

THE ASKOV CONFERENCE

Across the rich fields of Denmark, the steel windmill of ASKOV HIGH-SCHOOL is visible for many miles around and from far and wide it has attracted people to its homely presence. It whispers gently to them as they sleep, and throws swift shadows the sunlit windows as they sit at their studies. But rarely did it whisper more kindly to such a varied group of people as those twenty-five who met there for the last week in October. It must have shared with those men and women from America, from Scandinavia and Finland, and from the wide circle of Western Europe bounded by Italy, Austria and Poland, a sense of wonderment at the community of spirit and unity of purpose which distinguished the whole conference. Each delegate was a representative of a different organisation or national branch, but all were part of the movement to

BUILD PEACE THROUGH SMALL INTERNATIONAL GROUPS OF VOLUNTEERS WORKING, LIVING, AND LEARNING TOGETHER.

This is a living, growing movement, and not a vast mechanical organisation on an international scale. Its strength is drawn from each individual and from the variety of ways in which this common aim is approached - the Quaker organisations, a religious approach; the Swedish "Internationelle Arbetslag", the medium of education; and the Service Civil International through practical work - to take some random examples.

The first two days of the conference were devoted to Service Civil International matters; on the third day the delegates from the Norwegian Fredsvenners, the Finnish Work-Camp Movement, the Congregational Christian Service Committee, the Friends Ambulance Unit (Post-War Service), the Friends Relief Service, the Friends Peace Council, the Swedish IAL, all began to arrive. Naturally it was not necessary to await the arrival of the Danish Fredsvenners who, with the staff and friends of ASKOV HUS, were our hosts, and to whom a great measure of the success of the conference was due. And successful it was - satisfyingly and inspiringly successful - and an event of no little importance in this sad year of international failures. Thanks are also due to Willy Begert who chaired most of the sessions, and whose energy during the intervening year made this second meeting of the various national secretaries a worthy successor to the Brussels conference in October 1946. He will certainly be missed during the next six months when he will be working on the S.C.I. reconstruction service in Crete. Ralph Hegnauer and Ogden Hannaford will still carry on his two main jobs - that of International Secretary for the 10 branches of Service Civil International, and that of International Liaison Officer for the 11 organisations (including S.C.I. as one organisation) who are "BUILDING PEACE THROUGH INTERNATIONAL WORK-CAMPS".

Of the 10 national branches of S.C.I., only one was unable to send a delegate - the Czech branch. The International Frivillig Civiltjeneste, (the Danish Baby) was "born" on the first day of the conference. It was encouraged to try and organise a service during 1948 so that it could qualify as a fully-fledged official branch of S.C.I. by next autumn's conference. It would work in very close so-operation with the Danish Relief Committee - Fredsvenners Hjaelpearbejde. At the conference, the Belgian and German branches were admitted into the family of S.C.I. as "official" brothers, and a whole evening's discussion was devoted to the question of Germany. Other subjects discussed at these more informal evening discussions were: our aims; the East-West problem; Leadership on the services; and Unesco.

The discussions on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation was opened by a most welcome visitor to the conference, and by no means a stranger to the summer services in Belgium and Poland - Miss Sviggum from Unesco House in Paris. A rich prospect of help and co-operation in next years programme of camps was revealed as a result of the discussion. Unesco would be prepared to "sponsor" certain camps, help in the educational programme, in the obtaining of visas and travelling facilities, in carrying through negotiations with governments, and with publicity.

The more technical problems were discussed during the day-time sessions which began at 9am and lasted until 6 pm - long hours, but valuable ones, punctuated regularly and promptly by the joyful sound of the bell selling us to yet another delightful Danish meal. Food was not one of our technical problems. But it was stressed during the discussion that, from the experience gained from past services, strange food could have an adverse effect on a volunteer's health. This had to be carefully watched, along with elementary hygiene, sufficient hours of sleep, and the nature of the work which women volunteers were asked to undertake.

A more fundamental problem was that of youth work, which might tend to drain away resources badly needed for Adult services. Branches were encouraged to continue experiments in this field. The problem of leadership and training provided another lively and instructive session. Leaders were needed badly, yet it was not desirable to create a "class" of leaders within the movement. Nor was it possible for volunteers to be "made" into leaders in training camps. Experience gained through being a depot, leader, week-end work-camps and "concentrated" camps where special attention was paid to specifically work-camp problems were suggested as reasons of equipping those selected for leadership.

It was generally agreed that the number of volunteers in a camp should be about 20 or 25 at the most. Of course there should be no hesitation about organising larger services should the size of or the urgency of the work demand it. When immured in their camp, volunteers should not, of course, neglect the folk in the community for which they were working. A service with a good spirit had every chance of getting that spirit over to the community. Visitors to camps, it was decided could be a mixed blessing, but in order to get the maximum benefit from visitors, it seemed best for the visitor to let the camp leader know when he was coming.

Many of the delegates had taken part in camps during the summer and the discussions were very vivid and realistic. "Self-government" on services, for example; "Difficult" volunteers; the language problem . . . It was most desirable that services should be run on democratic lines, where the volunteers should be allowed very largely to have a say in the various arrangements made. "Democracy" did not, however, mean that volunteers were allowed to do what they liked. They must feel individually responsible for the service. The leader should delegate as much of his authority as possible, thus freeing himself for more constructive tasks and giving good training to others. There was no need to be afraid for accepting direction from the leader on small points - there was much too much valuable time wasted in discussing small matters such as who should do the washing-up! - thus leaving more time and energy for the really vital issues and for more constructive discussions. These latter could be the very life-blood of a service, especially spontaneous discussions which arose out of the work, or out of a fixed programme of organised talks. Such talks should always be topical and bear a relation to the main task of working for peace and reconciliation. It was necessary to have a good educational programme, stimulated by the leaders and supported by the volunteers. The truth of all this was borne out at Askov, where the delegates were every waking moment engaged in lively discussion upon some problem or other which had, say, affected the Finnish volunteers in France, or the Dutch and British volunteers in Austria; and this contributed greatly to the sense of family unity which bound the group so closely together, and caused the departure of the first friends towards the end of the conference to be sensed as a real loss by all.

The suggestion was jokingly put that at the next conference of national secretaries, there should be an opportunity of the delegates performing actual manual work together in order that they might live up to the motto of "Deeds not Words". If that projected meeting is in any way as fine as Askov then that is the only additional feature in which it can possibly be the superior of this conference. Certainly the conference was convinced that the work was such an important feature of services that a serious working-week of some 44 hours should be undertaken. Of course, conditions do vary a great deal and it did not seem possible nor yet desirable to lay down any firm ruling on the exact number of hours. There could be no blinking the fact that volunteers working alongside paid, skilled workers, caused certain problems. The old problem of how to get more "workers" on the camps was discussed.

INT 47 12 18 - 1 03

The crux of this problem lay in trying to arrange for the employers to grant more holidays. It might be

true that in camps where there were more students, the educational programme was more developed and that discussions were on a higher level, but there was no guarantee that the service had a higher spiritual level.

The American Friends Service Committee would like all volunteers to stay for the full duration of a service. This had tremendous advantages in building up a community spirit, but it did tend to exclude certain volunteers who only had a short holiday at their disposal. S.C.I. accepted volunteers for a minimum of two weeks, and this had tended to give to services a transit-camp atmosphere. Each service should have a nucleus of stable volunteers, and no volunteers should be accepted during one period of service for more than one camp. Volunteers should only be allowed to visit more than one camp during one period of service if the secretariat or the camp-leader concerned considered it advisable. As to volunteers themselves, it was considered wise to accept them from as many different sources as possible. They should pay their own travelling expenses, but in special cases help should be given. No volunteer should leave his own country to go on a service until it was quite clear who was paying for his travel; when assistance was given it would normally be the sending organisation who paid the outward fare and the organisation responsible for the camp in the other country who paid the return fare. These were matters which had to be decided upon before volunteers travelled from one country to another. In addition, pocket money, insurance and dependents' allowances should be similarly settled. The A.F.S.C. in their American camps were financed from local sources. Certainly this was the habit of S.C.I. who thought that volunteers were given a greater sense of responsibility towards the community in which they were working and the community in its turn became more interested in the service.

The international Liaison Officer could not deal with exchanges of individual volunteers between country and country; his job was to advise organisations where volunteers were available and where they were needed. He also acted as a clearing-house for information and propaganda; and as a negotiator with other organisations for the movement as a whole. The yellow fortnightly Camp News came from his office. Financially, he was supported by contributions from all eleven organisations. Nearly 80 camps were planned by all these organisations for 1948; this would entail the exchange of some 550 "foreign volunteers", assuming that each one could stay for two months.

This compared very favourable with the 70 camps which had been organised in 1947, and upon which reports had been made at the conference. There had been a very lively exchange of volunteers between the various countries and organisations and it was certain that as a result of the Askov conference and even smoother interchange would follow in 1948. It could be reported that no attempt had been made on the part of organisations to "convert" any of the others to its own outlook, and volunteers working in camps of an organisation other than their own had not felt themselves as "foreign bodies" or as "Observers" there, but really part of the camp in which they were, responsible to the camp-leader and to the organisation responsible for the camp.

Many of the problems of the work-camp movement are insoluble; they are human problems - problems of a living organisation which can only be dealt with on the spot and solved only for that particular situation. Five days' conferring had only been sufficient to clear the air of the most commonly recurring difficulties, and to plan confidently for the coming year. The five days were soon over; the last "Tak for mal" too soon said after the last meal; and Piet Kruithof converted the last renegade to his obscurest and most exotic song. Hearts were merrier and steps were lighter on the road to the station, and the windmill peeped over the hedges to wave a last friendly "Au revoir".

Basil Eastland