

THURSDAY, AUG. 12. (Written August 14). The building of the Confederation Generale du Travail is a large white structure across the street from USOM headquarters. Mr. Bui, the head of the organization, was waiting to receive me. Dressed in light khakis, his clothes cut like those we associate with Chinese leaders, he rose to greet me and led me to one end of his office where there were leather armchairs and a sofa. We spoke in French and understood each other well, though I found that I could not get to him on the subtler levels of innuendo and suggestion. The limitation of language kept me from establishing anything in the way of a personal tie.

He traced for me the history of his organization. It was founded in 1949 ~~as~~ with ties to the French CGT-Force Ouvriere but because the law did not permit unions (under the French) it called itself an association: Association de Defense des Interets Professionnels des Travailleurs de Vietnam (ADIPTV). In 1952 when the law was amended to permit unionization, it changed its name to Confederation ~~des~~ ~~de~~ Vietnamienne du Travail Chretien (CVTC). Why did it affiliate with the Christian union international, instead of ICFTU, I asked, particularly in view of the French origin in the Force ~~des~~ Ouvriere? He answered that many French unions had such an affiliation; moreover, ICFTU was socialist, and the Communists were using the mask of socialism. It was less confusing and a ~~more~~ clear avoidance of Communism to affiliate with the Christian unions; though a Buddhist himself, he could identify with the Christian social doctrine and the ideals it represented. In April 1955, however, the name was changed to its present one, omitting the Christian reference.

Until the division of the country by the Geneva agreement, CVT had sections in the North -- for example, coal workers in Hanoi and Haiphong, and agricultural workers. ~~which were really the Communists~~ In the migration that followed, some 30,000 CVT members came down from the North, and settled in ~~villages~~ refugee villages of which there were 11 around Saigon.

Standing before a large organization chart on the wall, he explained that CVT has three main sections: (1) Commerce and industry; (2) agriculture; and (3) plantation workers in rubber, tea and coffee. The second was the ~~largest~~ biggest section, but in 1958 Diem ordered the ~~agricultural~~ workers to join government-sponsored groups which seriously weakened CVT. This, said Bui, was the biggest error of the government.

I tried to get specific figures but he was either evasive or did not understand me. Finally, he talked of 50,000 peasants in CVT at the present time; 50,000 plantation workers, 5,000 fishermen and 300,000 industrial and commercial workers. The movement is organized like the AFL-CIO, with regional federations and with national federations of workers in the same activity. He said there are 432 individual unions (comparable to our local unions) in CVT, 6 national federations (agricultural, plantation, transport, textile, fishing, and railroad, which is being shut down because of ~~the~~ Viet Cong sabotage). There are 28 offices in the provinces, 11 of them in Government areas, and 17 which are now inaccessible in Viet Cong dominated areas.

There are no strikes because the government does not permit them. The cost of living is rising rapidly, and there is little that CVT can do. "Nous sommes paralyses." His whole demeanor indicated a sense of defeat. "We have no power to exert pressure." The Communists are now attempting to organize secret unions but have had little success; if the government continues its present policy vis-a-vis the unions, however, they will gain ground. Despite assassination and kidnapings (he used the English word) of union leaders, the CVT ~~leadership~~ local leaders have been able to beat off ~~infiltration~~ infiltration. He was concerned about a new government decree forbidding meetings, but I learned later that this was an exaggeration: the government

merely requires ~~an~~ 24-hours advance notice, and even this is generally disregarded by the unions without any government reaction. Buu seemed like a man who was rationalizing his failure to pursue aggressive activities.

I questioned him about the union weekly, and he said 15,000 copies are printed. (I had been given a figure of 20,000 at USOM.) The press, brought in from Taiwan, was presented by USOM. I visited the little plant in a building ~~located~~ to one side of the main structure, where two rotary presses were at work. Some 20 young boys were setting type by hand. I took a copy of the paper.

I told him I had read the labor code which seemed quite good. "Yes, the laws are good," he said, "but they will not be enforced unless there are unions."

I raised the question of what American unions could do for CVT but he answered only with generalizations, his comments rich with figures of speech but lacking in concrete proposals. "There ~~must~~ must be direct participation by the American people, the American workers. A screen divides the two peoples. The Vietnamese see the American workers through a prism in a deformed image -- as rich and imperialistic. The United States gives a great deal but it is poorly understood. The people see only soldiers, cannon, guns, ambassadors and big cars. Chinese imperialism, of longstanding in the history of Vietnam, is making effective propaganda. Direct contact is the only answer if there is to be a rapprochement. The American unions are more positively interested in the war than are the Vietnamese people. The latter are apathetic. I pressed him for the forms ~~of~~ contact he would favor. He finally said, "Send people to the U.S. and let them see the unions there really defend the poor, and that they have power." ~~Some~~ Some Americans have been well received -- "comme un frère" -- and referred specifically to Arnold Beichman who had been here last year and who is back in Saigon for a few weeks. "We must send delegations. Il faut faire ce travail." But soon he was back to describing the problems: Eighty percent of the people are peasants; the industrial worker is privileged, compared to the peasant. We must organize the peasants. The laws apply only to the minority in industry and commerce -- not to the majority who are in agriculture. There is no law for the peasant; therefore the Communists recruit among them peasants, who live in misery. There is much gambling, prostitution, alcoholism. "C'est la pourriture (rotteness) où les Communistes poussent." And they grow like mushrooms in this soil. "L'avenir est très sombre." There is no stability in the government because there is no popular base. He drew a pyramid standing on its summit. Things oscillate, he said, holding up his hands, and ~~rocking~~ from side to side. He turned the paper upside down, showing the broad base at the bottom. "We must turn things around. In this fight we need a solid base. The government plays the Communist game without realizing it. By seeking to divide us, weaken us, it acts to the advantage of the Communists. We have not been prepared for the political battle that will follow. Nous serons ~~inutiles~~ bouffes. What's what will follow from the ultimate negotiations unless the people are organized."

In the evening I had dinner at John Condon's with about fifteen people, many of them from the bus drivers and truckers union, the others American consultants working on Saigon's transportation problems. One of the latter told me that information to work with is lacking. It's assumed that there are 2,400 taxis in Saigon, clearly not enough. (I am always the 2,401st person looking for a cab, the fare for which incidentally is dirt cheap.) John says the only people who had information that helped these consultants was the union. One of the union men told me that he had had a strike a few weeks ago, authorized by the government, against Michelin. The men had walked out, with the consent of the district chief, over the following

issue: The government had commandeered some of Michelin's trucks, and the company refused to pay the drivers, telling them to collect from the government, which obviously had no intention of paying. The drivers pointed out that when the Viet Cong had done the same thing, the French employers had paid the wages. Why the difference? After a week's strike, Michelin settled.

During the day, I interviewed the secretary-general of the Ministry of Labor (Niehm) and the Inspector General (Doan) who gave me little information beyond what was contained in the Labor Code which I had already read. They confirmed much of what Buu had said: they estimated that CVT has 500,000 members including farm labor, with 300,000 in the industrial branch. They said the unions have little leadership. I asked for figures on the implementation of the labor code, especially on the enforcement of minimum wage provisions, one of the responsibilities of the Inspector-General. He finally said that last year there were about 5 or 6 cases of violations that he had pursued. The minimum wage promulgated for Saigon -- it is lower elsewhere -- is 50 piastres a day for men (70 cents), for women 40 piastres and for the younger workers (children) 35 piastres. The Ministry of Labor has few figures; it leaves that to the Ministry of Economics. Doan said that land reform had been effective, and when I pressed him to spell it out, he said that the owner of the land is now limited in the amount of the crop he may take. When I asked for figures, he said that formerly the landowner took 50 percent, often 60 percent. Today the figure has shifted so that the laborer must get 60 percent. Doan said that the present labor law followed the original French system, and the emphasis was legislative. But now, since the union movement is growing, the government plans to modify the labor code. The code was adopted in 1952 when there was little organization; now employers must recognize the unions. The effect of government policy should be to get employers to accept the unions (but I fear this answer was due to my leading question).

Today (August 14) at lunch which included the director of the Industrial Division of the Ministry, I learned that a new decree on labor is being promulgated, to be signed any day now, prohibiting strikes. This gentleman was sharp, critical, aware of the failures. Thieu (phonetic spelling) spoke of the absorption with self-interest by everybody, the unwillingness to seek anything other than one's immediate personal advantage. He spoke of a device he had introduced to get capable officials out of Saigon to the places where they are needed. Formerly men sent to the provinces would deliberately neglect their work so they would be recalled to the safety and comfort of Saigon; his solution was to get a decision that men who failed in their jobs would lose their draft deferment. This, he said, is improving performance. He told bitterly of workers being forced to work under the threat of grenades. But he seemed terribly frustrated about the likelihood of any change in the government's composition or policies.

Conversation generally in Saigon, among almost all Americans and a very few Vietnamese, comes down to one simple proposition: Everybody knows that the key factor leading to defeat is the gap between the government and the people; but everybody knows it and nobody can do anything about it because the people who can close the gap refuse to do what's necessary -- ~~materialism~~ abandon self-interest and dedicate themselves to national goals.