

POSTAL UNION CONGRESS AT MADRID, 1920.

The seventh Postal Union Congress, which was to have met in 1911, but was postponed until 1914 at the instance of the Spanish Government, and further postponed on account of the outbreak of war, assembled at Madrid on the 1st October, 1920.

The Congress was attended by 165 delegates, New Zealand being represented by the Secretary of the Department, Mr. R. B. Morris.

The sittings of the Congress were held in the General Post Office, Madrid, which is probably the most palatial post-office in the world. The opening ceremony took place in the presence of their Majesties the King and Queen of Spain, the Diplomatic Corps, and high Government officials. The inaugural address was delivered by His Excellency Count de Bugallal, Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, and the Congress was declared open by His Majesty the King.

The labours of the Congress lasted two months. The final sitting, in the course of which the various conventions and arrangements were signed by the delegates of the Union countries, was held on the 30th November.

During these two months twelve plenary sittings of the First Committee (Principal Convention), fifteen sittings of the Second Committee (Postal Parcels and Insured Articles), ten sittings of the Third Committee (Money-orders, Collection Orders, and Newspaper Subscriptions), two sittings of the Fourth Committee (Postal Cheque Service), and three sittings of the Fifth Committee (Committee for the Revision of the Wording of the Conventions, &c.) were held. Each committee had its sub-committees for the discussion of various questions.

Mr. Morris was instrumental in obtaining the approval of the Congress to three special matters. These were the recognition by countries of the Union of impressions of automatic stamping-machines as used in New Zealand; the right of each country to fix, within certain limits, its own postage rates; and the use at future Congresses of the French and English languages conjointly instead of French only.

A resolution was brought forward by the United States delegate to reduce the voting-strength of Great Britain and her Dominions from six votes to one. This produced a warm discussion; but the motion was rejected by forty-one votes to twenty-two.

In Article V of the Final Protocol note is taken of the declaration made by the British delegation, in the name of their Government, that it has assigned to New Zealand, with the Cook Islands and other island dependencies, the vote which the Convention attributes to the other dominions and the whole of the British colonies and protectorates.

During the Congress the Territory of the Sarre, and French and Spanish Morocco (as separate Administrations) adhered to the Universal Postal Union, and new votes in respect of colonial possessions were accorded to the United States and to Japan.

The Congress decided that the basis for the settlement of transit accounts should in future be theoretical gold francs, and in the revised Convention the expression "effective francs" is superseded by "gold francs." Gold francs are not at present in circulation in any country. The exact weight and fineness of the metal in the standard coin are, however, defined by the legislation of the countries constituting the Latin Union; and it is this weight of metal which will in effect be used for the standard in question, its current value being normally determined by the market price of gold in a country where the exportation of the metal is free, and where it is readily obtainable in exchange for notes.

The Congress adopted the gold basis not only for the settlement of accounts, but also for postage-rates. As, however, it would be impossible in present circumstances to insist that the postage-rates of countries where the currency is seriously depreciated should follow closely the market rate of exchange of the amounts laid down by the Convention, it was agreed that these rates should be considered as maxima. Every country is now at liberty to fix its postage-rates at any point between the rates in force on the 1st October, 1920, and the maximum fixed (on a gold basis) by the Convention, on the understanding that, whatever equivalents are adopted, the proportion between the rates for the various categories of correspondence should be as closely as possible the proportion between the rates prescribed by the Convention.

In any case in which a country fixes its equivalents so low that it would become advantageous to post correspondence for that country unpaid or insufficiently prepaid, in consequence of the fact that the surcharge collected would be less than the postage payable in the country of origin, the country of origin is empowered to insist on full prepayment of correspondence of every kind addressed to the country whose equivalents are unduly low, and also to suppress the reply post-card service with that country.

The unit of weight for letters remains at 20 grams (1 oz. in the case of countries which use the avoirdupois system), and the permission given by the Rome Convention to postpone the introduction of the 20-gram unit has been withdrawn.

The maximum postage-rates fixed by the Convention are: Letters, 50 centimes (5d.) for the first 20 grams or 1 oz., 25 centimes (2½d.) for each succeeding 20 grams or 1 oz.; post-cards, 30 centimes (3d.); printed papers, commercial papers and samples, 10 centimes (1d.) per 50 grams (2 oz.), with minima of 50 centimes for commercial papers and 20 centimes (2d.) for samples; literature for the blind, 5 centimes (½d.) per 500 grams (1 lb.). Unpaid and insufficiently prepaid correspondence is to be charged double the deficient postage on delivery, with a minimum charge of 30 centimes. The amount to be collected from the addressee, whether on unpaid or on insufficiently paid correspondence, is to be indicated by the office of origin in francs and centimes. The registration fee and the fee for an advice of delivery are fixed at a maximum of 50 centimes. One franc (10d.) may be charged for an advice of delivery applied for after posting, or for requests for information as to the disposal of ordinary or registered packets.