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ITALY

NINTH NATIONAL CONGRESS OF SMALLHOLDERS.

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The Romans are accustomed to the great throngs of cosmopolitan and diverse people who pass down their ancient streets, but they have, in the last few days, observed something unusual - an enormous crowd of serious, bronze-faced men, all wearing a distinctive badge of three ears of wheat, which is the badge of the National Federation of Smallholders, the wearers of which had gathered in ROME to attend their IXth National Congress.

This immense crowd of the men and women who till the soil of Italy, amounted to over 35,000, and represented about 7,000,000 small farmers. The number increased daily, and the presence of these persons, who are so well-qualified in the exigencies of the economic and social development of agricultural reform, gave the Federation itself a rather special character.

Thirtythree provinces, 866 communal and divisional sections, and 522 outlying subsections come under the territorial plan of the National Federation of Smallholders of the Agricultural Reform and are subject to the reform regulations.

The Countrywomen's Groups /Gruppi Donne Rurali/ form part of the Federation, and their purpose is to examine the living conditions, surroundings and mentality of the Italian countrywoman, carry out educational activities of a local and rural nature, study family economic aid, and trade unions information and action, in addition to develop recreation, and encourage folklore and the traditional regional arts.

The young people also come under the Federation through their own organization, which is called the Young Farmers Group, numbering 3,171 members today.

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The IXth National Congress of Smallholders was held amidst the ruins of the Palatine, in the grandiose and impressive amphitheater of Domitian, with its rich carpeting of green grass and its great roof open to the sky. The stadium itself was bright with color created by the green of the Federation flags, the tricolor of Italy which floated against the blue of the sky, the scattered yellow of the farmers' straw hats, and the rich coloring of the groups of traditional costumes to be seen here and there. High across the ancient walls which rise around the arena were the words in huge letters: "In the Service of the Country and in the Defense of Italian Christian Civilization," and "Only through a Peasants Policy which Elevates the Country People Socially and Economically can Freedom and Democracy be Defended."

The National Federation of Smallholders has been able to achieve such victories as that of the BONOMI Law, and that of the elections for the administration of their health service in 7,416 communes out of 7,608. Furthermore, in the economic field it has achieved the assurance of State purchase of grain on every obligatory contingent and the State protection against excessive imports of grain. In addition it has won an increase in customs duty on cattle and meat, a grant of 5,000,000,000 lire for the distribution of seed chosen by the smallholders themselves, and an increase in the voluntary quota of olive-oil which a farmer may sell to the State for which he will be paid 2,500 lire for incidental expenses and the establishment of 410 lire per kilo deposit. The Federation has also brought about an increase on customs duty on olive-oil and the imposition of taxes on the manufacture of oil products from animal fats and solid greases; an increase in the price of hemp and choice tobacco; the law against the adulteration of wine; and the cheese protection law.

The IXth National Congress also marked the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Federation of Smallholders, the results of which in the economic field have just been spoken of. The Federation is carrying its activities in each field as the strengthening of the social and economic importance of smallholders in the national life and the binding together of the classes through the homogeneity and autonomy of their work. It is also fighting against the high cost of living and for the extension of insurance for invalids and the aged of all classes of smallholders. In the latter sector, the recent BONOMI Law for compulsory health insurance was a decided victory.

After the Congress was opened, Paulo BONOMI declared that the time has come when the Italian leaders must be told that it is not enough for the government to provide a strong anti-Communist policy, but Communism must be opposed in every

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single sector with decision and firmness! In this struggle the Government must be upheld by the unanimous support of all citizens who are ready to give their moral strength to safeguarding their country.

Minister of Agriculture MEDICI illustrated the reasons why agriculture needs to be defended, not only in the economic sector, but also in the social field, because the income of an agricultural worker is definitely lower than that of any other worker.

Prime Minister Mario SCALBA, brought the greetings of the Government to those present, and reminded them of what he had said at their previous Congress concerning the then recently-formed Government's maximum attention to the problems of extending the health service benefits for all smallholders, and the fact that today this ambition had been fulfilled. He promised that the problems of these people, who have all the concern of the Government, will be examined with the greatest care and the ardent wish of achieving everything toward their benefit. Problems are certainly not lacking, but one can today affirm with reasonable security that, since the war, there has been a decided improvement in conditions for all classes of the Italian people, and that in a real democratic regime freedom is not sacrificed under the pretext of progress. The improvement in the conditions of the working-classes, which has taken place amidst the appalling difficulties which followed the war, has been the work of the democratic government which the country has maintained since 1947.

All this demonstrates quite clearly that the Christian Democrat Party and the other democratic parties have no need to look to the left to gather inspiration and strength to carry out their social policy and the elevation of the workers. The approbation which the agricultural workers have shown toward the government and the democratic parties is a reason for profound satisfaction, and one is able to gather the signs of an increase in the numbers of more progressive workers who, up to a short while ago, were strongly Leftist, but who are now passing to democratic ways of thinking.

Throughout his speech, SCALBA was often interrupted by prolonged applause and cheers.

Amintore FANFANI leader of the CDP, reminded the smallholders present of the previous Congress in which the proposals for the health service were put forward, and he pointed out that they have been brought to fruition during this past year.

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The Congress was brought to an impressive conclusion by the solemn gathering in the great cathedral of St. Peter's where the Pope gave his blessing to the immense crowd.

At dawn that day every little street leading to the Square was jammed with country people all pressing animatedly toward the cathedral. Hundreds of buses from all the provinces of Italy formed a colorful circle around the vast square, and hours before the ceremony every corner of the cathedral was full of men, women and children whose faces bore the unmistakable tan which is born of life in the open air.

As the Pope entered the cathedral, great applause burst forth - something unusual in that sacred fane, and a wave of fluttering handkerchiefs and flags swept across the nave. Slowly the Papal cortege passed down the central aisle through the demonstrations of homage. The Pontiff ascended the throne and, turning to the farmers, he said "This rapid and incomplete summary of the multiple activities of your Federation, must be to you both an encouragement and a promise. If you remain true to your principles, in time your activity will extend still more widely. New possibilities are being opened up to each one of you, through the growth of trade union assistance, to multiply the occasions in which you may do good, to revivify your love for your neighbor, and your Christian charity, which brings life and ardor to all. May Divine Providence guide you and pour its blessings upon you and your families and all those whom you hold dear."

Outlining the significance of the Federation in an interview with the RFE reporter, BONOMI declared: "On January 1st this year, our numbers amounted to 1,496,585, corresponding to 3,029,468 working members, and 7,069,554 members of their families. This means that the Federation controls about 70 per cent of the personnel of the agricultural classes."

"Do you think that Communism can be stopped in this particular field?" he was asked.

"Communism does not stop with public works and fine speeches," he replied. "It can only be stopped by rousing the consciousness of the masses, and accustoming the leaders of all communities to fight against this evil without ceasing. Even if we could work miracles, the Communists would not be grateful, but would condemn us because we had not worked two miracles. This happened when we succeeded in reducing by half, the cost of insurance, which benefited absolutely everybody."

"What is the set-up of the Federation, Mr. BONOMI?"

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"Our Federation comprises 12,201 outlying sections, 3,171 groups of Young Farmers, 2,137 Countrywomen's Groups, with a million and a half associate families and over 7,500,000 'representative units', this is without including the Agrarian Syndicate Federation, the associated firms, and the farmers parliamentary Group, which numbers about a hundred members. Only 133 communes out of 7,624 which voted reported Left-wing victories, in the health insurance elections and the National Federation of Smallholders won the electoral victory in 7,433 communes. In other words we gained 97 per cent of the votes on the insurance question and the Communists gained 1.7 per cent. The Italian Communist Party deliberately chose this terrain on which to make a stand and it was overwhelmingly defeated."

End.