dans les politiques sociales 1900-1940. Notes pour un débat », *Cahiers de la recherche architecturale*, 15-17, 1985, p.15

and that the statistical report could be a basis for establishing an agreement between statisticians of different countries.

During the 1928 Labour Conference, opportunity would be given to Thomas to push this further. Chaman Lall, an Indian workpeople's delegate, asked for a general study of the housing question and living conditions of the workers, especially out of Europe. His resolution, seconded by a Japanese delegate, moved that the Office should launch studies on the subject and have them examined at a next Conference. Just like in 1922, it cannot be ruled out that Lall's timely resolution was not spontaneous. The Office's report to the Governing Body conflated Lall's resolution with the movement in public opinion in favour of housing and the development of active policies in Germany, the UK and France.<sup>54</sup> It explained that the Office was familiar with the question, and ready to launch wide ranging studies. In fact, the report went on, 'answering in advance' Lall's resolution, the Office was already preparing an important work on urban housing in Europe since the war. It was then ready to become the centre of information and experience sharing about housing, and would be able to draft a convention or a recommendation about the most effective methods in the field. The Office's report on Lall resolution was also keen to demonstrate that housing was firmly within the Office's realm. Acknowledging the 1922 and 1924 discussions about its 'borderline issue' status, it concluded 'everyone in interested circles agrees that no organisation than ours is better qualified to tackle this problem'.<sup>55</sup> Such an

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<sup>54</sup> Bureau International du Travail, *Procès verbaux du Conseil d'administration, sessions 38-42*, Genève : BIT, 1928, p.580-582

<sup>55</sup> Bureau International du Travail, *Procès verbaux du Conseil d'administration, sessions 38-42*, Genève : BIT, 1928, p.580.

affirmation was fragile, and Thomas knew it. Hence his interest for the development of the Federation housing section whose action would exemplify the movement of public opinion and enhance the legitimacy of the Office to prolong its forays into the housing question.

It was in this context that the idea emerged to establish the housing section secretariat in Geneva, an idea that matched the different schemes imagined since 1922 to place the Office at the centre of the 'public movement' for housing.<sup>56</sup> Though it is not known whether this possibility was exposed to Thomas and Milhaud's old socialist friends, and to the Office's connections within the housing group, Thomas was indeed in Paris just before the conference of the International Federation of Housing and Town Planning, attended by Pribram. This possibility and the insurance about future cooperation with the Bureau may have given the splitters the last push to go out in the open after almost two years of disagreement, acrimony and non decision. Pribram, again, wrote a very complete report about the meeting. The members of the housing group met and decided to launch a new independent organisation specialised in housing. This new group was to have its headquarters at Berlin or Frankfurt – *Stadbaurat* Ernst May was present in Paris– , with support from the national governments, said municipalities and other municipalities and housing national organisations.<sup>57</sup> The task of its organisation was assigned to a committee chaired by Wibaut and which included Vinck, Sellier, Klöti, Sjöstrand, and Kubista while Kampffmeyer was chosen as secretary. Pribram's report expressed no surprise about such

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<sup>56</sup> ILO, W/1000/5/11, 'Minutes, Thomas' note 28 august 1928, Documents, Pribram report 17 July 1928.

<sup>57</sup> See financial documents in John Nolen Papers, box 7, f.2.

development, and validated its righteousness by its numerous comments about the unpractical aspects of the Federation Conference, its inability to reach reproducible conclusions and its lack of focus about the aspects of housing the Office was most interested in (financing possibilities, building techniques, tenant's rights). During the conference, Pribram approached all the influent persons in the new organization, and his report sketched the possible cooperation. There was to be a division of labour geared towards collaboration. By and large, the Office would be in charge of the documentation and research tasks, assisted by committees of experts created by the new organization on the most pressing issues (financial and technical problems, organisation of building agencies, legal aspects regarding tenants). The Office would gather the documentation and lead the research for these committees to deliver an informed decision. Such a configuration, concluded Pribram, would make it possible for the Office 'without compromising into a domain still seen at the limit of its prerogatives, to exert not a slight influence on the development of this movement which should play an ever growing role in future social policy'.<sup>58</sup> Thomas met with Wibaut during the summer to vet the agreement, and this put an end to the 'Geneva project' to replace it by a connection with the new association.<sup>59</sup>

The Office really needed such a symbolic affirmation on the housing scene, while some Governing Body members kept on raising concern about the appropriateness of the housing forays. In October, during the examination of the Office's report on Lall resolution, and though the different worker's

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<sup>58</sup> ILO, W/1000/5/11, Documents, Pribram report 17 July 1928.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas also suggested to bring Kampffmeyer to Geneva at the expense of the Office, to establish cooperation on a firm footing

delegates were keen to support the Office's recommendation for new studies and the possibility of a convention/recommendation, John Ballingal Forbes Watson, the director of the British National Confederation of Employers' Organization, made it clear that he saw housing as part of public health, whence in the province of Sir Dummond's League of Nations. He also insisted that the closest contact should be kept with national governments as to the choice of experts collaborating to the new study.<sup>60</sup>

This was just a warning. The Office's report was approved, and the ongoing studies given official status as the background of a possible presentation of housing to the Conference. A serious warning though, and the projects for a second volume on rural housing that would have extended beyond Europe were trimmed after this session, as a clear concession to League of Nations interest into rural public health.<sup>61</sup> The office nevertheless kept going in 1928 and early 1929: the housing statistics conclusions were endorsed by the Statistical Union of Italian Cities, and by the Northern Countries Conference of Labour Statisticians; Guye was given collaboration from another ILO staff member and an external volunteer to work on the European housing study; he was also sent to attend the first conference of the new organisation. Eventually tagged International Housing Association and settled in Frankfurt, it was located the place with the largest public housing program of the moment under the leadership of *Stadtbaurat* Ernst

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<sup>60</sup> Bureau International du Travail, *Procès verbaux du Conseil d'administratio, sessions 38-42*, Genève : BIT, 1928, p. 518-519.

<sup>61</sup> ILO, Guye staff file, Documents, memo by Guye to get a promotion to rank A, 15 August 1930

May and social democrat mayor Ludwig Landmann.<sup>62</sup> There, Guye established the basis for an exchange of publications (including the reproduction of Guye's 'Housing chronicle' into the new organisation's journal), and close contact between the two organisations.<sup>63</sup> As Guye boasted a couple of months later, he saw himself as in charge of 'dividing the housing work between these two institutions'.<sup>64</sup>

The momentum was then still alive, and Thomas seemed decided to push forward again, on the statistics prong. In a report to the Governing Body, presented during the 45<sup>th</sup> session in June 1929, he built from the claimed success of the statistics study<sup>65</sup> to propose that the housing statistics publication should be the basis for a statisticians conference, similar to those the Office had organised about labour or migration statistics. The aim would be to suggest uniform statistical categories and practices, and to fulfil the conditions for more accurate comparison between countries and a more scientific study of housing, whence a better overall grip on the living conditions of the workpeople.<sup>66</sup> Thomas ventured that preliminary approaches had been made with the representatives of statistical national agencies for a conference in late 1929 or early 1930. During the discussion of this report, Thomas spoke about the postponement of the examination of the housing

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<sup>62</sup> The invitation was mailed by Kampffmeyer to the Office, and Sjöstrand paid a visit to the Office just the day after, to present it orally.

<sup>63</sup> ILO, W/8/1/1/01/1, Documents, Guye to Kampffmeyer 7 March 1929. Guye also attended the International Federation conference in Rome in September 1929, in order to keep good relations and connections with both networks.

<sup>64</sup> ILO, Guye staff file, Documents, memo by Guye to get a promotion to rank A, 30 April 1929.

<sup>65</sup> Considering the clippings that Guye included in his own claims for promotion within the Office staff, the book indeed received a wide acclaim. ILO, Guye staff file, Documents, memo by Guye to get a promotion to rank A, 15 August 1930.

<sup>66</sup> Bureau International du Travail, *Procès verbaux du Conseil d'administratio, sessions 43-46*, Genève : BIT, 1929, session 45 15 June 1929.

statistics study by the International Institute of Statistics until 1931<sup>67</sup>, and urged the governing body to authorize the statisticians conference. Some Governing Body members then suggested it was appropriate to wait until the endorsement of the Office's report by the International Institute of Statistics. Thomas deferred to the postponement, but could not escape a sharper warning than in 1928. Housing, said Forbes Watson the British employers' delegate was not into the purview of the Office, and though he would not object to a statisticians conference, it seemed clear to him that housing was well into the realm of the League of Nations health section. Thomas did defend his position that article 396 of the Peace Treaty placed housing within the Office's scope, and the French union leader Jouhaux concurred, but for the first time Thomas seems to have been on the backswing.

This was confirmed in the Fall of 1929, though in a very strange way. During the 46<sup>th</sup> session of the governing body, the discussion was about a statistical conference about work accidents while Forbes Watson led the attack. He repeated his former arguments, and moved that the conference should limit itself to the kind of housing that was part of the labour contract

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<sup>67</sup> The postponement was due to the extended dissenting views by many members of the 1927 committee as to the conclusions of Pribram's report, which was based on the Office's study. Many comments were about the 'urban and municipal' orientation of Pribram's perspectives. It seems that Pribram was anticipating these difficulties and others (e.g such as the interpretations of the term 'dwelling', as suggested by ILO, W 1000/2/7, Documents, Pribram to Lesoir, 3 August 1928). The report was initially to be submitted at the 1928 session of the Institute, and possibly this first postponement resulted from Pribram's attempts to rally dissenters. It would not be until 1936 that the Institute would officially create a commission on the subject. See Bertil Nyström 'Observations on the Possibility of Improving the International Comparability of Building and Housing Statistics' *Revue de l'Institut International de Statistique / Review of the International Statistical Institute*, 4, 1, 1936, p. 71-85, and his report Bertil Nyström 'Commission on Building and Housing Statistics. Preliminary Report' *Revue de l'Institut International de Statistique / Review of the International Statistical Institute*, 6, 2, 1938, p. 251-263

(‘*couchage*’). The verbatim notes, which were not printed integrally into the official minutes, mention that Thomas tried to uphold his point about the fact housing belonged to the Office’s sphere, and said he would answer later. But no discussion about housing ever took place again, nor during this session nor until Thomas’ death in 1932.

After 1932, Thomas’ reports stressed the continuing growth of governmental housing policies as social policies and said that the Office was still gathering documentation and preparing for a conference on housing statistics (1930), while he supported a Japanese proposal made at the 1932 conference to place housing on the agenda. But the official approval for the continuation of studies then given by the Governing Body comes after a remarkably brief report by the Office, that explained documentation about the extra European world is still too much fragmented and that the subject was not ripe for consideration. Only ‘*couchage*’ was subsequently placed on the agenda of the 1935 session of the Conference. There was no momentum any more. The economic crisis and the Governing Body’s position seem to have edged Thomas’ interest, while he was exploring other themes like European integration and solutions to economic problems.<sup>68</sup> An exploration of the Office’s archives reveals that housing had been *de facto* abandoned. Guye’s study, *La politique du logement en Europe: la construction d’habitations à bon marché*, was completed and published in 1930, and Guye began to work on movement of wages statistics, a theme he would

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<sup>68</sup> See the excellent study by Denis Guérin, *Albert Thomas au BIT, 1920–1932. De l’internationalisme à l’Europe* Genève : Euryopa/Institut européen de l’Université de Genève, 1996, p.70 sqq.

exclusively focus onto after March 1931.<sup>69</sup> The Office stopped to collect documentation on housing, and the statistical section limited its investigations to the level of rents, an aspect that was considered appropriate to its mission.<sup>70</sup> At the same time, the League of Nations Health Section, just as Forbes Watson had suggested, was entering the field with decision: thus, it was also the boundary work between the League and the Office that led to the sidelining of the housing question within the Office's activities.<sup>71</sup> A housing report was prepared for the League European Conference on Rural Hygiene of 1931, and several volumes published in 1935 and 1936 that grasped both urban and rural housing on behalf of the health section,<sup>72</sup> while the economic and financial organization began to pile up statistics about the building business.<sup>73</sup> In this sense, the end of the housing operations at the ILO were the symbol of the defeat of a socialist/municipal/voluntary associations coalition by a liberal/state/governmental compact. Thomas' death in 1932 prevented any return on the agenda. Just as it had happened with the 'workers welfare' theme, efforts by Thomas and his staff to maximize the understanding of article 396 and 427 of the Peace Treaty and to give a broad range to the Office's mission related to 'conditions of industrial life and labour', the

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<sup>69</sup> ILO, Guye staff file, Documents, memo by Guye to get a promotion to rank A, 1932.

<sup>70</sup> See *International Labour Review*, august 1933, june 1934 and May 1935, as well as the *ILO yearbook 1934-1935*, vol.II.

<sup>71</sup> Guérin has listed a number of moments when the Office and the League clashed with one another, beginning with the International Economic Conference of 1927.

<sup>72</sup> *Séries de la Société des nations*, III, Hygiène, volume 3 (France), 5 (Pays-Bas) et 6 (Italie).

<sup>73</sup> See ILO archives, W 8/1 for the collaboration of the Office with the League on urban and rural housing studies in 1937.

exploration of housing was thwarted. But there are other clues about the history of the ILO to be drawn from the history of this road not taken.

### **Conclusion**

It was not only about housing that the Office's officers actively tried to support existing 'non government organisations', or even to establish new ones. As said earlier, Thomas had a clear view that keeping in touch with 'semi public groups' and building from their commitment and buoyancy was all the more important that their involvement in the fields touched upon by the Office, and its invocation, might be useful for the latter's role and range. The groups with whom the Office strived to keep in touch with were to act as the public opinion that would put pressure on the Governing Body and, at a lesser degree, the Conference, for them to release their check on the Office's trailblazing activities. This made it interesting for the Office to be proactive with these groups beyond the housing issue. In 1927, Albert Thomas was a force behind the establishment of the International Social Insurance Conference (Conférence internationale de la mutualité et des assurances sociales –CIMAS), which benefited from the material support of the Office. Adrien Tixier, the head of the Office social insurance section, was also the secretary of the Conference.<sup>74</sup> Before that, Thomas had already been central in another associative operation. As a former member or close kin to the International Association for Labour legislation, the International Association on Unemployment and the International Association for Social Insurances, he had worked at their reconstruction since 1920 as he thought their presence

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<sup>74</sup> I owe this information and supporting material to Sandrine Kott.

and propaganda would help the International Labour Organization at every stage of its reforming fight, from agenda setting to the implementation of recommendations.<sup>75</sup> Subsequently, he pushed for their merger during several years, and eventually won the day in the Fall of 1924 when the three groups held a common conference in Prague, presided by Thomas. The creation of a new group, the International Association for Social Progress, was proclaimed in 1925. From its headquarters of Basle (in Switzerland), it was expected to support the International Labour Office all the more than several of its leaders were very close from the institution (as vice president Louis Varlez, the head of the unemployment section of the Office)<sup>76</sup> or from Thomas himself (such as Adéodat Boissard). As mentioned in note 18, the Office had also acted as steward to the Association Internationale de Service Social Industriel in 1922, and there are likely other cases we are just unaware of. In each of these situations, the idea was to harness the forces of ‘public opinion’ into the service of the International Labour Office and Organization actions, to make possible the gathering of experts without considerations of class or nations, and to keep the whole scheme connected to the Office. The section on ‘International Relations’ that Thomas implemented in his yearly Director’s report bears witness of the continuing and intense relationship the Office was anxious to maintain and showcase with civic groups, as this section listed a range of voluntary groups connected with ‘labour and industrial life’ and their connections with the Office. It was clearly expected that such leverage on

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<sup>75</sup> See Martin Fine, « Un instrument pour la réforme. L ‘Association Française pour le Progrès Social 1927–1–29 », *Le Mouvement Social*, 94, 1976, p.3–29

<sup>76</sup> On Varlez’s role , see Christian Topalov, *Naissance du chômeur*, Paris : Albin Michel, 1994 and Jasmien Van Daele, *Van Gent tot Genève. Louis Varlez. Een biografie* Gent : Academia Press, 2002.

'non government organizations' would help to supersede the hostility, roadblocks and checks on the Office's thrust towards reform. This was made possible by the variety of networks with whom the Office was connected with, from its origins, and which Thomas and his staff were in good command of. At the other end, the members and leaders of international voluntary associations were eager to get the Office's support, both for material (when the Office contributed to maintain a secretariat) or symbolic reasons (when collaboration with the Office would give supplementary or initial credit to an association). It does not mean that they were not afraid of a possible vassalization, and Thomas alluded to it when he told the International Labour Conference of 1925 about the 1924 Prague Social Policy Conference and the 'suspicion' of people there. But the existence of common horizons, namely the belief into class collaboration for the sake of a pacified society and the welfare of the workers, and the memory of past shared experiences and fights (in political groups and issue networks) were enough to allow the Office under Thomas' leadership to act as an important organizer of international non governmental life during the inter war.