

Geert Van Goethem(University of Ghent)

## **The reconstruction of the trade union Internationals after WW I.**

LE SYNDICALISME A L'EPREUVE DE LA PREMIERE GUERRE MONDIALE

**Colloque, Paris, 26-27 novembre 2014**

*organisé par le Centre d'histoire sociale du XXe siècle de l'Université Paris 1*

*et l'Institut CGT d'histoire sociale*

## **Destruction and Reconstruction**

*As the history of the three most important international trade union organizations in the interwar period has already been documented, I prefer not to summarize this research, but to focus on the role that was played by these organizations. This approach also allows me to address the key issue that guides my research in contemporary, 'global' Labour History: the position of 'Labour' in a post-industrial and increasingly global society and its impact on the role of labour movements.*

National trade unions consolidated their position in most industrialized countries in the last quarter of the 19th century<sup>1</sup>. Their main mission was to improve working conditions and negotiate decent wages<sup>2</sup>, while not only addressing the employers, but also public authorities. Trade unions, in this way, evolved into social movements which challenged national governments.

Transnational co-operation was primarily born out of economic necessity<sup>3</sup>. Unions often exchanged information about pay rates in a particular trades. Hence, the first transnational organizations were set up by national unions, mainly representing workers from industries which were facing stiff international competition, or whose activities cut across national borders. Such international unions appeared from 1889 on; first, in more artisanal sectors, but very soon also in key sectors of the new industry (mining, metal, textile and transport). Twenty-eight so-called International Trade Secretariats (ITS)<sup>4</sup> had been established by 1914, most of them being based in Germany<sup>5</sup>.

Only after the turn of the century, when solid national confederations had been established, formal consultations began between the latter. The International Secretariat (IS) of National Trade Union Centres was established in 1901. Again, its main purpose was to disseminate information about labour standards and labour laws. Much of its history has been one of ideological conflict between syndicalist tendencies (such as in France) and a reformist tendency (led by the German trade union movement), the former suggesting that the trade union International should also evolve into a militant political organization, while the latter argued that the unions primarily had to serve the interests of their membership and not bother about politics, as this was the area of competence of the political party it was usually linked with<sup>6</sup>. From the latter point of view, major cross-border political demands, such as the eight-hour day, fell outside the competence of the trade union international. And as the German trade unions - truly a mass movement - had the soundest finances and paid almost all the costs and expenses of the IS, syndicalist tendencies were never able to impose their view. However, this IS also included a right-wing tendency, which rejected any form of

political relationship between trade unions and parties. Such views were supported by the American Federation of Labour (AFL), backed by the British General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU). Especially the Americans, vigorously opposed the 'subjugation' of unions by political parties or tendencies. This was the battle they were fighting in their own country, against the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Their main aim was to isolate IWW internationally, and for that reason they had joined the IS. Hence, an attempt to eliminate a national opponent can also be identified as one of the (negative) motivations of national unions for joining the International<sup>7</sup>.

It was not until 1913 that IS became the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU). Its aim was a bit more ambitious, but important projects failed to materialize as the outbreak of the war was drawing near.

The international trade union movement disintegrated during the First World War. Three groups emerged, which aligned themselves with their respective countries' policies in the war. A group of neutral organizations was established, led by the Dutch unions; the German organization which formally retained control and mainly maintained contact with unions of neutral countries and the Axis powers; and a group of allied organizations, which consisted mainly of Belgian, British, French and also Italian organizations. The latter group was joined by the American Federation of Labour in 1917, when the United States had entered the war.

National unions played a substantial role in supporting the industrial and military policies of their respective countries during the First World War. International co-operation served as a foreign policy tool. Reformist unions supported national war efforts and helped to turn their nations into war machines by boosting production capacities. They had a say in industrial and public policy decisions in return. Reformist ideas got the upper hand in the European trade union movement and old syndicalist unions, such as the CGT (in France), reversed their policies during the war. The latter, however, were questioned by minority groups, which were targeted by communist organizations after the war.

National unions raised the issue of a post-war international peace conference in the early stages of the war already, i.e. they discussed the venue and the agenda, and they talked about the people that were to be invited. As early as 1914, AFL suggested that the venue should host an international labour conference at the same time. And Léon Jouhaux, from the French CGT, wanted 'industrial clauses to be inserted into the peace treaty'<sup>8</sup> (May 1 celebrations in 1916). Delegates at a conference of allied unions in July 1916, in Leeds, supported this proposal and agreed on a minimum programme. The CGT spoke about 'a common and short-term objective of the international labour movement' and a way to prepare for 'its renaissance and for the future' of this movement<sup>9</sup>. And

although the deep divide in union ranks – between the allied and the German-Austrian unions - could not be fully bridged, there were few important policy differences, as the latter had agreed on a similar programme at a conference in Bern, in October 1917<sup>10</sup>. Thus, a blueprint for social reforms had already been largely developed by that time.

As the war was drawing to a close, trade unions also had to identify broader post-war aims. They were obliged to reflect on fundamental issues: should they commit themselves to building a free market economy, with a democratic system of government; or should they opt for a socialist economy, modeled on that of the Bolsheviks. And although a number of leaders, such as Arthur Henderson, showed considerable interest in what was happening in the Soviet Union, the fourteen-point programme of the American president Wilson proved to be much more appealing. It served as a 'Magic Mirror'<sup>11</sup>, 'in which progressives of all kinds saw their own programs reflected'<sup>12</sup>. European reformist socialism resolutely opted for Wilsonian Liberalism<sup>13</sup>, which promised to put an end to the 'old', secret diplomacy and pleaded for a 'general association of nations' and free trade.

As the war was drawing to a close, there was increased co-operation between the different national labour movements, along with extensive consultation. Both parties and trade unions were involved in it. In a number of countries, such as Great-Britain, no clear distinction could be made between them, while in others, such as the US, the distinction was almost absolute. Hence, at joint conferences agreements on union issues - such as a cross-border program of social and legislative reform – were easily reached, while agreements on political issues – such as the attitude towards the Soviet Union or the desirability of a negotiated peace settlement - were much more difficult to conclude. The latter issue was tackled in April 1917, following an invitation from the Bureau of the Second International concerning a peace conference in Stockholm that was to be attended by delegations from both sides.

Not everybody found it expedient to organize a labour conference with delegates from belligerent nations. But the question was settled by the allied governments themselves: they simply refused to grant visas to its participants. They argued that 'peace negotiations should be an affair of governments'<sup>14</sup>. Nevertheless, delegates to the London Allied Labour and Socialist Conference, in September 1918, gave a mandate to four leaders (Henderson, Vandervelde, Thomas and Gompers) to convene a World Labour Conference at the venue of the upcoming peace conference, and at the same time. Eventually, allied governments also vetoed this proposal. Prominent labour movement leaders, from the different sides, were then to meet each other at a conference in Bern. But the Americans refused to attend, and so did the Belgians. In my opinion, the Bern conference was important for two reasons. On the one hand, it laid the foundations for the reunification of the

international trade union movement through a list of common demands; and on the other hand, it signalled the beginning of US trade union isolationism that would last for almost twenty years. And although Gompers' international career had yet to peak at the peace conference, as chairman of the Commission on International Labour Legislations, his ambition to establish a new, politically neutral and AFL-led trade union International, was thwarted by the resumption of cooperation between European unions. Essentially, they held contradictory views on the role of public authorities and, in the framework of a new international organization, on the competences of a cross-border law enforcement tool. Europeans, led by Jouhaux and the French, argued that international labour standards that could be legally enforced played a vital role in implementing reform rapidly, while the latter was a gloom and doom scenario to Gompers and AFL, whose views and practices were diametrically opposed to it<sup>15</sup>.

However, with hindsight, it is clear that the international labour movement was a player in the field of international diplomacy in Versailles. It was never to achieve such high status again. Moreover, trade union leaders constantly referred to Versailles during the Second World War, in order to ensure that their request to participate in the San Francisco conference was properly considered<sup>16</sup>.

Thus, from 1917 on, while still setting up joint conferences, parties and trade unions increasingly set their own priorities. As has been mentioned earlier, trade union demands prompted less debate. This was a step towards a more independent trade union movement, eventually leading to the current situation, i.e. the complete absence of any links between the international trade union movement and the Socialist International. Better international cooperation requires convergent policies. Hence, a 'labour programme' - uniting labour movements from different sides - laid sound foundations for cooperation between the unions at the end of the First World War. Political cooperation, however, proved to be impossible: after the armistice had been signed, it seemed impossible to convene an international socialist conference in Bern. Both AFL and the Belgian socialist movement (party and union) refused to attend. Also, AFL could not realize the dream it had cherished for so long, given that allied governments did not consent to a 'labour' conference taking place at the venue and time of the official peace conference.

Now that the war was over and the peace treaty had to be negotiated, the unions were eager to keep their wartime gains and claimed fair compensation for their cooperative attitude during the war. Most of all, they wanted representatives of the labour movement to be included in the national delegations, so that labour interests could be taken care of at the negotiating table itself. But again, governments were cautious in their reaction. Although socialist parties were in government in several allied countries and several national delegations did include socialists, this did not imply

recognition of the organized labour movement. Especially for Samuel Gompers, who had more or less proclaimed himself leader of the (American and) international labour movement, it was a bitter pill to swallow. He realized, as many others did later, that he should not take such a 'deal' for granted and that the post-war period was not a propitious time for old friendships to be revived. Eventually, Gompers was offered the post of chairman of the (Labour) Commission that was to draft the labour charter. However, looking at it objectively, Gompers failed to achieve the two goals he had set himself, i.e. first, to hold parallel conferences, with the eyes of the world turned to the American president and to the leader of the international labour movement; and second, official recognition as a formal member of the American delegation.

Representatives from the international labour movement did, however, attend the Versailles conference, though not sitting at the large negotiating table, but somewhere in a backroom. There, they laid the foundations of an international labour organization and reached an agreement on basic principles regarding international labour standards. In the post-Versailles decades, mainly national union leaders would continue to refer to this agreement and to the way in which it was concluded. It was held up as an example of the 'recognition' of labour interests by international diplomacy.

### **Amsterdam: between Washington, Moscow and Rome**

Notwithstanding their major differences during the war, the national unions of Western industrial nations managed to agree to establish an ambitious trade union international, in Amsterdam, in the summer of 1919. Compromises were a necessary part of it, as well as acts of penance and confessions of guilt, although they did not have to forgive each other or reach a consensus. The integration of the German trade union movement into the new international was, of course, the biggest symbolic step, and a political one as well, as former belligerent nations seemed to put aside their wartime differences. The strategic aim was allowed to prevail: to start building a united labour movement prior to the international labour conference in Washington, in October, and the establishment of the ILO, which had to mark the culmination of the national waves of social reform. To engage in high-level international talks was an alluring prospect to union leaders and it prompted, perhaps, their premature decision to re-establish the International. No solid foundations had indeed been laid, so it did not take long before the first problems emerged. National unions held widely different views on IFTU goals and the IFTU programme. Also, the International still had to make its position clear on communism, a new phenomenon; and equally unclear was whether they had to bring an activist attitude to the International. In addition, a sense of leadership was missing. Day-to-day management was handled by two Dutchmen, Edo Fimmen and Jan Oudegeest. There was no clear division of labour between them and they took a radically different view on the union's

mission. The presidency was held by W.A. Appleton from the British GFTU; not that it was a powerful post, rather a relic of the past. The British TUC was the most solid pillar of the international trade union movement, but a lack of international expertise and a deep cultural divide that separated it from its continental counterparts, prevented it from really taking the lead for the time being. This put the chairman of the French trade union movement, Léon Jouhaux, in a strong position and he immediately used it to strengthen the French influence within ILO as much as possible. The facts were plain to see: Albert Thomas was appointed ILO's first director, while Léon Jouhaux became chairman of the Workers Group.

The Amsterdam International made its intentions crystal clear to the Americans. Samuel Gompers, who showed little interest in European developments after 1919, was annoyed about the constant stream of political manifestos issued by the Amsterdam secretariat. Moreover, he felt the membership fee was too high, arguing that the IFTU headquarters were located in Western Europe and that AFL was but partially involved in running the organization. However, no concessions whatever were made concerning these issues on the part of the Amsterdam secretariat, as a result of which the Americans turned their back on IFTU. Aligning themselves with the US government, they preferred to focus on their economic hinterland (Canada, South-America). This has often been interpreted as a new isolationist move, but the argument can be applied to the European labour movement as well, and to European politics in general, which also preferred to focus on regional issues in the next decade.

With AFL and GFTU (in 1921) having left IFTU, the latter no longer included a right-wing tendency. The vast majority of IFTU unions now held reformist, social democratic views. To some extent, ideological cohesion was enhanced through this, but a shared vision was still lacking. Edo Fimmen desperately wanted resolutions calling for action to be fully implemented. Between 1920 and 1923, he tried to turn IFTU into a more militant organization, whose primary aim was to safeguard peace and to push through a socialist reform programme<sup>17</sup>. His views were consistent with those of the communists within the international trade union movement. Consequently, it did not take long before he favoured international cooperation with them and with the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU of Profintern, 1921) in particular. This was a lethal cocktail: there were substantial differences and they triggered a deep crisis in 1923, which almost caused IFTU to disappear. The Amsterdam International and Profintern had become closely intertwined, as prominent union leaders from IFTU-affiliated organizations had been present at the founding conference of the latter<sup>18</sup>. Not only did Profintern try to unite communist minorities in Western Europe, it also made an attempt at integrating the old syndicalist tendency. But it failed to do so, as the Komintern left the latter little room to manoeuvre and the syndicalists decided to leave the organization in 1922. They founded

their own 'Black' International, the International Working Men's Association(WMMA)<sup>19</sup>. Profintern had a short-lived existence, during which it aimed to consolidate communist influence within West European labour movements. It also put the Amsterdam International on the defensive by addressing issues such as gender equality and anti-colonialism.

The presence of communist minorities in most European trade unions was unsettling for national leaderships. The mere existence of Profintern created a headache for the Amsterdam International. The former waged an aggressive propaganda campaign against the 'yellow' Amsterdam<sup>20</sup> and repeatedly stated its intention 'to destroy Amsterdam'<sup>21</sup>. The split within the French CGT, followed by the establishment of the communist CGTU<sup>22</sup>, was also a very unsettling affair and the communists were blamed for being 'schismatics'. The majority of IFTU affiliated unions therefore refused to cooperate with Moscow-led unions. Not the British TUC, however. The latter drew a distinction between the British communists, which were blamed for their irresponsible policies, the Russian trade union movement and Profintern. Aligning themselves with the Ramsey MacDonald government, the British TUC welcomed cooperation with the All Union Central Council of Trade Unions from Mikhail Tomski. Exchange programmes were established and Russian calls for international unity received TUC support. The TUC was now facing even more isolation within IFTU, and the latter was increasingly looking like a lame duck. Only when in the aftermath of the 1925 general strike TUC broke off relations with the Russian trade union<sup>23</sup>, conditions were created for demonstrating effective British leadership within IFTU. Also, in subsequent years, TUC would endorse British foreign policy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. And as the latter was neutral or hostile until the beginning of the Second World War, the British attitude vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, Soviet trade unions and Profintern no longer caused problems for IFTU. On the contrary, Walter Citrine assumed the IFTU leadership.

Not only were Profintern and the presence of communist minority groups within several national unions giving the reformist leadership serious cause for concern, it also caused a deep distrust of the outside world. Cooperation with unions and international organizations which did not form part of the Second International's network was out of the question. And this applied to the International Federation of Working Women<sup>24</sup> as well, an international which included women's unions, women organizations from the broader labour movement, and individual trade union members. The Federation was launched in 1919, following an initiative of the American Federation of Working Women aimed at organizing an international conference and influencing the agenda for the 1919 International Labour Conference in Washington, which was almost exclusively attended by male participants. In contrast to continental unions, Anglo-Saxon trade unions had much greater awareness that a pure class approach to labour issues would be not enough to tackle gender inequality. Consequently, the legitimacy of a women trade union international was mainly



questioned by the former. National unions within IFTU therefore withdrew their support for the initiative and decided that the IFWW had to join IFTU from 1924 on. The IFWW then ceased to exist, as the American women left the organization.

A similar uncooperative attitude was demonstrated towards the International Christian Trade Union (ICTU). The latter was founded in 1920 and fairly strong in the Low Countries, the Netherlands and Belgium<sup>25</sup>. ICTU consisted of unions which held solidarist views. Ideologically, in the context of the early 1920s, they were quite close to corporatism. To bring about reconciliation between social classes, was a basic principle, along with the defence of a number of moral Christian values, such as the strict separation of men and women at the workplace. It is actually quite surprising that ICTU was not more successful in uniting right-wing unions, as IFTU did not bother to do so. However, it did manage to break the monopoly that was claimed by IFTU within the ILO Workers Group. The International Court of Justice in Den Hague ruled that ICTU was entitled to mandates within the Workers Group (judgement of 26 June 1922). Hence, ICTU and IFTU did cooperate in Geneva, while completely ignoring each other in the outside world.

#### Epilogue

Deep ideological splits ran across the international trade union landscape by the mid-1920s. The latter underwent a first shift in the 1930s, as a result of the economic crisis and subsequent political instability. Renewed cooperation between the Americans and the British propelled the unions into action again. Reformist labour movements saw their international position strengthened after the US had joined the ILO in 1934 and AFL had become an IFTU member again in 1937. However, this was a short-lived alliance, as AFL refused to accept the logic of the TUC argument saying that international trade union alliances should mirror the political and military alliances of their respective nations. It implied, in the context of the Second World War, cooperation with Soviet trade unions. The British argued that if the labour movement were to make its due contribution to the construction of a new post-war world order, the only feasible option was that the unions of the three great powers would work together. While, in the eyes of AFL, the Cold War had already started at that moment, and the fight against communism was seen as the logical continuation of the fight against Nazism<sup>26</sup>. From its earliest days, and between 1945 and 1949, the World Federation of Labour (WFTU), which included the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)<sup>27</sup> – the rival organization to AFL, contained the seeds of future conflict and the rift that was to occur a few years later, when the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU)<sup>28</sup>, a new reformist international, was established. The international trade union movements, i.e. WFTU and ICFTU as large rival blocs, evolved into Cold War tools and increasingly fought one another in formerly colonized countries.

Fully aware of the geopolitical consequences, both the Western and the communist bloc considered that trade unions and other labour organizations (such as the ILO) played a crucial role in choosing a particular development model<sup>29</sup>. Later, when the Cold War had come to an end and neoliberal economic policies were implemented on a global scale, labour issues were treated as a peripheral policy concern, both nationally and internationally. And although unity in the international trade union movement has been restored, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) has not succeeded so far in convincing policy makers to give due prominence to labour issues again.

---

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Van der Linden, *Workers of The World. Essays Toward a Global History*, Leiden: Brill, 2008, p. 271

<sup>2</sup> The classic definition of a trade union by Sydney and Beatrice Webb : "a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining and improving the conditions of their working lives"

<sup>3</sup> See chapter 'Labor Internationalism' in Marcel van der Linden *Workers of The World*, pp. 259-286. Van der Linden argues that international trade union cooperation is driven by political and economic motives.

<sup>4</sup> Today global unions, ten in all. <http://www.global-unions.org>

<sup>5</sup> Michel Dreyfus, 'The Emergence of an International Trade Union Organization (1902-1919)', in: A. Carew, Michel Dreyfus, Geert Van Goethem, Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick, Marcel van der Linden (ed.), *The International Confederation of Trade Unions*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2000, pp. 27-71

<sup>6</sup> Suzan Milner, *The Dilemmas of Internationalism, French Syndicalism and the International Labour Movement, 1900-1914*, Oxford: Berg, 1990

<sup>7</sup> With respect to membership, both IS and its follow-up organization IFTU adhered to the principle of one national union per country. In 1936, AFL invoked the same principle to prevent the Congress of Industrial Organisations (CIO) from joining IFTU. CIO had split away from AFL in 1936, they merged in 1955 into AFL-CIO.

<sup>8</sup> Résumé de l'activité du Centre de Correspondence de Paris.

<sup>9</sup> Rapports des Comités et des Commissions Pour L'Exercice 1914-1918, présentés au XIX Congrès Corporatif de la CGT tenu à Versailles, du 15 au 18 Juillet 1918, Paris, Imprimerie Nouvell, 1918, p. 71

<sup>10</sup> Reiner Tosstorff, 'The International Trade-Union Movement and the Founding of the International Labour Organization', in: *International Review of Social History*, 50 (2005), pp. 399-433.

<sup>11</sup> Alan Dawley, *Changing the World. American Progressives in War and Revolution*, Princeton: University Press, 2013, p. 192

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth McKillen, *Making the World Safe for Workers. Labor, the Left, and Wilsonian Internationalism*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013, 153

- 
- <sup>13</sup> Arno Mayer, *Political Origins of the New Diplomacy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.
- <sup>14</sup> McKillen, *Making the World Safe for Workers*, p. 159
- <sup>15</sup> McKillen, *Diplomatic History*, p. 647
- <sup>16</sup> Geert Van Goethem, *Diplomatic History*, p. 664
- <sup>17</sup> Edo Fimmen, *Labour's Alternative. The United States of Europe or Europe Limited*, London: The Labour Publishing Company, 1924
- <sup>18</sup> D'Aragona (CGL, Italy), Rosmer (CGT, France), Purcell (TUC, UK), Williams (International Transport Workers Federation)
- <sup>19</sup> Wayne Thorpe, *The Workers Themselves. Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour, 1913-1933*, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989.
- <sup>20</sup> The International Trade Union Movement (ITUM), no. I, 1921, p. 21.
- <sup>21</sup> Open letter to the members of the Kommunistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands, no II, 1920
- <sup>22</sup> J.L. Robert, '1921: la scission fondatrice?', in *Le Mouvement Social*, 172, September 1995, pp. 101-108.
- <sup>23</sup> D. Calhoun, *The United Front: The TUC and the Russians, 1923-1928*, Cambridge: University Press, 1976.
- <sup>24</sup> Geert Van Goethem, 'An International Experiment of Working Women : The International Federation of Working Women, 1919-1924', in : Magaly Rodriguez Garcia (ed.), *Labour internationalism – Different Times, Different Faces*, Special Issue in *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire/Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis*, 84 (2006), pp. 1025-1047.
- <sup>25</sup> Patrick Pasture, *Histoire du Syndicalisme Chrétien International. La difficile recherche d'une troisième voie*, Paris : L'Harmattan, 1999
- <sup>26</sup> Geert Van Goethem, 'From Dollars to Deeds: Exploring the Sources of Active Interventionism, 1934-1945', in: Robert Waters and Geert Van Goethem (ed.), *American Labor's Global Ambassadors. The International History of the AFL-CIO during the Cold War*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013.
- <sup>27</sup> Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO, 1935-1955*, Chapel Hill/ University of North Carolina Press, 1995, pp. 262-264
- <sup>28</sup> Anthony Carew, Michel Dreyfus, Geert Van Goethem, Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick, Marcel van der Linden (ed.), *The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU)*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2000.
- <sup>29</sup> Daniel Maul, *Human Rights, Development and Decolonization. The International Labour Organization, 1940-1970*, ILO Century Series, New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012.