

Frédéric Desbordes

Léon Jouhaux - Itter Castle 1943-45

A play in 26 scenes

Remembering the internment of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning trade unionist as a war
hostage

English translation by

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to Yves Veyrier

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Second edition

Preface

Leon Jouhaux, Itter Castle 1943-45 is a play written by Frédéric Desbordes, my husband. He published it shortly before he died but, for lack of time, did not have the satisfaction of producing it.

It was his third play, after *Voltaire/Newton (... et inversement)*, 2005, and *Albert Thomas: Voyage*, 2019. Frédéric's passionate interest in history is clear from the subjects of his plays. Moreover, the values of the International Labour Organization were always close to his heart, and my position in the ILO enabled him to enjoy regular contact with many trade unionists. This interest led him to focus on the life of Léon Jouhaux (1879-1954), one of the foremost French trade unionists, Vice-Chairperson of the ILO Governing Body and President of the Economic Council of France in 1947.

Léon Jouhaux fought for social justice, human dignity and peace at a very dark period of the XXth century when these fundamental values were being trampled underfoot. His tireless efforts led to him being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1951. And yet, while he made a significant contribution to social progress and greater equality between human beings, his name and deeds are now largely forgotten. It was undoubtedly to remedy this injustice that Frédéric took such an interest in this historical figure.

I therefore consider it my duty to reprint the play at a time when memories of the Second World War should be convincing us of the need for greater wisdom and peace. Eighty years after the liberation of the prisoners held in Itter Castle and the end of the war, a reminder of the words of a man of conviction, with a profound belief in the need for peace and social justice, is not out of place. With this second edition, as Frédéric always said, "the words will resonate once again".

Karen Curtis Desbordes

Léon Jouhaux, from Aubervilliers to Oslo,

An extraordinary life and work

Bernard Gernigon

Who would have predicted that the young boy, brought up in a working class family in the outskirts of Paris would, some decades later, be awarded the most prestigious prize in the world? From the manufacture of matches in Aubervilliers to Oslo to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, Léon Jouhaux travelled a long road as a committed trade union activist, a stubborn internationalist and a convinced pacifist.

Grandson of a man who was executed during the 1848 revolution, son of a communard who took part in the fighting against the Versailles army, Jouhaux, who to his great regret was forced to abandon a promising school career for financial reasons, and was imprisoned at the age of 22 for proclaiming seditious slogans, had all the makings of a revolutionary. And that is what he was. First, in the full sense of the term, when he organized long and hard strikes at the beginning of the 20th century in association with anarchist movements and wrote in the *Voix du Peuple* of the compelling need for a general strike. And then, later, in a different way, after the horrors of the First World War had led him to greater pragmatism, when he acted as a veritable precursor of an unprecedented model of international relations by putting forward innovative solutions for the achievement of social justice throughout the world.

Committed trade union activist

He was a committed trade union activist throughout his adult life, and even earlier, as he first became a trade union member in his teens. His was a unique path in the French, and indeed international trade union movement. Elected as Secretary General of the fledgling General Confederation of Labour (CGT) in 1909 at the tender age of 30, he held the position for 38 years.

He remained a trade union activist following the schism in the French trade union movement that led to his resignation as Secretary General of the CGT. The schism, which he felt deeply, did not however bring an end to his commitment, as he was elected President of the new confederation following the establishment of the CGT Force Ouvrière. Even though his failing health required him to be more distant from everyday matters, his mandate as President was far from being merely an honorary title. It led to him representing his confederation in the recently established Economic and Social Council, and immediately becoming its president, as well as at the International Labour Organization, where he continued to fulfil the role of Worker Vice-Chairperson of the Governing Body.

It was his aim to remain a trade union activist throughout his life, without spilling over into politics. As a tireless defender of the values set out in the Amiens Charter, and a fierce proponent of trade union independence, he refused, even under the Popular Front, any

Government positions. And he dragged the whole Confederation with him in his refusal to mix trade union activities and political responsibilities by pushing for the adoption of a decision by the Officers and the Executive Committee to that effect.

He was a trade union activist in his vigorous defence of workers' interests during bitter and arduous negotiations with employers and the Government. One of the main architects of the 1936 Matignon agreements, Jouhaux was at the origins of the landmark achievements for workers rights of paid leave, the limitation of hours of work and collective agreements.

He showed his commitment as a trade union activist through the organization of a campaign in the 1920s for the creation of social insurance schemes, an essential element in workers' well-being. And, following the liberation, he played a decisive role, through his faithful lieutenant, Georges Buisson, in the establishment of health insurance and a pension system based on inter-generational solidarity. He emphasized that social security would prevent the wastage of human energy, that most precious of gifts.

Stubborn internationalist

In Jouhaux's view, trade unionism could not be confined within national borders. He considered that internationalism was the very essence of the workers' movement and was based on the need for international solidarity.

Almost without knowing it, he was already an internationalist at the age of 16 when he took part in his first strike, the principal objective of which was to call for the prohibition of the use of white phosphorous, which was extremely harmful to the health of workers. The strike was crowned with success, as it not only resulted in the prohibition of the use of white phosphorous in France, but also led to the adoption of an international convention in Bern.

He was already a stubborn internationalist before the First World War, when he sought to develop links with British and German unions at a time when the international situation was beginning to be fraught with threats to world peace. And he continued to be so during the war, when he participated actively in the international trade union conferences in Leeds in 1916 and London in 1917, which prepared the way for a more just and humane post-war world of work.

He also demonstrated his stubborn internationalism by obtaining a place on the French delegation to the Peace Conference and by working tirelessly in the Commission on International Labour Legislation on the creation of the International Labour Organization, which was enshrined in Part XIII of the Treaty of Versailles. The authority that he acquired in so doing enabled him to have a strong influence on the decisions taken at the first International Labour Conference held in Washington, and particularly the designation of Albert Thomas as the first Director of the International Labour Office.

Finally, he continued to show his metal as a stubborn internationalist throughout his participation in the work of the ILO, where he was an essential actor from 1919 until his death in 1954, in his capacity as Chairperson of the Workers' Group and Vice-Chairperson of the Governing Body throughout that period. His action proved decisive in cementing the universality of the Organization through his call for the admission of the countries that had

been defeated in 1918. And later, overcoming the reticence towards communist regimes at the end of the Second World War, he supported the membership of Eastern European countries and the USSR, in opposition to the positions of the United States and United Kingdom. His role was just as decisive in the innovative steps taken at the beginning of the 1950s, including the creation of the Committee on Freedom of Association, on which he was the first Worker spokesperson. He proclaimed on that occasion that the new world could not be developed without freedom of association as its keystone.

A convinced pacifist

His overwhelming commitment to action at the international level was largely the outcome of his concern to ensure lasting peace, as an indispensable prerequisite for the well-being of workers and the improvement of their conditions. He was already a committed pacifist at the beginning of his adult life, when he expressed clear anti-militaristic views. For example, his arrest in 1901 – not for the only time during his lifetime as an activist – was a result of his clear and firm proclamation “Long live anarchy! Down with the army!” Admittedly, he was later critical of these positions, but he retained the memory, tainted with nostalgia, of a great enthusiasm, based more on irrational hope than constructive commitment.

He remained a pacifist in his attempt, unfortunately unsuccessful, to engage in common action with German unions in favour of peace. Although in 1914, Jouhaux and the CGT accepted the commencement of hostilities with Germany, they made it clear that it had to be a war of defence and liberation, not a war of conquest. And in an article in *Bataille syndicaliste*, Jouhaux made an ardent plea, at a time when bloody battles were raging, for the different peoples to take action following the victory and to exert concerted pressure for an end to all war.

He confirmed his commitment as a pacifist between the two wars, particularly through his advocacy of collective security in the League of Nations, where he was a member of the Commission responsible for controlling the production and sale of arms. In his awareness of the risk of a new conflict, Jouhaux, although in favour of reparations, supported a reduction in the burden on Germany and opposed the French policy of military occupation.

While clearly a pacifist, he was without illusions concerning authoritarian regimes, as shown by his calls to abandon neutrality in the Spanish Civil War, his condemnation of the German-Soviet Pact, his refusal to accommodate the Vichy regime and his determination to resist the Nazi invader. His belief in the ideal of peace was further strengthened by his successive periods of detention in France and Germany during the Second World War. The discussions with his fellow prisoners, as related by Augusta Bruchlen, his companion in good times and bad, showed his differences of views with his fellow military and political detainees in Itter Castle in the Austrian Tyrol.

The crowning recognition of his constant pacifism was the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1951. But, for Jouhaux, “a recompense is a point of departure” and, up to his death in 1954, he did not cease his activism in support of a “universal movement for peace, social

progress and human rights”, even though this approach did not receive the full support he would have hoped for from the international trade union movement.

A speaker with exceptional powers of persuasion and endowed with outstanding resilience, which enabled him to overcome obstacles, difficulties and insults, Jouhaux was the incarnation of free and independent trade unionism for nearly half a century. Some seventy years after his death, he is still the figure who symbolizes the golden age of the French trade union movement, when its membership could be counted in millions and the achievements of workers’ movements, gained through bitter struggles, were resulting in deep and lasting changes in the lives of workers.

[photo]

Léon Jouhaux

27th Session of the International Labour Conference, Paris, 1945

Itter Castle 1943-45

On 2 May 1943, Léon Jouhaux was interned in Itter Castle in Austria. He was one of the many French public figures whom Hitler wanted to keep far from France, hostages who were at his disposal in case of necessity.

Léon Jouhux was interned together with Edouard Herriot, Paul Reynaud, Edouard Daladier, Jean Borotra, General Maurice Gamelin, and then Albert Lebrun and André François-Poncet, and later with General Maxime Weygand, Colonel François de la Rocque, Marcel Granger, Michel Clemenceau and Alfred and Marie-Agnès Cailliau ...

On 19 June 1943, Augusta Bruchlen, Jouhaux's companion and secretary, was brought to Itter, having obtained authorization, without privileges, to join him.

What would become of them? What did the future hold in store? They predicted that the Allies would win the war. It was a question of resources and time -1945, 1946 or even later? What will befall them up to the last day, the last hour, the last moment of the drama? Will they be condemned? Would this small group of illustrious men and women, with such divergent views, be able to live together? Over the two years, they were bound by a tacit agreement not to show their differences to their jailers. But what really happened in secret behind those walls? We cannot help imagining that there must have been some conflicts and tensions during those long months.

The writings are known, as each of them endeavoured to keep a record of their experiences. Words were also spoken, which we could not hear, but which perhaps still resonate. It seemed to me that those words could tell the story of Léon Jouhaux. And so we may now venture into the places occupied by four of the interned hostages: Léon Jouhaux, trade unionist and Secretary General of the CGT since 1909; Augusta Bruchlen, a trade unionist from Alsace, his companion and secretary; Paul Reynaud, a Gaullist and the last but one President of the Council of the IIIrd Republic; and Jean Borotra, a famous tennis player, and former General Commissioner for Education and Sports of the Vichy regime.

Léon Jouhaux refers to past struggles and prepares for those of the future, alone or with Augusta, confronted by his adversaries and fellow detainees.

The days pass at Itter Castle, with games of deck tennis, meals taken separately by supporters of de Gaulle, on the one hand, and of Pétain, on the other, sewing, recalling former times, reading, Reynaud's captivity diaries, the battle for France between Gamelin and Weygand, German lessons, preparations and escape attempts, the electrician Zvonimir Cuckovic, Goebels' articles translated by Augusta, early morning anguish, barbed wire, the forest, Dachau, Captain SS Wimmer ...

The prisoners were freed from Itter Castle and the SS company that was laying siege to the castle on 5 May 1945, during the battle of Itter, by Captain Lee of the US army and Major Gangl of the Wehrmacht.

On the afternoon of 8 May, de Gaulle's personal plane brought Jouhaux and some of his fellow prisoners to le Bourget airport, near Paris.

F.D.

The role of the musician

Reading through *Léon Jouhaux, Itter Castle 1943-45*, by Frédéric Desbordes, musical passages by Félix Mendelssohn, Ludwig van Beethoven and Richard Wagner rapidly appeared to be suited as melodious and rhythmic interludes.

The “Germany of Goethe and Schiller ... the Germany of those who have worked for the good of humanity”, as described by Jouhaux, and which is represented here in music, offers an embarrassment of riches.

In addition to extracts from one of the most sublime lieder by Johannes Brahms, the music played will include the studies for viola written at the end of the 19th century by the violinist and teacher, Friedrich Hermann, member of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, as well as improvisations on a theme by John Dowland. The musical interventions conclude with melodies by Hector Berlioz that are of great freedom and originality.

It is possible to imagine that Hauptsturmführer Sebastian Wimmer, commander of Itter Castle, studied with one of Hermann’s pupils, practising his favourite works from the classical and romantic repertoire, taking his first steps in improvisation, coming back to his student pieces, and finally opening up to the unknown.

Pierre-Henri Xuereb

Back cover blurb:

The castle is a hybrid of fake Renaissance and fake gothic. Seen from afar, it may give the impression of old stones. From close up, the vulgar grey plaster shocks by its mediocrity.

We cross a bridge into the castle, a first and then a second entrance guarded by heavy metal gates. We enter the courtyard.

Frédéric Desbordes is an author and producer of live performances, and the creator of the Théâtre Les 50.

His play *Albert Thomas VOYAGE*, written in 2019 for the centenary of the ILO, was given in Geneva before the representatives of 187 Member States at the International Labour Conference. It was also produced in Paris in the Espace Raspail. The play received the Francis Blanchard Prize 2019.