

# ALBERT THOMAS—WORLD CHAMPION OF LABOR

BY

LEONARD S. KENWORTHY

IF AN institution is the lengthened shadow of a single man, as is so often the case, then the International Labor Office today is the lengthened shadow of Albert Thomas, a short and stout French Jew, with a powerfully shaped head and a massive brown beard, and white hands that he used frequently in eloquent gestures. Today the I. L. O. is considered the most successful international organization growing out of World War I, and the only one to weather World War II without serious loss of prestige and power, but when Thomas took it over it was merely a dream written into Part 13 of the Treaty of Versailles.

Who was this "wandering Jew of social progress," as he came to be known, and how did he breathe life into this paper organization?

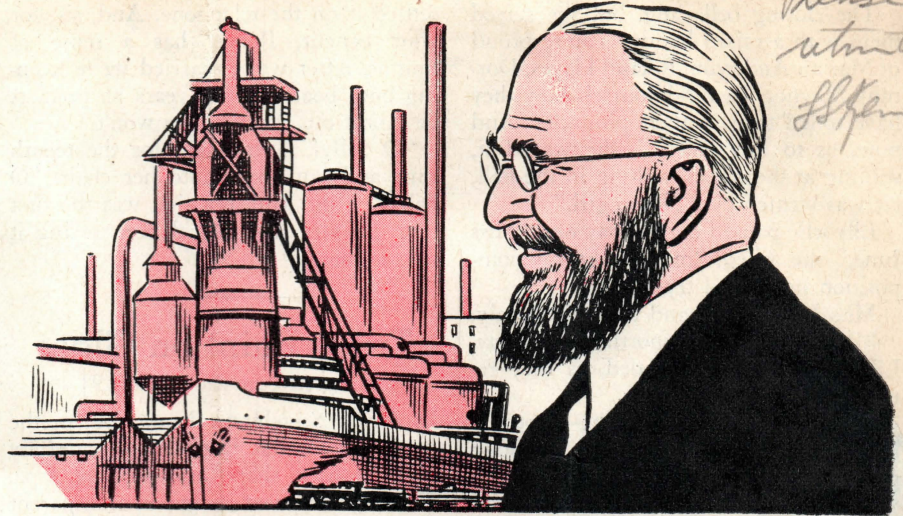
Thomas was born in a suburb of Paris on June 16, 1878, the son and grandson of village bakers. As a small boy he helped his father with the *petit pain* and the long loaves of bread in the bakery, and attended school on the side, then the Ecole Normale Supérieure and the University of Paris. He was a good student, excelling in literature, geography, and history, and winning prizes which took him on a trip to Siberia and on a year's scholarship to study in Germany and travel to Crete, Turkey, and other parts of Asia Minor.

Completing his academic training, he became a teacher, a writer, and a journalist, acting for a time as assistant editor to Jean Jaurès, prominent French labor leader and editor.

His brilliant analyses of labor conditions and policies and his energetic espousal of the rights of labor brought him into local and then national prominence as a political figure, and he was elected city councilor, mayor, a member of the French Chamber of Deputies, and, during World War I, Minister of Munitions.

This was the man who was chosen by the world's labor parliament in Washington in November, 1919, to organize and instill life into the newly created International Labor Office.

Thomas envisaged the I. L. O. as "an instrument of action encircling the globe." Everywhere where there were working people there would be work for the organization to do. And that meant in every land, on every continent. His passion was to achieve the "social justice" that the Treaty of Versailles asserted must undergird international peace, and to alleviate the "injustice, hardship, and priva-



tion" that the treaty makers knew imperiled the peace of the world.

Intelligently, courageously, passionately he set out to perfect this "instrument of action."

Of supreme importance was the assembling of a competent staff to man this new enterprise. These men must be competent in their chosen fields and they must think first in terms of the world, secondly, in terms of their own nations. Such people were hard to find.

Of equal importance was the development of an *esprit de corps*—morale. There must be vision, imagination, faith in the future of this group, and loyalty to it. This must be shared by all.

No ordinary man could do all this. But Albert Thomas was no ordinary man. He was an extraordinary person. He was a man of intelligence, insight, energy, courage, breadth, and imagination, organizing ability, humor, and personal charm. He did not possess all these in equal measure, but he possessed a large enough portion to win and retain the respect and in many cases the admiration of employers, employees, and government officials the world over. His first assistant and successor, English-born Harold Butler, has said of Thomas, "His untiring energy, his burning faith, his brilliance of intellect, his warmth of heart, were an indispensable part of his equipment, without which his work could not have been performed and cannot be understood."

In those early months Thomas was the I. L. O. All letters were signed by him, no matter who wrote them. This was perhaps dictatorial, but was intended to help him to keep informed on the activities of all his subordinates. It was also intended as a device to help to implant a general philosophy in the group. By

suggesting changes in wording and emphasis, as well as fact, he could help to "educate" his staff.

His door was always open and through it streamed visitors from employer, employee, and government groups from all over the globe. From them he garnered much invaluable information and many important ideas. Then there was the constant stream of papers, periodicals, and reports that he and his assistants perused and clipped—and a retentive memory in which many items were filed.

The fact that he read and spoke French and German and read English and Spanish well helped immeasurably, as did his ability as a public speaker.

Then too there was the Rapport, to which top-ranking officials came regularly—a kind of administrative town meeting where administrative policy was determined and divergent points of view reconciled.

The easiest course open for the I. L. O. was to become a research center, compiling tome after tome for the libraries of scholars all over the world and accumulating a huge library of information on labor in various parts of the globe. But Albert Thomas was determined that it be much more.

Four of his ideas were particularly important in the growth of this international group:

1. First of all he saw quite clearly the organizational setup of the Office. There were to be four sections: the diplomatic, the political, the research, and the technical services. The first would deal with the governments in the making of laws on labor. The second would handle all matters pertaining to employer and employee groups. The third would delve into problems of social insurance, vocational education, health. The fourth would furnish technicians and specialists to governments that wanted them, "on loan."

Sketch by  
Bill Wickham



2. In order to decentralize the Organization, he set up branch offices and advisers in strategic centers, including one in the United States, despite the fact that it did not become a member nation until 1934.

3. He was certain "that it was not enough to bring the nations to Geneva, but that it was equally necessary that the gospel of Geneva should be preached in the nations' capitals. So he became a globe-trotting spokesman for labor, visiting all the nations of Europe, the North and South American continents, Africa, China, Japan, and other parts of the Orient. At the time of his death he was preparing to go to Turkey, Iraq, and Iran.

4. The fourth great personal achievement was his publication each year of the Director's Report, a yearly summary of labor conditions in the world that employees, employers, and government officials eagerly awaited. Thomas' biographer and associate, E. J. Phelan, refers to these as "his greatest individual contribution to the material work of the Office."

Beginning with the first conference in 1919 the Organization has accomplished much, recommending to nations such steps as the 48-hour week, the establishment of unemployment offices under public control, the prohibition of the use of white phosphorus in matches, the abolition of the use of boys under fourteen as sailors, compulsory sickness insurance for industrial and commercial workers and domestic servants, and for agricultural workers as well, and the 7¼-hour day for coal workers.

Many of these recommendations seem ridiculously simple to us today, but they were strides rather than steps forward when they were taken, and their gradual passage as laws in most of the member nations was in part a result of the influence of the I. L. O. and of Albert Thomas.

His intense interest in the I. L. O. did not prohibit him from active association with the Co-operative Movement, the International Advisory Committee for France on Recreation, or the furtherance of international education, but all these interests drained him constantly of energy and health, and on May 7, 1932, he died in Paris at the age of 54, after twelve years as director of the International Labor Organization.

At the funeral in his home town of Champigny-sur-Marne, leaders of trade unions, of socialist and co-operative movements, and official representatives of forty-two nations, the League of Nations, and the I. L. O., mingled with common laborers and local townspeople as they paid tribute to this man who had worked first in a small section of France, then in the nation, and who had finally "taken the world as his province"—this champion of labor throughout the world, this "wandering Jew of social progress."

# What Is in a Name?

BY M. ALEXANDER ARTHUR

**T**RACE your name to discover an interesting ancestry!

Most of the old, plain Anglo-Saxon surnames handed down through the centuries were originally indicators of their owners' occupations and depicted the trade followed by the bearer of the name. This is true of Draper, Weaver, Porter, Parson, and think of all the Smiths there are!

A great many of the names of animals are connected with the attributes of those animals, some of the origins reaching far back in antiquity. You will find that the old root of the word "wolf" meant "one who tears and rends"; the implication is clear and the name singularly appropriate for the animal who bears it. In olden times in Germany the term "wolf" was considered a compliment to a soldier or warrior. Thus we have the name Adolph, which means "Noble Wolf," or Rudolph, which means "Glory Wolf."

The orangutan, an anthropoid ape about two thirds the size of the gorilla and a native of Sumatra and Borneo, has for a name a word taken right from the Malay language, meaning "wild man." In fact, the few English and American residents of Borneo are addressed by the natives, "Orang Tuan," which is translated "Master Man." The orangutan is considered by many naturalists to be the nearest to man in appearance and intelligence.

The name of the monkey comes from the ancient root "monna" meaning "a woman," from the fancied resemblance of the monkey's face to that of an old woman. The little lemur, a member of a suborder related to the monkey family that comes mostly from the Island of Madagascar, derives its name from the Latin of ghost or specter; the lemur has the habit of slipping stealthily through the woods at night, a weird expression on its small face and in its great, round eyes.

"Tiger" is a name that goes far back to the Persian root *tighra*, meaning "ar-

row" or "sharp." In this the tiger is well named. What animal leaps so swiftly on its prey or has sharper fangs with which to rend it? Of course the name of the lion comes from the Latin word *leo*, but it really goes much farther back to the Egyptian word *labu*, which is the name the Egyptian gives the animal today.

Of snakes, the words "reptile" and "serpent" come from the Latin, meaning "creeping," but *cobra-de-capello* is Portuguese for "hooded snake," while "vipera," from the Roman word *vipera*, refers to the habit of this snake of bringing forth its young alive.

"Squirrel" comes from the word in the Greek language, meaning "shadow tail," and "porcupine" comes from two Latin words, *porcus*, a hog, and *spina*, a spine, which can easily be translated "spiny hog." The name of the rhinoceros is taken from the Greek, meaning "nose-horned." The little mouse gets his name from the old Sanskrit root which means "to steal."

One of the antonyms we find is that the Latin word *canis*, meaning "a dog," has for the diminutive *catulus*, and this seems to be the most satisfactory root that can be found for the word "cat." Though a cat and a dog may be, in adult life, dire enemies, their names originate in the same root.

Most of the native American animals have Indian names. Hence the name of the moose comes from the Indian word "wood eater," and "wapiti," the name originally applied to the Rocky Mountain goat, which is white, means "Indian white deer" and was used for the goat by the Indians. But the white man, when he went West, applied the name "wapiti" to the American elk. Our name for the coyote comes from the Mexican word *coyotl* and was used long before Cortez conquered that country.

One could go on and on, and the farther back one goes in analysis the more is one impressed with the appropriateness of the names borne by most animals. Of course there are exceptions. For instance, no one knows why the elephant should bear the name that in the Hindu language means "an ox."

