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Chapter Eleven

The Cold War

Many ITF affiliates in Eastern and Central Europe were never allowed to resume an active role after the Second World War, which left their countries under Soviet control. The Czechoslovak national centre took an early cue from the Communist group in the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) and roundly declared in May 1946 that the ITF should be wound up. The nominal Polish membership was formally ended in September 1947 and the Hungarians failed to reappear at all following the war.

By 1948 it must have seemed impossible that anyone could have had the faith of the early pioneers of the WFTU, who had hoped to form a world organisation of all workers. The ITF congress opened in Oslo that year less than three weeks after the Americans, French and British had begun the airlift of supplies to their beleaguered zones in Berlin, in response to the Soviet road and rail blockade. Hans Jahn, leader of the German railwaymen's union and a man the Nazis had beaten and imprisoned before he escaped to spend the war in exile, declared: 'We will have neither brown Bolshevism nor red Fascism.'

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The ITF 1948 congress in Oslo, Norway.

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The Berlin crisis was the first of the confrontations between East and West to offer a real threat of a new world war. But even without it, the European recovery plan - 'Marshall Aid' - had shattered whatever superficial unity the WFTU had pretended still to maintain. To the Communists, this plan for a massive injection of American economic aid to the European economy was nothing but a capitalist putsch. The plan's inauguration in June 1947 had been followed soon afterwards, in October 1947, by the founding of a formal Communist alliance, the Cominform in Belgrade.

The vast majority of the ITF's affiliates were unqualified supporters of the plan. The General Council of the ITF adopted a resolution in November 1947 pledging the ITF's support in its implementation, and decided the ITF should call a special conference of transport workers' unions in the countries concerned. That conference was held in Luxembourg at the beginning of April 1948 and expressed the participants' appreciation of the American government's generosity. It confirmed the transport workers' wholehearted co-operation.

The ITF's position was put beyond any doubt at the Oslo congress when two guests, the labour advisers to the main operational arm of the plan, the European Co-operation Administration (ECA), were warmly welcomed. One of them was Bert Jewell, who only shortly before had been an American railway workers' representative on the ITF executive committee, the first American ever to be a member. He assured the congress that the ECA looked on labour 'not as a commodity ... but as human beings' and the success of the plan could only be measured by the good it did for the workers.

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Reint Laan Sr of the Dutch transport workers thought he could already put a figure on the benefits of the plan, declaring that the Dutch standard of living would be 25 per cent lower without it. In his presidential address, Omer Becu described the Marshall Plan as a generous and enlightened effort to prevent Europe's economic ruin. The ITF ought not only to offer its total co-operation in seeing it through but had to 'fight uncompromisingly the forces which still strive to sabotage it'.

The great majority of the ITF's affiliates were by now uninhibited in their anti-Communist stance. The ITF, in turn, was regularly lambasted by representatives of the WFTU as 'fascist beasts', 'foul hirelings of the warmongers' and 'infamous traitors of the working classes'.

One particular industrial dispute opened the wound. A strike called by the ITF-affiliated Canadian Seamen's Union (CSU) in 1949 highlighted the divisions. The union was fighting to protect its members and to prevent heavy reductions in the Canadian merchant fleet (which was then the third largest in the world). The Canadian government saw the CSU's leadership as dominated by Communists seizing the opportunity to make political capital and to disrupt the implementation of the Marshall Plan by bringing chaos or paralysis to the West European waterfronts. The significance of the strike was soon to extend far beyond its domestic dimensions because of the eagerness with which activists overseas organised solidarity actions. Britain's Labour government, coping with a desperately fragile economy, used the army to unload some of the strike-bound vessels. The ITF refused to back the strike and in a dishonourable alliance with the US and Canadian governments encouraged CSU's members to

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join the newly-created Canadian district of the Seafarers' International Union (SIU) of North America. The ITF's executive committee created what it called a 'vigilance committee', made up of two seafarers' and two dockers' representatives, with the task of identifying and countering Communist disruption in European ports. It was supplemented and served by three regional committees and a special fund, opened to meet these expenses, attracted substantial donations.

The CSU strike was defeated and the Canadian merchant fleet all but vanished along with the union. CSU members on the East Coast either joined the new SIU or left seafaring. On the West Coast, the remnants of the CSU regrouped as Local 400 of the ITF-affiliated Canadian Brotherhood of Railway, Transport and General Workers (CBRT). Along with the longshoremen in the Canadian ILWU, Local 400 has been a bulwark of the ITF's Flag of Convenience campaign (see Chapter 14) - every single Vancouver ITF Inspector appointed since the 1970s has come from 'Vocal 400'.

Gradually, however, the friction became less intense as the Cold War became an accepted, if unacknowledged, 'normality'. The problem was partly exported as each camp sought to influence other countries in the world. One of the reasons for an increase in ITF activity in the 'regions' was the fear of Soviet influence. The report on activities for 1952 and 1953 was convinced the regions must not be left to fend for themselves. They were being 'penetrated' by outside forces and would be pulled into whatever orbit exerted the strongest pull. A network of regional offices would allow the ITF to organise moral and material

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support and so develop and strengthen transport workers' unions.

One area of concern was the Pacific, where a conference was organised in 1959 by two of the most powerful of the world's dockers' unions: the American International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU), led by Australian-born Harry Bridges, the dominant dockers' union on the Pacific coast of the USA; and the Australian Waterside Workers' Federation (WWF), led by Jim Healy. The third party was the host, the All-Japan Dockworkers' Union. The conference decided to set up a 'Permanent Liaison Committee' and the ITF feared the emergence of what promised to be a potent rival in the region.

Today, the ILWU and the Australian WWF (who have now merged with Australian seamen) are important, active and much respected members of the ITF family. The Japanese dockers joined in 1996.