

BRETON NEWS



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The Breton Information Bureau

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BRETON FARMERS REVOLT.

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The series of sabotage acts which started at the end of May in the region of Pont'n Abad (South West Brittany) and have since spread to the rest of Brittany have been committed by members of the well organised farmers unions.

The immediate cause of the disturbances was a surplus of certain agricultural products on the market, in particular early potatoes. The collapse of prices had acute repercussions on the livelihood of small holders, who constitute a high percentage of the Breton farmers.

Apart from the fact that there are too many middlemen between producers and consumers, the Breton products are often at a disadvantage on the consumers markets in the French and German industrial centres because of the costs of transport.

One of the Breton demands is for a "perequation" of transport costs, i.e. a scaling of railway tariffs in such a way as to reduce the handicap of distance.

FIRST INCIDENTS.

On May 25th. 1500 delegates of the farmers' unions had gathered in Karaez (Central Brittany) and decided to resort to direct action if their claims were not satisfied.

A few tons of early potatoes were soaked in Diesel oil and strewn all over the streets of Pont'n Abad (26-5) in protest against the collapse of prices.

The streets of the town were blocked with trailers and tractors for 7 hours on the 30/5. Railways were obstructed with girders to prevent the expedition of potatoes sold at low prices.

Five telegraph poles and a cable were out in the district during the following night.

SABOTAGE OF ELECTIONS.

On Sunday 4th of June, local elections were sabotaged in 4 localities near Pont'n Abad, when small groups took away the ballot boxes and burnt them in the streets. During the following two days, 15 middle-aged farmers were arrested. Other men were appointed by the unions to run their farms while they were in jail. The Federations of Farmers Unions expressed their solidarity with the saboteurs. The chairman of the Finistere Federation and a few Breton members of the French parliament called in Paris on three ministers in an attempt to obtain the release of the arrested men.

GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS OCCUPIED.

On the 8th of June at dawn, 3000 farmers invaded the administrative centre of Montroulez (Morlaix, N. Brittany), and set up barricades in the main street while a "commando" of 200 occupied the government buildings (sous-préfecture) between 6-10 a.m. This action was organised secretly, with the maximum of surprise. The government representative was obliged to take refuge in the police station. Police reinforcements were rushed in from other Breton cities (Rennes, Kemper, St. Brieg).

In the afternoon, the farmers were forced to disband but were urged by the organisers of the demonstration to resort in future to "direct action", in small groups, by night. Two of the organisers were arrested and a third, who sat during the morning in the sub-prefect's chair, was on the run.

A report in the "Irish Independent" according to which Breton nationalist leaflets calling for a "free Brittany" were distributed among the demonstrators is confirmed by a correspondent of "Breton News". The same correspondent reports that a locomotive was damaged.

REVOLT SPREADS TO THE WHOLE OF BRITTANY.

In the following days, acts of sabotage took place in all other areas of Brittany, while strong police reinforcements were being brought in from outside Brittany. Telegraph poles and signposts were torn down, trees felled across main roads, road-blocks set up outside the principal towns (Nantes, St. Brieg, Gwengamp, Karaez.

On June 16th, 7000 farmers with 1000 tractors invaded the town of Pontivy (Central Brittany) and sealed off its entrances. They crashed the iron gates of the government buildings (sous-prefecture) and delivered an ultimatum demanding the release within 24 hours of the two leaders imprisoned in Montroulez the previous week. Steel-helmeted police used tear-gas to disperse the demonstrators who showered them with rotten eggs and other missiles. Liquid manure was poured at the gates as the police charged (Reuter).

On the 17th at dawn, 2000 demonstrators invested the town of Malestroit (NE of Gwened (Vannes), and occupied a large dairy plant. Here as well as in Gwengamp the same day, they declared that they would continue their action, whatever concessions were made, until the leaders imprisoned in Montroulez were released.

Previously a train was held up for 6 hours on the Paris-Kemper line which was blocked in two places near Lorient.

GOVERNMENT REACTIONS.

The French government had lately become concerned about the worsening conditions in Brittany. At the beginning of April, a prominent Breton, ex-Premier PLEVEN, had a long interview with President DE GAULLE during which they discussed the Breton problem.

In a communique issued after the demonstration in Montroulez, the Minister for agriculture stated that the government was perfectly aware of the particular character of the agricultural problems of Brittany (Ouest-France, 9/6).

At the time of going to press, we read in "The Observer" and "The Sunday Times" that the French government has drawn up emergency measures for Brittany, to stop the spread of the revolt. "The plan provides for new abattoirs, the creation of a big new marketing centre at St Pol (N. Brittany), State purchase of excess butter, milk and meat, export of surplus potatoes to Algeria, and help to Breton poultry farmers".

OUR COMMENT. Concessions to more general Breton demands are reported. Brest has been declared a "zone of conversion", to benefit from special credits for industrial development. Rail and road communications are to be improved. During the past ten years, the Bretons have been accustomed to promises not being held and are no longer so easily impressed. They remember that the credits allocated for the implementation of the 1954 "Breton Plan" were subsequently blocked. The measures now promised by the French government are still considered insufficient to give a good start to the Breton economic recovery, and to stop the catastrophic emigration. The farmers have declared their intention to continue the demonstrations until all their demands are met.

The problem is not purely agricultural. The decline in the purchasing power of the farming community and the depopulation of the land affects seriously the income of most other classes (small traders, craftsmen, wholesalers, professional men, etc). It is now more than ever evident that the difficulties of Brittany require a special and urgent solution. The farmers revolt has the sympathy of large sections of the Breton population, which take pride in the daring actions of their countrymen. Although professional in character, it vindicates the claims for self-government which have been made during the past 30-40 years by the nationally conscious Bretons.

.... There is unrest in Auvergne, Normandy and other French agricultural areas also, but so far there is nothing comparable to the disturbances in Brittany. One of the reasons why the acts of revolt are so widespread here is that the Breton economic interests have been particularly neglected by the French government for a long time. Another is that the Breton farmers unions are better organised at the base than their French counterparts.

..... For the past few months, the French press has been paying great attention to the development of the situation in Brittany. "La Croix de Paris" published a long study of Breton emigration. The weekly "Candide" has a detailed account of the Breton economic life. The periodical "Science et Vie" gave a 13-pages report on the Breton revival. "Action municipale", the French local councils' bulletin devotes an entire issue to Brittany. Other publications like "Economies Regionales" and "Rustica" have announced their intention to do likewise.

..... Rural unrest has been a chronic feature of the Breton economic life for the past few years. Mass demonstrations were staged particularly about the 19th of October 1959, the 14th of December 1959, the 7th of April 1960 (they have been reported in Breton News).

..... "At Guingamp, a crowd of 3000 demonstrators... had spent the morning singing Breton songs and chanting insults against the Prime Minister, M. Debré",
(The Observer, 18/6).

..... Heard from farmers near Kastellin (W. Brittany): "The Algerians have got what they wanted by violence. We are going to do like them. (A. Figueras, in Liberte du Morbihan, 14/6).

..... Slogans "Free Brittany" are beginning to spread on walls and roads"
(A. Figueras).