

# **SOLIDARITY**

## Chapter Twelve

### **Decolonisation and the Regions**

The desire to spread the influence of the ITF beyond Europe had been apparent before the start of the Second World War. But Edo Fimmen's visits abroad and his commitment to anti-colonialism had yet to pay dividends in terms of increased affiliations and rising membership.

During the war the recruitment effort was naturally slowed. Even so, 32 unions from 15 non-European and four European countries affiliated between 1939 and 1945. At the end of the conflict the ITF was in remarkably healthy shape, with 47 effective affiliates from 20 countries. There was also a new urgency in calls for a wider constituency for the international trade unionists.

Part of the reason was an idealistic support for the growing number of independence movements. The hearts and emotions of European and North American trade unionists were always going to be on the side of those seeking liberation from colonialism. A resolution at the first congress after the war, in Zurich in 1946, declared support for 'countries which are in an early stage of trade union

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development' so that they could have 'a decent standard of living'.

However, the second half of the resolution disclosed a second motive behind European concern for the well-being of trade unionists in the 'early stages of development'. Here was the same unashamed self-interest that had led to calls to deal with the 'yellow peril' 50 years earlier – a statement that colonial workers should not be 'used as a lever to reduce the standards of the workers in the more industrially developed countries'.

As the Cold War grew in intensity, a missionary air imbued the enterprise. The introduction to the report on activities for 1950 and 1951 said it was more necessary than ever for the ITF to concern itself with 'parts of the world where workers live in abject poverty ... mercilessly exploited by a capitalistic ruling class'. The fact that politics was as important as such calls to a higher morality was demonstrated by the following year's report, which showed that money spent from the 'Edo Fimmen Free Trade Union Reconstruction Fund' in 1950 and 1951 on the Asian (Bombay) and Latin American (Havana) offices amounted to £836 and £833 respectively, whereas £1,051 went to France and £1,000 to Italy, countries where battles were being fought against Communist-dominated trade unions.

The London congress of 1954 amended the ITF constitution to oppose 'colonialism', while two years later in Vienna there were 37 delegates from 14 non-European countries. The congress gave the executive committee power to co-opt up to four members and thus give representation to regions whose votes at congress were

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The 23rd ITF congress in London in 1954.

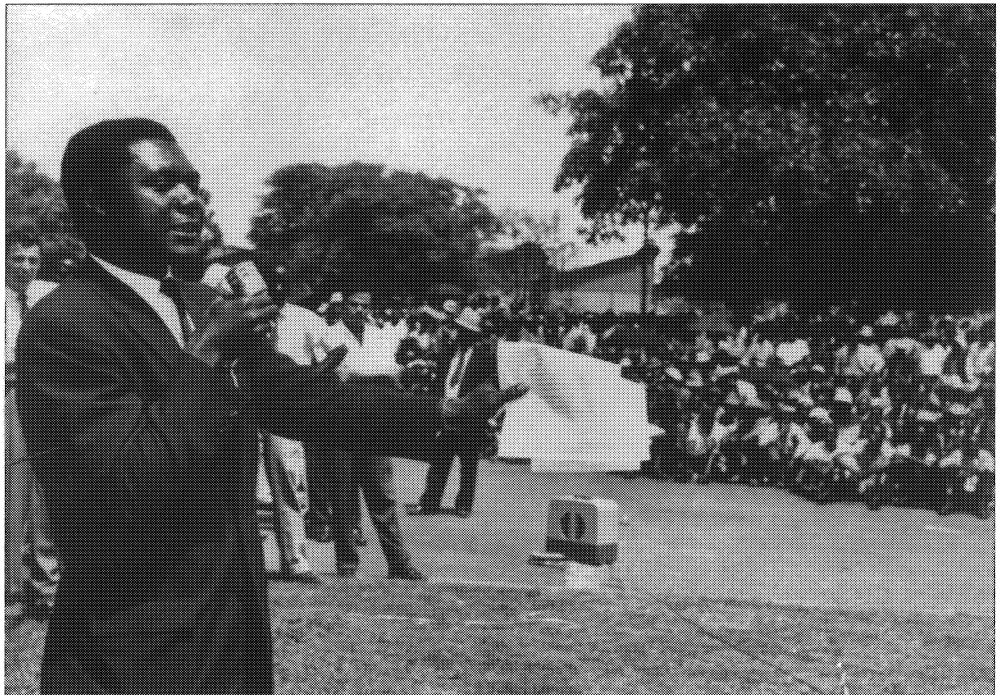
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too few to secure election. All the co-opted members had the same rights as elected members and their arrival – J.D. Randeri from India, Syndulpho Pequeno from Brazil and Michael Labinjo from Nigeria – marked a change in attitude. A second resolution favoured the founding of an African office, but this did not follow until after a visit to several African states by Omer Becu, then general secretary. An account of the mission, entitled ‘Still the Dark Continent’, in the monthly *ITF Journal* exposed the colonial and racist views of many of the European organisations in Africa.

Omer Becu concluded that the growing black trade union movement needed assistance to establish itself and to improve the conditions of its members. ‘Our task at this time is to convince the African worker by our actions that the workers of Europe and America are his brothers, and that they have nothing in common with the handful of racialists, who represent no-one but themselves and their own selfish interests,’ he wrote on his return. ‘That will not be an easy task, for the African has a natural distrust of the white man, born of long and unpleasant experience.’

The ITF had no permanent representation and few affiliates, although the Rhodesian Railway Workers’ Union, catering for European employees, had been a member of the ITF since 1930. The Kenya Railway African Union affiliated in 1954 and by 1958 the ITF had 15 African member unions. Michael Labinjo from the Nigerian Transport Staff Union, who had been co-opted to the ITF executive committee, was appointed as regional representative of the ITF in an ICFTU office in Lagos. He resigned after one year and the executive committee

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Tom Mboya, General Secretary of the Kenyan Federation of Labour, addressing a meeting during the 1959 strike of East African railway workers.

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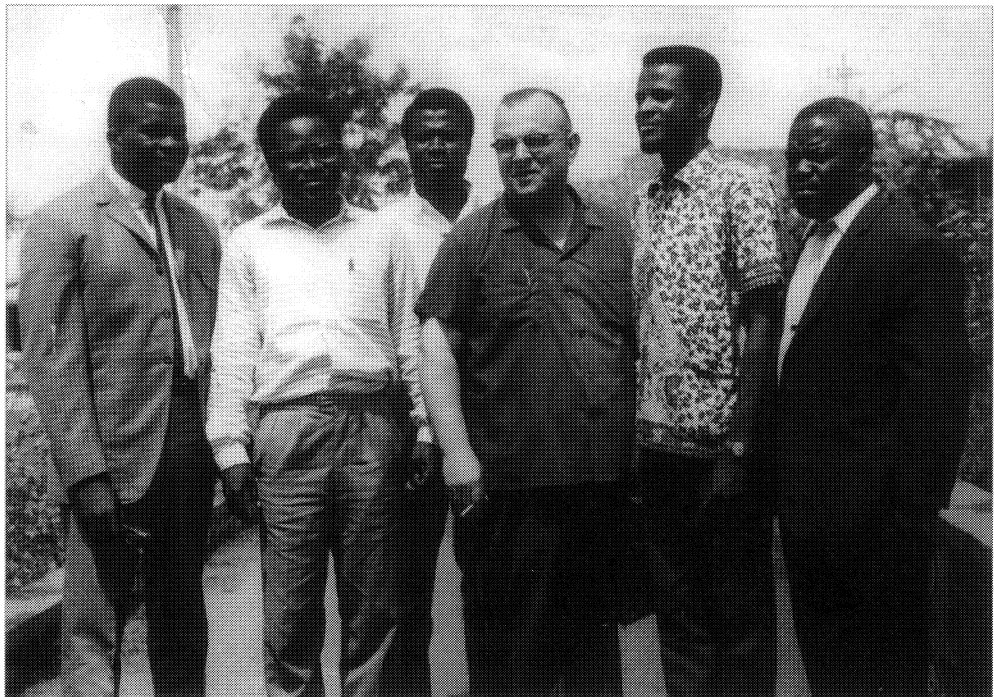
decided that his successor - Emile Laflamme - should be full-time.

A gradual spread of independence for many African countries did not make the ITF's job any easier. New leaders and rulers often fell foul of the military and many did not appreciate the power and influence of a free trade union movement. Problems arose with pro-Western unions in Ghana before Dr Kwame Nkrumah, himself a former seaman and ex-member of the National Maritime Union of the United States, was overthrown in 1966. Meanwhile, the ITF regional office had to steer a delicate political line in Nigeria itself, with the union movement split between Communists and non-Communists.

Few contacts had been made with African unions before the war, but efforts to attract affiliates in Asia had begun much earlier and had a more substantial base. A 'Regional Information Office' was set up in Bombay early in 1949, but was hampered by the ITF's priority in Asia at the time of preventing 'cheap competition' on the world's maritime labour market. The previous year, George Reed, an official of the British NUS, had been sent by the Federation to Singapore, with the task of persuading the government to clean up and control seafarers' recruitment and engagement.

The event that was to set the ITF's Asian activities on a more determined and organised course was the holding of the 'First Asian Transport Workers' Conference' in Tokyo in April 1955. The attendance was drawn from 26 unions in Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaya, Pakistan and the Philippines. The discussions centred on trade union rights and freedom of association, with specific reference

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The ITF's first African representative Emile Laflamme in Ghana at the end of 1966 with representatives of the Ghanaian transport workers' unions.

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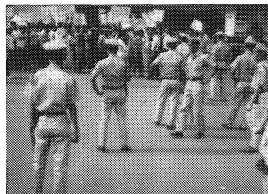
A reception organised by the Nigerian Motor Drivers' Union and Allied Transport Workers for ITF Assistant General Secretary Harold Lewis during his visit to Nigeria in June 1967 (Lewis became ITF General Secretary in 1977 and served until 1993, making him the ITF's second longest serving General Secretary next only to Edo Fimmen).



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to the rights of Japanese transport workers in the publicly-owned services.

Two months later, the ITF opened an Asian office in Tokyo. This was followed by a further office in Singapore in 1959. The Japanese National Railways Workers' Union (Kokoro) was at the heart of the struggle for trade union rights in the public corporations - a fight identified with the Japanese government's refusal to ratify the ILO's Convention 87, the most basic of all the ILO's instruments. The ITF had lent its total support to Kokoro, which had lost many members who had been victimised for backing their union by strike action. Even so, the Japanese affiliated membership stood at some 418,000 by the end of 1959.



The Manila port strike of 1962 – police are seen being mobilised against a rally of striking dock workers.

Although the Indian and the Japanese memberships were the twin pillars of the ITF's Asian organisation, the Philippines Transport and General Workers' Organisation (PTGWO), led by Roberto S. ('Bert') Oca, provided support in the south-east. At the time, all the big Australian transport workers' unions and most of New Zealand's found the ITF politically unattractive.

Across the world in Latin America, the ITF had established a presence in the 1920s, when it had affiliates in Argentina and Brazil. But a fresh start was needed after the war, and the ITF was represented at the founding conference of the Inter-American Confederation of Labour (CIT) in Lima in January 1948. Trifón Gómez, once the leader of the Spanish Railwaymen's Union and a former member of the Spanish Republican Government, made a tour of several Latin American countries and was well received. Early in 1949, the ITF started to issue one of its publications, 'Press Report', in Spanish and the ITF convened the "First Latin

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Japanese taxi drivers, members of the ITF, protesting against appalling working conditions in a rally in April 1959 in Japan.

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American Transport Workers' Conference" in Havana, Cuba, in September 1949.

The conference was very well attended - some 50 delegates from 28 unions in no fewer than 17 countries - and it prompted a number of new affiliations. An ITF regional office for Latin America opened for business in Mexico in April 1955 under Trifón Gómez, while a conference of the Zonal Presidents in Mexico City was



The ITF Brazilian representative Jack Otero lecturing in Puerto Rico in 1964. Otero later became ITF Regional Secretary for Latin America and the Caribbean as well as a member of the ITF Executive Board.

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planned for six months later. The event was overshadowed by the sudden death of Gómez only three days before the meeting was due to start. He was greatly mourned, for he had represented so staunchly the pride, courage and spirit of Republican Spain and its socialist trade union movement.



ITF General Secretary Omer Becu addressing the first Latin American Regional Transport Workers' conference in Mexico City in October 1955.