

SOLIDARITY

Chapter Three

The Move to Germany

The burst of initial enthusiasm and optimism shown by the early leaders of the ITF could not last. Virtually all the work had been done on a voluntary basis and most of those involved had other full-time jobs. The defeat of the Hamburg dock strike also sapped morale and dented the appeal of joint international action. National federations turned inwards and concentrated their efforts on securing their own firm foundations.



ITF founder Tom Chambers was ITF International Secretary from 1896 to 1904 and also ITF President from 1901 to 1904.

Before the Paris congress in 1900, the first rumblings of discontent began to emerge about the lack of activity and apparent disorganisation of the ITF's leadership in London. Two years later, in Stockholm, the argument became public. Criticism was levelled over the state of the organisation - with the counter-accusation that the president and secretary were impoverished and receiving no wages.

Tom Mann left for what was to be a ten-year trip to Australia in 1901. His place was taken by Tom Chambers, who was also an official of the NSFU. Although Chambers did not have Mann's charismatic appeal, he was considered

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a competent administrator, working under difficult conditions.

Charles Lindley, chairman of the Stockholm congress in 1902, outlined the consequences of a decision taken in 1900 in Paris to cut the contribution rate from 1d per member to 1/2d per member. 'It was impossible to extend propaganda activities. There was not even enough money to pay a living wage to Tom Mann and his deputy secretary, Tom Chambers, or, for that matter, to meet normal office expenses,' he said later.

He recalled that the federation had a deficit of 2,000 Kroner (£111 at 1902 exchange rate). 'As a result, Tom Mann found it necessary to earn his living by other means, and so he took over a small pub called "The Enterprise" near the Strand in London. It became a busy meeting place for many idealists and reformers. However, the publican's life was not for Tom Mann and he therefore gladly accepted an offer to go to New Zealand and later Australia as a trade union organiser.'

Charles Lindley's account of the 1902 congress also demonstrated some of the social difficulties trade unionists worked under. The conference had 20 delegates from six countries and was held in the newly built home of the Swedish Labour Movement - Folkets Hus or People's House. There was a difficulty with interpreters. 'We needed a Dutch interpreter for the Congress, so we applied to a bureau which helped foreigners in Sweden to obtain employment. In reply, they wrote that they had asked their workers if any of them were willing to interpret for us, but that nobody on their books wanted to have anything to do with the "so-called People's House". "Our workers," said the

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The second formal congress of the ITF that was held in Paris from 19-21 September 1900.

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The third ITF congress that met 4–7 July 1902 in Stockholm, Sweden.

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letter, "want to do their duty and live in peace with God and mankind". In other words, they did not want to give any assistance to such dangerous desperadoes as ourselves.'

The Stockholm congress failed to resolve any of the outstanding tensions within the ITF, particularly a growing conflict between the German unions, who stressed the need for organisation before action, and the more idealistic British leadership. The financial position continued to be miserable. Tom Chambers' appeal for unions to meet their affiliation fees fell on stony ground. The office of the ITF was moved from central London to a private house in Ilford, on the eastern outskirts. This was almost certain to have been Chambers' home, and was done to cut costs.

Chambers struggled on for another 12 months. Then, in 1903, he made it clear that he wanted to resign. A full central council meeting in February 1904 accepted his resignation. Paul Müller, of the German seamen, alleged that he had neglected his duties. Ben Tillett agreed to take over as president until the next congress, to be held in August in Amsterdam. The question of the ITF headquarters was also raised, but postponed.

Faced with such an immediate leadership crisis, the Amsterdam congress presented an opportunity for reform. The German unions were well prepared and put forward proposals for a new all-German five-man central council. The headquarters of the ITF was to be moved to Hamburg (later to Berlin). Hermann Jochade, of the railway workers, was appointed president and the only full-time officer. Johann Döring, of the Hamburg dockers, was vice-president, and Paul Müller secretary.

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The Swedish Transport and Dockers' Union strike committee in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1897.

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The meeting also adopted a new strategy of non-intervention in national disputes, building up organisational strength instead. Success soon followed. Membership doubled as the Italian railwaymen and the International Longshoremen's Association and the International Seamen's Union of America, headed by Andrew Furuseth, were recruited. Regular news sheets were issued from Berlin and it was clear that the recruitment net was being cast well beyond the European maritime industries.

Way back in 1896, one of the first acts of the central council had been to despatch Edward McHugh, of the Liverpool National Dock Labourers' Union, to New York to make contact with American unions. He was instrumental in the formation of the American Longshoremen's Union in October 1896. Although few other missions were quite as fruitful, Tom Mann was prolific in his contacts with trade unionists overseas. He was convinced of the need for greater organisation and stressed the importance of international co-operation at every opportunity.

Strong economic conditions in 1906 and 1907 assisted the growth in trade unions and by the end of 1907 the ITF had grown to 500,000 members, compared with 150,000 two years earlier. The affluence of the organisation allowed affiliates to pay out voluntarily Dm23,552 (approximately £11,000 at that time) to assist disputes between 1906-8, a figure roughly equal to that raised in annual affiliation fees.

Despite its success in expanding the membership, the leadership continued to be criticised for its conservatism - Jochade was nicknamed 'Der Bummelzug' (the slow train) by Austrian transport unions. Jochade gave a flavour of his

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attitude in a foreword to the 1913 congress in London: 'The International Federation has developed into a powerful body which will continue to expand provided it continues to follow the path mapped out for it by the past seven international Congresses. However, should it allow itself to be diverted from this well-tryed path by impatient people for whom nothing happens quickly enough, or permit itself to be misused for experiments, then the further development of the ITF will soon be halted.'

Debates within the ITF partly reflected the growing international tensions on the eve of the First World War. The Italians, French and British were the most outspokenly critical of the German leadership. The French complained that the German idea of trade unions was more of beneficial associations than 'organs of the class struggle'. H. Guinchard, of the French transport workers, said that Jochade's report attacked everything that did not fit the German model. While he admitted that the German trade union system 'may be good, it may be admirable', he added: 'I do not deny that it has brought many advantages to the German workers: better wages, shorter working hours, but your system is not enough for us. Your system is one of social peace. Our unions are permeated by the revolutionary ideals of the French people. They are aiming not just at ephemeral successes, but at the transformation of society itself.'

August Forstner, of the Austrian Transport Workers' Union, defended the leadership and was less than enthusiastic about calls for revolution: 'The employers are not in the least impressed by revolutionary speeches ... you don't achieve very much by union leaders togging themselves up in red shirts and ties.'

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Following the congress the attacks on the leadership continued. An article in 1913, in the Italian railway workers' journal, did not mince its words: 'The ITF, faithful to its programme of doing nothing and trying nothing, remains silent. It continues to send us its useless information bulletin every week. There is no thought, opinion, or word of condemnation or praise for those organisations which, like ours, have demonstrated that they were formed to do something.'

Criticism was constant until the outbreak of war ruled all such concerns irrelevant. During the first few months of the conflict, Jochade hoped to keep the ITF alive, particularly as membership passed one million in July 1914. 'We shall try, so far as circumstances and the restraints imposed upon us by the condition of the war allow, to re-establish the old relations with those of our comrades in neutral states,' he said in a statement in October.

Doubts were quickly expressed about the extent of trade union freedom in Germany. Robert Williams, general secretary of the National Transport Workers' Federation, supported by the French, suggested a move to England. The public response from Jochade was that there would be as many problems in a British headquarters as there were with a German one. But his private thoughts were of a different vein, as expressed in a letter to Charles Lindley, of the Swedish Transport Workers' Union. He dismissed Robert Williams: 'All in all, he seems to have little notion of trade union questions. That, however, is not really surprising since until a few years ago he lived in Swansea, was a coal worker and part-time local councillor, and in addition had a minor post in a small organisation of some 3,000 members (National Amalgamated Labourers' Union)

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which shot up like a mushroom after 1911. Things were not much better once they had set up the national federation. At its head they put Williams, a man without a vestige of trade union experience - yet another proof of how lightly trade union activity is taken in England. And this man, who has never been anywhere and, with the exception of the last two years, has never done anything, who is completely under the influence of his wife - a Suffragette infected by anarchist ideas - wants to save the ITF from the hands of the Germans. In this, of course, there is a little of the old hatred of the Germans, which, since 1904, has never quite disappeared and is now taking on a new lease of life.'

The Dutch proposed moving the headquarters to a neutral country (the Netherlands), but this also did not find favour in Berlin. However, a sub-secretariat was established at the headquarters of the Dutch Federation of Trade Unions, where Jan Oudegeest was to act largely as a post-box for unions in belligerent countries to correspond with Berlin. 'The fortress of the transport workers, the completion of which has been worked upon during the last 10 years, must not be destroyed by flames of race hatred,' said Johan Brautigam, leader of the Dutch seamen's union.

The strains between British and German trade unionists were considerable as they sniped at each other's support for their own country's war efforts. Jochade was called up in October 1915 and went to fight in Flanders. L. Brunner was appointed his successor. The Weekly Report continued to be issued occasionally during 1916. After December 1916 there was no trace of activity of either the central council or the Berlin secretariat. War had made the ITF silent for the first time for 20 years.