

SOLIDARITY

Chapter Four

'The Yellow Peril'

The appeal of international solidarity struck a chord with the founders of the ITF, despite the fact that they lived in a world dominated by imperial and colonial attitudes. It was not long before the ITF became involved in issues of race. Edward McHugh in New York, for example, tried from the beginning to accommodate racial and national feelings among longshoremen. His aim was to create a single organisation to include all the different ethnic groups established on the East Coast. His efforts were exceptional, because racist feelings were so strong that even unions drifted away from their original commitment to integrated organisations.

During the 1902 ITF congress in Stockholm it was decided to organise 'coloured' transport workers. However, a call six years later in Vienna for increased activity to recruit and issue propaganda among 'foreign-tongued and coloured seamen' developed into a heated exchange full of anti-Chinese and Japanese sentiments. The attack was led by Andrew Furuseth, of the International Seamen's Union of the United States. Himself a Norwegian-born immigrant, he said his union had nothing against the employment of

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'Negro' seamen, but 'it would be impossible to tolerate the yellow race on American ships - that would mean handing over all our jobs to them'. His remarks provoked a strong reaction from many delegates, but Charles Lindley, leader of the Swedish Transport Workers, sprang to his defence: 'It has been said that Furuseth is no socialist, but I am firmly against socialism being used as a dogma to justify over-population by the yellow race ... They have been living in their own way for a large number of years and it is not possible to persuade them to reach a higher level of culture.'

The Norwegian seamen's union was bitter in its response, saying Lindley's union had recently opposed the employment of Polish seamen on Swedish ships. Paul Müller, of the German seamen, summarised what was the most common attitude towards non-European seafarers by saying that all delegates were against undercutters or strikebreakers, but if seamen of any nationality were willing to work for European or American wages then there could be no objection.

Most European fleets included a number of Asiatic seamen - mostly Chinese and Indians - at extremely low wage rates and under very poor conditions. A British Labour Party report in 1919 stated that they formed one of the 'principal grievances of the seamen in practically every maritime country'. Regulation often took the form of prescribing the proportion of national subjects to those of Asiatic origin. In 1913, British ships employed 212,570 British seafarers, 46,848 Lascars (Indians) and 32,639 non-British Europeans.

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A coherent anti-racist and anti-colonialist policy was developed after the First World War by Edo Fimmen, the ITF's secretary. The 1921 ITF congress congratulated the workers of the 'subject races' on their increasing desire to embrace trade unionism and urged all workers to ignore the barriers of race and creed, because 'the raising of the standard of life and status of the lowest paid workers is necessary for the maintenance of the standard of life of organised labour everywhere'. Fimmen repeated his message at every opportunity. He wrote in the ITF newsletter in 1926: 'The trade unions in the old industrial countries will not be able effectively and permanently to maintain and extend the gains they have so far made unless they take energetic steps to improve the standard of living in the Eastern countries, and until they realise that the social struggle of the workers in China, Japan, India, etc. is their own struggle.' Two years later, at the Stockholm congress, he was on his feet again: 'We must not only free ourselves from feelings of race superiority, we must try to understand a point of view, a state of mind, conditions, entirely different from our own. Above all, we must remove the comprehensible suspicion with which the workers of colonial and semi-colonial countries regard all members of the white race.'

The repetition of Fimmen's sentiments may have shown his determination to reinforce the ITF's declared anti-racist stance, but it also demonstrated that the practice of many unions was often far different. Leaders of the Dutch seamen's union, for example, said they agreed with Fimmen at the 1924 ITF congress, but two years before had actively lobbied their government to restrict the employment of coloured people on Dutch merchant vessels.

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Part of the ITF policy was to link racism with colonialism, and Fimmen was an active supporter of freedom movements in the imperialist countries like Britain and France. He had regular correspondence with a number of emerging independence leaders and a warm exchange in 1929 with Jawaharlal Nehru, then general secretary of the All India Congress Committee and later the first prime minister of an independent India, was typical. Between 1921 and 1945, Nehru served nine prison sentences for participating in the movement of non-co-operation with the British. He reported to Fimmen: 'Only three days ago the Government launched a big offensive against labour and arrested a large number of so-called left-wing leaders. They have done so on the plea of suppressing communistic activities. As a matter of fact many people arrested are not communists.' Fimmen replied: 'I am following developments in your country as closely as possible, and only wish we were in a position to give you more tangible support in your fight against British imperialism. It is a great disadvantage that you are so far away, and that probably even correspondence is not safe. Shall I have the pleasure of seeing you again in July next? I sincerely hope that you will see your way to come over and be with us.'