

Chapter One

Transport in the Late Nineteenth Century

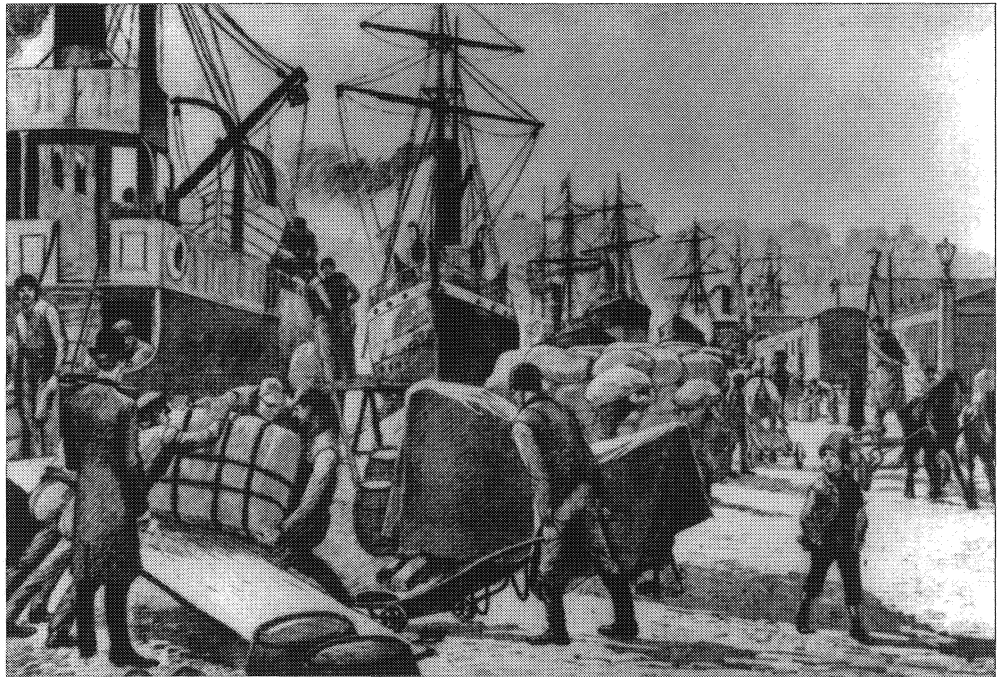
As the industrialisation of northern Europe gathered pace in the late nineteenth century, the foundations of what would become the modern world of transport were gradually being created.

Railways were continuing to spread their tentacles to every town and city, while steam-powered ships were beginning to deliver regular and reliable liner services on the main trade routes. The motor car was in the process of invention and development.

But although industrialisation had begun to provide great wealth for some, it left others in grinding poverty. Child labour was the norm, hours were long, job security for many trades was non-existent and pay was often just enough to sustain human life, but little more.

Workers in the transport industries were frequently at the bottom of the heap. Seamen and firemen of the coal-fired steam ships faced harsh discipline on board, were regularly cheated of their meagre wages and had to put up with

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A typical waterfront scene from the late nineteenth century.

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cramped accommodation and poor food. They had few rights and from wages as low as two shillings (10p) a day they would have to pay for their passage home as well as support themselves and their families.

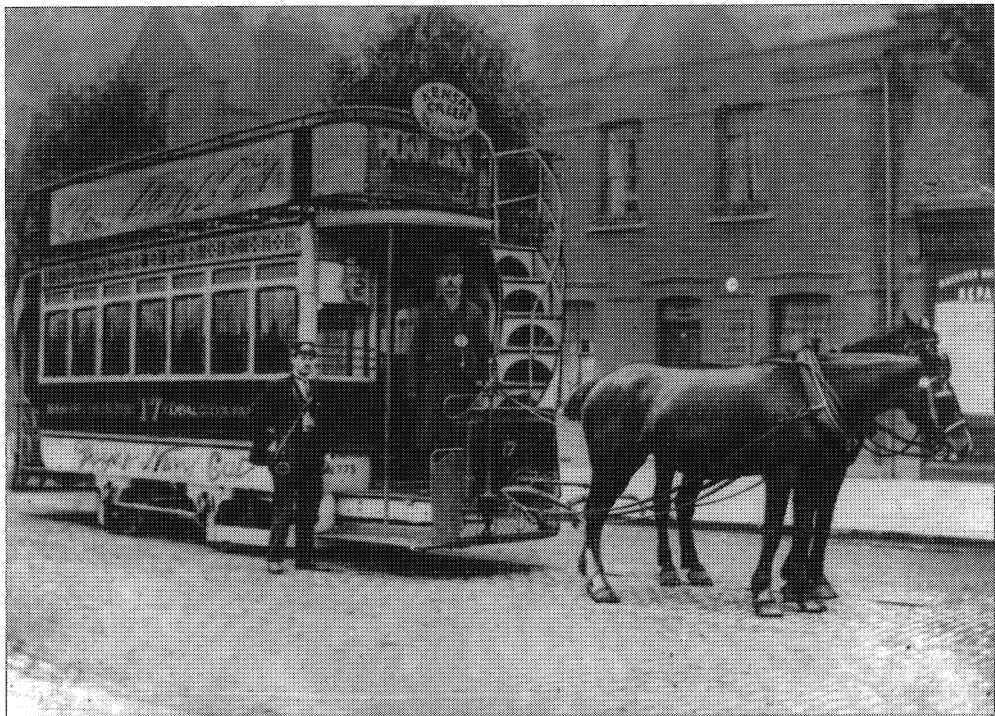
Dockers were also treated miserably. Records of the conditions of the Hamburg dockers at the time of the strike in 1896-7 showed why the workers were driven to demand a pay rise. The average wage was 1,050 Marks (£52.50) a year. Fares, rent, clothing, footwear and doctor's bills took care of much of this so that a family of five was left with 568 marks (£28.40) for food and other expenditure, about 1.7p per head a day.

Such conditions bred resentment, particularly when contrasted with the fabulous wealth that was being created by merchants and capitalists. The boom of the late 1880s encouraged the growth of resistance in more radical trade unions.

There began the first of several confrontations in a number of countries. One of the more notable, the London dock strike, led by Ben Tillett, Tom Mann - one of the most imposing figures of the early international labour movement - and John Burns, a socialist and agitator, only succeeded after a £150 donation from the Brisbane branch of the Australian Wharf Labourers' Union arrived at a critical moment. More than £30,000 was to be eventually donated to the strike fund from Australia, a huge sum at the time and the first positive example of international trade union co-operation.

Economic conditions in the second half of the nineteenth century were those of boom and depression. It was also a

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The last working horse tram in the United Kingdom pictured here in Paddington, London in August 1906.

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period of European imperialism where Britain, Germany and France were consolidating the colonialisation of large parts of the world. During an expansionary phase in the 1880s, the National Amalgamated Sailors' and Firemen's Union of Great Britain and Ireland experimented with activity abroad. The union established 15 branches in Northern and Western European harbours: Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey), the Suez Canal and on Malta and by 1890 a quarter of its members came from overseas.

International connections

Other transport workers had also begun to think internationally. The International Railwaymen's Study Committee, one of the first international trade union organisations, was founded in Paris in 1893 with a remit to exchange information on the conditions of railway workers throughout Europe.

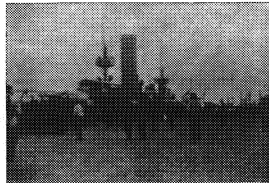
Even if they were not active socialists, most trade unionists in northern Europe would have been aware of the International Socialist Trade Union Congress, which was to take place in London in July 1896. The opportunity presented by the meeting was not lost on the seamen of Hamburg, who were probably the first to identify the potential for an international forum for seafarers.

Havelock Wilson, leader of Britain's National Sailors' and Firemen's Union, had been in regular contact with Charles Lindley, of the Swedish Transport Workers' Union. The two men had worked together in the north-east of England during Lindley's early career as a seaman. Wilson wrote to his friend on 11 April 1896 about the International meeting

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in London: 'There will of course be labour men present from all ports of the world. I have not heard as to whether there will be any from Stockholm or not? The seamen's union at Hamburg is sending its delegates and I have been requested by it that when the delegates are in London to avail myself of the opportunity and hold an international conference of the seamen. Do you think you could manage to have your society represented? It would be a great stroke of business if we could say there was an annual conference of sailors and firemen representing Sweden, Denmark, France and England.'

At the same time as he received the message from the Hamburg seamen, Wilson was in the middle of an aggressive recruitment campaign for his union. A docks dispute in Rotterdam was the final catalyst which made many begin to recognise the potential of an international organisation of seafarers and dockers.

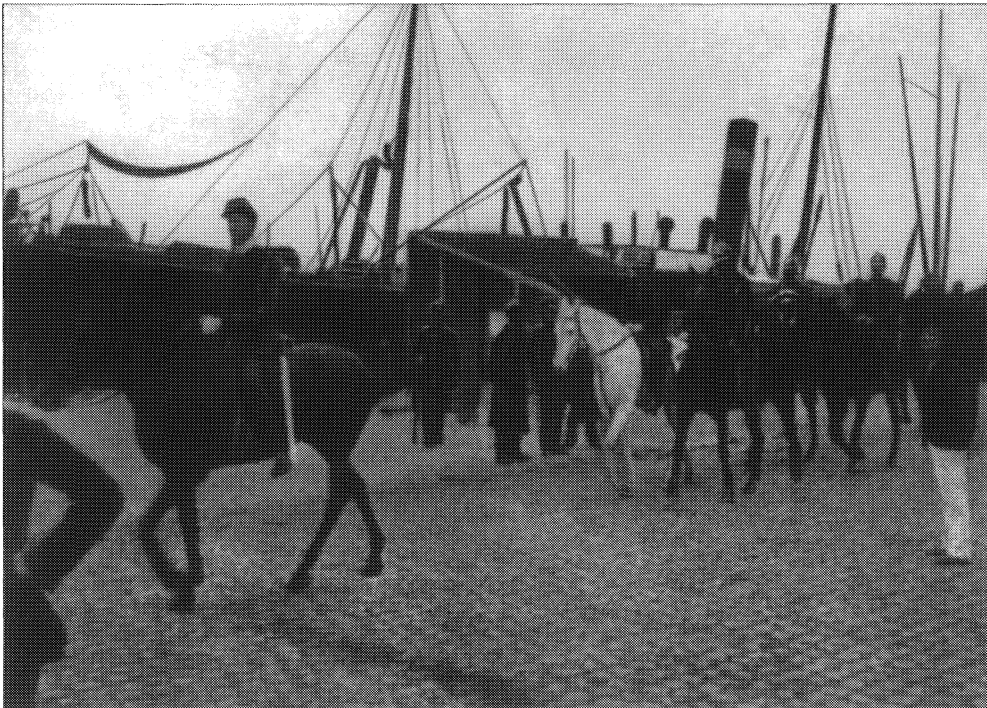


Another scene from the 1896 Rotterdam strike.

The Rotterdam strike had been caused by plans by the largest employer in the port to introduce a fixed wage of £1.50 a week, effectively cutting wages by 25 per cent. Any extra money earned by piece work would only be paid every 12 months and would be used to pay the bills for medical treatment and other emergency items. By the time the two Britons arrived, the whole port was on strike and the military had been called in by a nervous Burgemeester. Three of the largest ships of the Dutch Navy were lying at anchor.

Wilson found about 40 British ships caught up in the dispute and obtained a steam launch to visit every vessel telling the crews to attend a meeting that evening. Attended by 600 seafarers and striking dockers, the

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Mounted police patrol the waterfront in Rotterdam during the 1896 strike.

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meeting was closely observed by the police, who took copious shorthand notes, which resolved that British crews would refuse to load or discharge their cargoes until the strike was resolved.

Wilson's experiences in Holland and the formation of an Antwerp branch of the union in June had clearly strengthened his determination to exploit the 'great stroke of business' of an international conference. The *Seamen's Chronicle* of June 1896 had the story and clearly saw its international links in terms of an expansion of the British influence and a help in achieving domestic objectives: 'The Sailors' and Firemen's Union is peculiarly well adapted for the extension and consolidation of an international federation. Its members are continually visiting other countries and fraternising with foreign people and we hope to live to see the day when London shall be the headquarters of a great extensive and powerful international union of all sailors and firemen of whatever colour and race ... The general president, Mr J.H. Wilson, is an unequalled organiser of sailors and firemen and is just the man to stand at the head of the mightiest trade union the world has known.'

The founding fathers

As the date of the Socialist International grew nearer, Havelock Wilson, L.M. Johnson, Tom Mann and James Sexton, the Liverpool dockers' leader, met to plan a confederation and formed the organisation's Central Council. Mann was elected president. On 11 July, in a letter to the press signed by Mann and Johnson, reference was

THE Seamen's Chronicle.

The only Weekly Journal in the United Kingdom devoted to the Interests of The Seafaring Community and Kindred Industries.

Vol. III.—No. 123.

SATURDAY, MAY 23, 1896.

[ESTABLISHED AT STROTHERS' HALL.] ONE PENNY.

GREAT STRIKE OF DOCKERS AT ROTTERDAM!

FIFTY BRITISH SHIPS BLOCKED. CREWS ASKED TO WORK CARGO—THEY REFUSE.

MR. J. HAVELOCK WILSON, M.P., ON THE SCENE.

IRONCLADS LYING IN THE HARBOUR. FOOT AND CAVALRY SOLDIERS CALLED OUT.

Streets Blocked. Women Parade the Streets.

MR. L. M. JOHNSON SPEAKING FOR THE STRIKERS.

ENGLISH BLACKLEGS IMPORTED. BEFORE THE BURGEMEESTER.

DOCKERS WIN SPLENDID VICTORY.

OFF TO HOLLAND.
 Mr. Wilson, M.P., was lately engaged at Liverpool re-organizing and consolidating the branches of the Union in that port, when it came to his knowledge that the British sailors and firemen upon a certain vessel, which had just then returned to Liverpool from Rotterdam, had received notice to be discharged because they had refused to work the ship's cargo out when at Rotterdam. Mr. Wilson, with Mr. James Sexton and Mr. Ed. M. Hugh, of the Liverpool Dockers' Union, at once proceeded to the ship, saw the men, and learned that a big strike of dock labourers was progressing at Rotterdam, and that, in consequence, the British crew had very properly refused to work out the cargo, as by doing so they would have been assisting the Dutch employers to defeat the Dutch dockers. Mr. Wilson immediately proceeded to the office of the owners of the vessel, and after an interview with the agent, the agent's notice of discharge was unreservedly withdrawn. Subsequently communication was opened with the Central Committee of the Dutch strikers, and the result of it was that Mr. Wilson took train straight way to Harwich and left the same night for Rotterdam, arriving on Friday morning.

WITH THE STRIKERS.
 Early after breakfast Mr. Wilson visited the Central Committee Rooms of the "Vereniging Nederlandsche Houtwerkers" (Netherlands Boatworkers' Union), which is situated at the Boompjes, facing the Maas river, where he saw several members of the Committee who are conducting the strike. Needless to say, Mr. Wilson's reputation as a leader of British Trade Unions is by no means confined to the shores of England; he is known the world over, and no sooner was he recognized than he was received with cheering, and had an exceptionally cordial reception from the Dutch Strikers' Committee.

Mr. De Jong, the President of the Union, at once explained the situation which he briefly set out as follows:—In Rotterdam there are some 6,000 labourers, who call themselves boat workers, but they do the same work as English dock labourers. These men are severally employed by a number of merchants and shipping agents, who contract to load or unload vessels. The chief of these—a large employer of labour—is Mr. W. H. Muller, and he it is who has created all the trouble. The labourers have been paid by the job or by the piece, according to the firm they worked for, some at 25 cents (fivepence) per hour, others who work grain cargoes, at 10 cents (twopenny) per thirty baskets; those who work iron ore 7½ cents (one halfpenny) per ton between three men. Generally speaking the men working for W. H. Muller & Co. have been able to earn, by very hard work, £2 10s. 6d. per week, and the average wage earned by the dockers is nearly £2 per week. W. H. Muller & Co. suddenly gave notice to change all this.

WHY THE MEN STRUCK.
 He proposed to pay all his men 15 florins (30s.) 1/6) 30/ per week, and retain for 12 months the remainder of the money the men might have earned, and he proposed to pay their doctor's bills, &c., if he died in the interim, and hand over to the Dockers at the end of each 12 months anything that was left. This manipulation of the money which the men had worked for did not please the Dutch men; they not unreasonably failed to discover what would they were going to get by allowing W. H. Muller & Co. to retain 25 per cent. of their earnings. They refused to acquiesce and came out on strike. No sooner had they done so than the whole of the remaining dockers working for other firms who were not willing to make any change came out on strike in order to help their brother dockers. Now the fact was the fact! The Dutch dockers had dared to refuse work and accept any conditions

which their employers wished to impose. If a "pinner" had done this it would have been put down to "that fellow Wilson," or "those rascally agitators, Sexton, Tiltel, &c.," and the Free Labour gang would have been promptly requisitioned to supply a crowd of blacklegs. But a Dutchman daring to stand up boldly for his rights—monstrous! This must be put down with a strong hand. The men must be taught to keep their proper stations, they must be over-awed by a great show of force—"law and order" must be maintained, property must be protected, shipowners and merchants must be assisted in satisfying these rascally fellows who actually dared, in a continental city, to assert their manhood and demand the money which they had worked for!

SOLDIERS AND IRONCLADS!
 So De Burgemeester (the Mayor), Mr. J. S. Jacob, was approached by the employers, who demanded protection from the poor, quiet dockers, who were peacefully striking and creating no more disturbance than tame rabbits, and in a few hours the river-side of the city swarmed with soldiers and police, and three of the largest ironclads of the Dutch Navy came and lay off the town. Four battalions of the National Guard were called up, and placed in groups of thirty or forty, with fixed bayonets and a supply of ball-cartridges, at the ends of several streets. These were again supplied by large numbers of police, who carry swords, and generally the whole place looked like a besieged city. The Central Strike Committee Rooms are at 118, Boompjes, immediately facing the river, so the ironclads "brought to bay" the city, also the quay, and two of her great guns were laid so as to point threateningly at the Committee Rooms. This was the position when Mr. Wilson arrived upon the scene, and he looked particularly risky for "a foreigner" to interfere; but it was more than a parade of military and ironclads to frighten an old strike leader such as Mr.

Wilson. So he set to work to help the Dutch dockers forthwith. He was informed that there were about forty British steamships lying idle in the river and could not get discharged, and that the masters were compelling the British sailors and firemen to unload the cargoes. He took immediate and effective steps to stop this. Securing a steam launch, he went all over the Maas River and informed the sailors and firemen on each ship that he intended holding a meeting at night in Verkoopkalk Oostveet-plein (General Sale House).

WILSON ON THE MAAS RIVER.
 The moment Mr. Wilson was seen by the British sailors and firemen they rushed to the bulwark and cheered to the echo. This was repeated on each ship, and they all shouted out "God old Wilson! We'll come to the meeting, de!" The hall was crowded with about 600 sailors and firemen, captains, engineers and officers, and strikers. The police and soldiers were in groups at the entrance, and police and detectives, with shorthand writers, appeared inside the hall. The greatest excitement prevailed, and it was a wonder that the unnecessary display of soldiery did not lead to a serious riot. However, when Mr. Wilson mounted the platform, and the tremendous cheering had subsided, he began by counselling all the men to keep their heads, to be cool, and, above all things, to keep the peace and not give the authorities the slightest excuse for their unwarrantable, disgraceful, and unnecessary display of armed force. This good advice was received with cheer, and its significance was quickly appreciated. The meeting was a great success. Mr. Wilson delivered a logically and forcible speech, which had a visible effect upon all who heard it. The result of it was a resolution, proposed by a British fireman and seconded by a British sailor, that British crews shall refuse, during the continuance of the strike, to either load or unload any of the ships upon which they were engaged. This was

The front page of the British Seafarers' Union publication *The Seamen's Chronicle* reporting on the Rotterdam dock strike.

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made for the first time to the International Federation of Dock and River Workers.

Almost immediately, Wilson and Mann visited Rotterdam and Antwerp, organising seamen and informing dockers about the international federation. Representatives from both ports were invited to London later in the month for a fully international meeting of the central council of the international federation – thus qualifying it as the first ever meeting of what was to become the ITF. It was held at the Cranbourne Hotel, Charing Cross, on 27 July. Those present were Wilson, Mann, Tillett, L.M. Johnson (Britain), L. Janssens (Antwerp), Charles Lindley (Sweden), McGuire (New York), Albert Störmer (Hamburg), Henry Polak (Netherlands) and Louis Favert (France).

Probably ignorant of the part played by the Hamburg seamen in suggesting the meeting, L.M. Johnson attributed the beginnings of the ITF to a conversation among union leaders in London. He wrote in the September 1896 edition of *The Seamen's Chronicle*: 'It arose from an almost fortuitous meeting on the terrace of the House of Commons of Mr Havelock Wilson, MP, Mr R McGee, MP, Tom Mann and myself. As the result of a conversation, there was a meeting of delegates of the unions connected with the shipping and carrying trades in Anderton's Hotel, London, and it was decided to form a national federation of the whole of the unions of the trade. Whilst this was being carried out, a strike occurred at Rotterdam ... Mr Wilson ... on going over, was struck with the idea of making the movement international.'

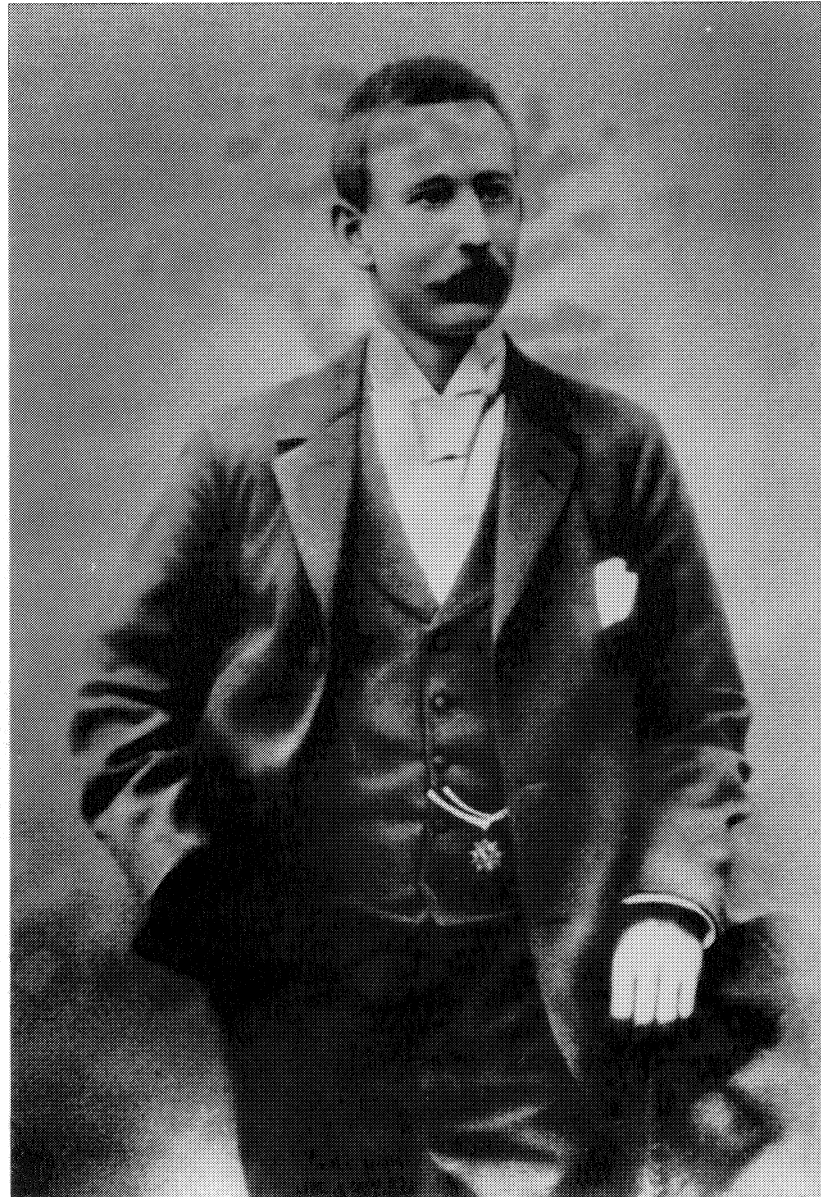
The election of Tom Mann as president ensured a bout of feverish activity which matched the grandiose vision of

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The reproduction of Charles Lindley's delegate card to the International Socialist and Trade Union Congress that was held in London on 27 July 1896. The ITF was founded during a fringe meeting of delegates to this congress.

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Charles Lindley at the time of the ITF's foundation.

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Havelock Wilson. Mann was an inspirational leader, whose oratory could enliven the largest gathering. A contemporary report of one of Mann's meetings in a 1895 edition of *Fortnightly Review* indicated his technique: 'He knows all the hardship of a labouring life; he knows all the discontents and resentments that labour broods over most sullenly; he know how frequently workmen hate the very ideas of having "a master"; and in this knowledge he deliberately touched his hearers on the raw, until they bayed with rage in response to the fierce, rancorous, sullen voice that seemed to be giving concentrated utterance to the deepest class-passions of their nature.'

Mann was to remain at the vanguard of the working-class movement for more than 50 years, visiting Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Russia, China, Canada and the United States as well as most European countries. Born in 1856, the son of a colliery bookkeeper, he started work at the age of eight. His mother died at the age of 38, when he was two, and at ten he was sent down the mine. Long 12-hour shifts were the norm until a fire closed his pit and his family moved to Birmingham where he was apprenticed to an engineer at the age of 14. It was here he began a process of self-education.

Ben Tillett was working in a brickyard at the age of six. He later became a casual worker on the docks in London and it was not until he was in his late teens that he learned to read and write. He was leader of his dockers' union for 30 years before it joined the amalgamation of 18 unions that was to form the Transport and General Workers' Union in 1922. He ended his career as a Labour MP and a member of the General Council of the TUC. Both Mann and Tillett were imprisoned for their trade union activities.



The ITF's first International Secretary Ben Tillett who was in office for a quarter of 1896. Until 1924 the chief position in the ITF Secretariat next to the President was the International Secretary. In 1924 the ITF decided to rename this position to General Secretary.

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ITF founder J. Havelock Wilson who was also a member of the British Parliament and the President of the main seafarers' union in Britain.

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The I.T.F.'s first President Tom Mann (1896 to 1901).

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Such colourful characters helped ensure that the new international was given enough momentum to survive longer than its initial burst of activity. Although not brilliant organisers, they were able to give the federation a high public profile.

The meeting on 27 July 1896 was followed two days later with a further international gathering during which reports were received from 87 ports in Europe and demands were drawn up to present to shipping and port employers. Tom Mann sketched out a vision of the future of the federation in August: 'We believe that it will become so powerful that it will be able to almost entirely abolish strikes and lock-outs in the shipping industries.'

The optimism and aggression continued in the federation's second-ever leaflet, published in October 1896: 'The order to our men is ... "prepare for action" ... , for there is no knowing at what hour the capitalists of the shipping industries may open fire. Let them. But remember through it all, our whole fight is not to fight down capitalists but to raise the standard of the workers, and if the latter be done by peaceful means so much the better, say we. If the employers by their stubborn refusal to negotiate, compel rougher work, then on their heads will rest the responsibility.'

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The INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION of SHIP, DOCK & RIVER WORKERS.

WHY THE FEDERATION WAS FORMED!

FELLOW WORKERS.—It is proposed by the Central Council of the International Ship, Dock and River Workers to issue leaflets from time to time explanatory of the policy to be pursued, and giving information concerning the International movement to the members of the Federated Unions.

The chief reasons why the Federation has been formed are as follows:—

FIRST.—Because the great variation in wages paid for the same work in different ports, and even the serious differences that prevail in the same port, have been a constant source of dissatisfaction among members of the various Unions, and oftentimes among members of the same Union; and, in addition, the employers of certain ports have been seriously handicapped against those in other ports where the rates are considerably lower. The Federation, therefore, aims at the gradual elimination of these causes of dissatisfaction to both employers and workmen, by a steady general levelling-up policy that shall tend to give all a fair field and no favour.

SECOND.—Because of the serious reductions in wages that have taken place during the past few years in the Shipping Trades, and the additional burden of toil that has been forced on the men generally; the wages of Sailors and Firemen having been reduced in many cases by more than £1 per month, and the number of men in the Mercantile Marine having been reduced by over 20,000 men during the past five years, although the tonnage under the British Flag is considerably greater now than five years ago. And in the Docks in London, the Dock Companies have, by their tricky system of piece work and mongrel co-operation, added to the labour of the men in such a way that their condition in this direction is worse than at any previous period. The Federation will seek to at once put a stop to this downward tendency, and, by combined action in the interests of all sections alike, will jealously guard the interests of all.

THIRD.—Because as a result of the general combination of employers, they have been able often to fight and beat the sectional organisations of the men; and the most devoted and hardest workers in each of the Unions are unanimously of opinion that only by a genuine Federation of existing sectional Unions can the workers get the requisite general fighting machinery to effectually cope with the organised employers.

FOURTH.—Because we hold that the workers have every right to share in the increased prosperity of the world. In the United Kingdom we know for a certainty that the state of trade is such as to warrant reasonable demands being made, and there is no justifiable reason why Dock and Waterside workers should be content with their present inadequate earnings and the slipshod methods under which they are employed. By means of Federation we shall be able to get over the question of "one man, one ticket"; by Federation we shall be able to get working hours better regulated, excessive overtime stopped, and such as must be worked to be reasonably paid for.

These, Fellow Unionists, are a few of the many reasons as to why the Federation has been formed, and we earnestly hope that every Union not yet federated will lose no time in becoming connected, and we specially ask that every member of every Federated Union shall at all times while at work, and seeking work, loyally wear the Federation badge, indicating, as it will, that the wearer is not only a member of a Union, but also that the Union he belongs to is properly Federated, and that, not to harm any one but to add to the well-being of all.

LONG LIFE TO THE FEDERATION!

Issued on behalf of the CENTRAL COUNCIL.

Offices—5, PALACE CHAMBERS, BRIDGE STREET, WESTMINSTER.

LEAFLET No. 1.—SEPT. 1899.

Federation Printing Works, 35, Clerkenwell Road, E.C.

Examples of three early English language leaflets produced by the ITF.

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Telephone: "DOCKERS," LONDON.



INTERNATIONAL
Transport Workers' Federation.
Kindly note change of Address:
425, MILE END ROAD, LONDON, E.

TO THE PRESIDENTS, SECRETARIES, EXECUTIVE COUNCILS, AND MEMBERS OF
UNIONS CONNECTED WITH THE TRANSPORT WORK OF THE WORLD,

WE GIVE YOU GREETING,
AND INVITE YOU TO AN
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE,
TO BE HELD IN AMSTERDAM, AUGUST 10TH, BY THE
INTERNATIONAL TRANSPORT WORKERS' FEDERATION.

The objects of the Federation are to found an International Combination of Transport Workers on a Trade Union basis, to establish Bureaus of Correspondence and Information, to organise Active Assistance in case of any Maritime Trade Dispute, to promote Legislation for the Protection of Transport Workers on Land and Sea in the several countries where transport workers are organised.

We desire to form an International Comradeship, to protect the worker internationally against the machinations of International Capitalism.

The already splendid history and work of the Transport Federation entitles us to seek your active co-operation in further increasing the usefulness of our work, ensuring systematic help during a period of industrial dispute in any part of the world connected with shipping or land transport. We earnestly seek your immediate attention and co-operation in appointing delegates and forwarding resolutions dealing with agenda for Amsterdam Conference.

The following resolution explains my present position as Secretary of the International Transport Federation, occasioned by the resignation of Mr. Tom Chambers, and I shall need your practical help and comradeship in the task.

PROVISIONAL AGENDA.

The resolution is as follows:—

"That Mr. Ben Tillett be appointed as secretary *pro tem.* until the next Conference, when a Secretary will be appointed."—(London Conference, February 12th, 1904.)

1. Constitution of Conference.
2. Secretary's Report as to the position of the Federation.
3. Organisation and Agitation in different countries.
4. Influence of Trusts, Cartels, and Associations of Employers on the wages and general conditions of the workers on Sea and Land.
5. Social Legislation for the Transport Workers of all Countries.

SPECIAL NOTE.—All resolutions and nominations to be in before June 1st, 1904.

BEN TILLETT.

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SUNDAY'S DEMONSTRATIONS.

TWO MONSTRE

DEMONSTRATIONS

WILL BE HELD IN

VICTORIA PARK

AND

SOUTHWARK PARK,

On **SUNDAY NEXT, November 15th,**

Under the auspices of

The International Federation of Ship, Dock, and River Workers.

The Speakers at SOUTHWARK PARK will be:

J. H. WILSON, M.P.,
R. McGHEE, M.P.,
W. M. THOMPSON, L.C.C. (REYNOLDS' NEWSPAPER) ^{Editor}
W. CROOKS, L.C.C.,
TOM McCARTHY,
R. BANNER, AND J. KELLY.

Speaking to commence at 8.15 p.m.

Chairman, No. 1 Platform **F. FOSTER.**
Chairman, No. 2 Platform **A. HARRIS.**

→* **PROCESSIONS** *←

with Bands and Banners, will start from **DEPTFORD BROADWAY** and **LONDON BRIDGE** (Tooley Street) at 1.30 p.m., and will meet at the "Red Lion," Lower Road, Rotherhithe, and then proceed to the Park.