

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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Labor Series

JOHN T. FISHBURN

Interviewed by: James Shea
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INTERVIEW

Q: This is an interview with John T. Fishburn, who was one of our first Labor Attachés and was assigned to Buenos Aires in 1943 and 1944. John, how did you get into the labor attaché field?

FISHBURN: I went to Argentina in January of 1943 as an economist. I was working on Argentine needs for finished industrial products from the United States, the same problem I had worked on for two previous years in the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs from the American point of view. After being in Buenos Aires for about three months my natural interest in social and political and labor problems came to the fore when I found that there was no one in our Embassy paying organized attention to covering and reporting on social and economic problems there, especially in connection with the labor movement. I asked my superiors in the local embassy if they couldn't switch me to covering those fields either the labor field and the closely related ones; I found out simultaneously that there had been established in the Department of State in Washington under the leadership of Otis Mulliken, who was the Director of what was then called ILH or the Office of International Labor, Social and Health Affairs, not only a program for covering those fields outside the United States but also to recruit and find persons qualified and interested to serve as Labor Attachés for the United States abroad. I knew that they were considering people but had not yet selected any, so I volunteered to serve as their first Labor Attaché in Buenos Aires if they approved. About two or three months later, I'm not sure exactly what date, I received word that they would be glad to have me serve as labor officer. They didn't use the title attaché then, for me at least, and I also found almost simultaneously that Dan Horowitz had been appointed as our first formally selected labor officer or labor attaché, I'm not sure which title he used, in Santiago, Chile. In a way the same thing was happening over in London where Sam Berger had been serving in another capacity for the US Government, informally as a contact with the labor people in Great Britain and so we really had Otis Mulliken heading up the work from Washington with Dan Horowitz, Sam Berger and me sort of all starting more or less at the same time in our various posts that I have mentioned.

I continued in that task in Buenos Aires until the former government of Argentina had been overthrown by a military junta and a new administration established to replace the former government. There was, for a space of a very few months, a labor minister who was very friendly and pro-United States-whose name I haven't yet been able to remember-under the Government which overthrew in turn the Castillo Government which had

existed previously. At any rate after a few months of having this friendly labor minister, Juan Domingo Peron decided that this was the field that he was going to utilize. He had been so closely tied to the Germans rather than the United States during the war and so unfriendly to the United States, that it didn't seem likely that we would serve any useful purpose at all trying to work with Peron in the labor field. As a result I asked if I could be transferred across the river to Montevideo as our Labor Attaché to Uruguay. That was approved in Washington and after a year and a half in Argentina I transferred about the middle of 1944 to Montevideo where I served as Labor Attaché for approximately a year. I then returned to the United States to end that first temporary activity of mine as part of the labor function in what was then the Foreign Service Auxiliary and of which I was a member during that short period of the war. Almost immediately I came back into the labor field in the Department of State working on Latin America under Otis Mulliken. After several years during which I served as Labor Advisor to the Inter-American Section of the State Department. In October 1957, I returned as a member of the full Foreign Service as Labor Attaché in Rio de Janeiro for a period of six years, departing on home leave in October 1963.

Q: John, at the time you were in Buenos Aires and Montevideo what was the dominant political persuasion of most of the labor leaders?

FISHBURN: In Buenos Aires at that time the C.G.T. in Buenos Aires and Argentina was controlled by a combination of the Communists and non-Communists many of whom were socialists. The Communists did have sort of the upper hand in a formal sense at the central headquarters. However, almost from the time I began operating there, I found separate and anti-Communist labor groups, the most notable of which was the Union of Municipal Workers in Buenos Aires under Francisco Perez Leiros. Although Francisco had been a member of the central C.G.T. while a Communist had been President, he was himself clearly inclined toward the anti-Communist approach. I found working with him pleasant, in fact Mrs. Fishburn and I spent ten days at the vacation colony of the Municipal Workers Union in Sal se Puedes, Argentina, during 1944; this was a very pleasant vacation, and Perez Leiros later turned out to be a stalwart supporter of the AFL-CIO in the inter-American labor field.

Q: Were the British active in any way in the Argentine trade unions?

FISHBURN: As far as I know, they had no contact with them at all.

Q: And was Perez Leiros a socialist or with the Argentine "radicales" as they called them?

FISHBURN: In my opinion and if my memory serves me correctly, he was a loyal member of a socialist group and interested in collaborating with the United States when the time came.

Q: Do you recall a prominent Argentine socialist by the name of Palacios?

FISHBURN: Yes, Alfredo Palacios was a leading socialist leader and closely associated with the labor movement. I had forgotten about him until you mentioned the name but he was there and was very active and highly respected.

Q: John, can you tell us about some of your work in the Department of State in the interim period between your assignment in Montevideo and before you went to Rio?

FISHBURN: Jim, at the time I returned and started working in the State Department I worked in that International Labor, Social and Health Affairs Division under Otis Mulliken. Otis, as Director of ILH, had been recruiting additional labor attachés, at least half a dozen some of which such as Dick Eldridge had been put in position. These included Dave Burgess Dick in Paris, and Dan Horowitz, who was still active but didn't stay in Chile very long as I remember. Most of the earliest labor attachés were men of academic background who had been interested in labor and social problems and recruited by Otis Mulliken. However, Otis ran afoul of his superiors. I think he was unwisely and unfairly relieved of his position somewhere around 1946 or 1947. I'm sorry to say that as far as I know since his replacement the State Department has not had an adequate or effective labor section working in Washington.

Q: John, would you care to comment on McCarthyism or the influence of Senator McCarthy in the State Department at that period?

FISHBURN: You couldn't ask that question of a better person. I was one of the last three men listed among the 57 that McCarthy first printed in the Congressional Record. Along with two others, I was listed only by name-with no details. As a result of that action I stated publicly that there was nothing in my past that I knew of that entitled him to make such a charge and I would welcome any questions anyone would like to ask. Members of the press did come and I told them and answered all their questions as well as I could. Naturally within the Department, in the Administrative Section, there had to be some formal recognition of McCarthy's charge and so I was given a questionnaire to fill out and then asked to appear before a committee where I was interrogated. I replied as best I could but I later found out that there had been some confusion between me and another individual of similar name at the University of Oklahoma-later than my time there. At any rate I do know that some people within the Foreign Service, especially those who dealt with the Far East, were seriously harmed in their career. As far as I was concerned my superiors in the State Department and all that I knew were solidly behind me as a non-Communist and a reliable, open person. I can't say to this day that I or my career were harmed.

Q: Thank you very much, John. Now, regarding the AFL and then the AFL-CIO after the merger, when did they really become active in the Labor Attaché program?

FISHBURN: Who is they?

Q: They, John, would be the AFL and the AFL-CIO, such people as Serafino Romualdi and Irving Brown.

FISHBURN: The AFL through Serafino and Bill Doherty were active from at least 1945 to my personal knowledge and I think they may go back a year or two before that. The CIO really didn't become active in international labor affairs until they became almost a separate CIO organization and separate from the AFL. And then at that time they did have some representatives who were active in Latin America also with which I was still concerned and responsible in ILH run by Otis Mulliken or later Tom Holland after he replaced Otis. The CIO never did develop nearly as effective a representation in Latin American as Serafino Romualdi. Serafino was by all odds in my opinion the most effective leader against Lombardo Toledano, head of the Communist-lead Latin American Confederation of Workers. Serafino came in and really developed effective relations with such Latin American labor leaders as Perez Leiros and others elsewhere, who helped Serafino to undermine the C.T.A.L. which was led by Lombardo Toledano, the pro-Russians and Communist labor leaders.

Q: John, did the AFL-CIO or the AFL have a prominent role in the selection and recruiting of Labor Attachés?

FISHBURN: Well, in the early years I don't think either the AFL or the CIO had a prominent role in their selection. Some limited cooperation with the AFL and later the CIO was first developed perhaps by Serafino and me. Slowly our labor movement began to have greater influence in the selection of Labor Attachés whose background was in the American labor movement-as distinct from the academic origins or just personal interest approach to life.

Q: Do you recall when the American Institute for Free Labor Development or AIFLD was set up and were you consulted about this organization or the foundation of such an organization at that time?

FISHBURN: Yes, that was set up while I was serving a Labor Attaché in Rio de Janeiro and it was established somewhere around 1960 or 1961. I heard about it through a group with which Serafino had been working in Sao Paulo and Jim Shea, my assistant, helped me follow it. Serafino came down and collaborated both with Jim and me with the labor group which later became the Brazilian segment or section of the AIFLD. Later the AIFLD was headed up by Bill Doherty rather than Serafino and with that change there was a rather drastic alteration in the technique of operation in Latin America by the AFL.

Q: John, could you tell us about your experience in Brazil and then back in the Department and then when you went on to Geneva?

FISHBURN: Jim, we spent six years in Rio. They were some of the most pleasant and productive years that I felt we served in the Foreign Service simply because it left us there long enough to really get to know the country and its people. As we left Brazil I felt that

my last year there was by far my most productive one, but rarely does a Foreign Service Officer get to serve six years in one country and even in a big one. It is a distinct disadvantage if you have to change frequently, every two to three years or so-but at any rate it was pleasant for us and I hope useful. The ability to collaborate with various individual components of the Brazilian labor movement was aided enormously by our ability to have sent to the United States a certain number of Brazilian labor leaders for training up here, by me and our Assistant Labor Attaché in Sao Paulo, with both of us able to handle the language fluently in the labor field. When I returned to Washington after my assignment in Rio for six years, it was in different capacities for a while including the selection of young American labor officers for the Foreign Service as a whole and then finally working two years under Phil Delaney as an Advisor to the Secretary of State in the international labor field. By that time the AIFLD was in full swing of operations in the Latin American labor field and collaborating with the US Government and various segments of it as anywhere else. Later I was offered the opportunity of going to Geneva as Labor Attaché as our liaison with the I.L.O. or International Labor Organization. In that capacity, I served for three years, my final stint in the labor field for Uncle Sam; I must say it was a fascinating one at a period when we found that the I.L.O. which originally been established by President Woodrow Wilson, Lloyd George in Britain and Clemenceau in France to serve as its principal purpose the development of non-Communist labor groups throughout the world to support democracy and our Western governments. We found that at that final period of mine the most influential single group, I'm sorry to say, in the I.L.O. was the Russian group and its friends throughout the world. They had managed to subvert labor groups in various countries and it was a discouraging historical change and one which I'll have to say I don't think our government faced very clearly. The facing of international problems of this sort within the specialized agencies of the United Nations is something for which the organization within the State Department in Washington, at least as of the time of my retirement in 1970, was not prepared to do.

End of interview