

# SOLIDARITY

## Chapter Eight

### Outside of Europe

Although founded on the principle of uniting transport workers of the world, the ITF found it difficult to gain affiliates from outside Europe. The early success of Edward McHugh, who had been despatched to the United States in 1896, was not followed by large numbers of non-European affiliations. There were occasional formal links, most notably the affiliations from branches of the International Longshoremen's Association, Andrew Furuseth's International Seamen's Union of America and the Argentinian railway workers' union, but contacts with unions in the Far East, Australia and the Americas were mainly informal.

Following the ITF's reconstruction after the First World War, a much greater emphasis was placed on links outside Europe. There were different reasons for the interest. Edo Fimmen was a committed internationalist and anti-racist and saw close contacts as part of his vision of a united international working class. But Ernest Bevin, the British dockers' leader, promised to try to bring in colonial unions, as he perceived a threat from the Far East. 'Not only the organisations of America, Australia and India, also those of

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An aid to Spain and anti-fascist meeting that was held in Mexico in 1938 during Edo Fimmen's visit there.

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Japan have to become members of the ITF, lest the Asians become a danger to the European workers. Capitalism also begins to develop in Japan and a start is being made with labour legislation in that country,' he said at the 1919 congress in Amsterdam.

However, it was to take four years before the first non-European affiliation was made with American dockers, railway workers from Argentina, Canada and Palestine and seamen from Argentina, all affiliating in 1923. Colonial unions from British India and Dutch Indonesia followed a year later, as did the first affiliation from a union in Australia.

Fimmen saw the spread of the international trade union movement as a necessary counterbalance to the growth of capitalism. In his book *Labour's Alternative*, published in 1924, he indicated his thinking. He saw that businesses could now 'practise the division of labour on an international scale'. He wrote: 'From moment to moment, the entrepreneurs can choose the weakest point in the international fighting front of the working class, and can concentrate their attack on this.' Concemore Thomas (CT) Cramp, the British president of the ITF, picked up the theme at the 1926 congress in Paris: 'We must strenuously continue our efforts to increase affiliation from outside Europe. Capitalism is world-wide in its operations. It knows no distinction of race or colour. The working class must have the same world-wide outlook, and must make it impossible for the European or American capitalists to grind their millions from coolie labour and to play off the Asiatic or African workers against the better organised workers in other lands.'

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The 1924 ITF congress in Hamburg was attended by M. Yonekubo of the Japanese seafarers' union and empowered the general council to co-opt a representative from the non-European countries should the affiliation of a large number of organisations render it desirable. Railway workers moved support for the 'oriental labour movement' and asked to examine the possibility of establishing a special secretariat for the expansion of the ITF in the East.

Events in the colonies emphasised the growing development of trade unions. Strikes by railway workers took place in Dutch Indonesia and in India and met with a hostile response. Referring to the 'Colonial Question', the ITF newsletter in 1926 said unions in the older industrial countries would not be able to extend the gains they had made until they had taken steps to improve the working conditions elsewhere in the world and until they had realised that the social struggle of workers in China, Japan and India was their own struggle.

Fimmen believed, as McHugh had shown, that a visit was worth a thousand letters and appeals to affiliate. He urged the 1922 congress to 'send someone over, who will enter into relations with them personally, speak with them, attend their congresses, and thus prepare the way for the affiliation of the transport workers' organisations of the rest of the world'.

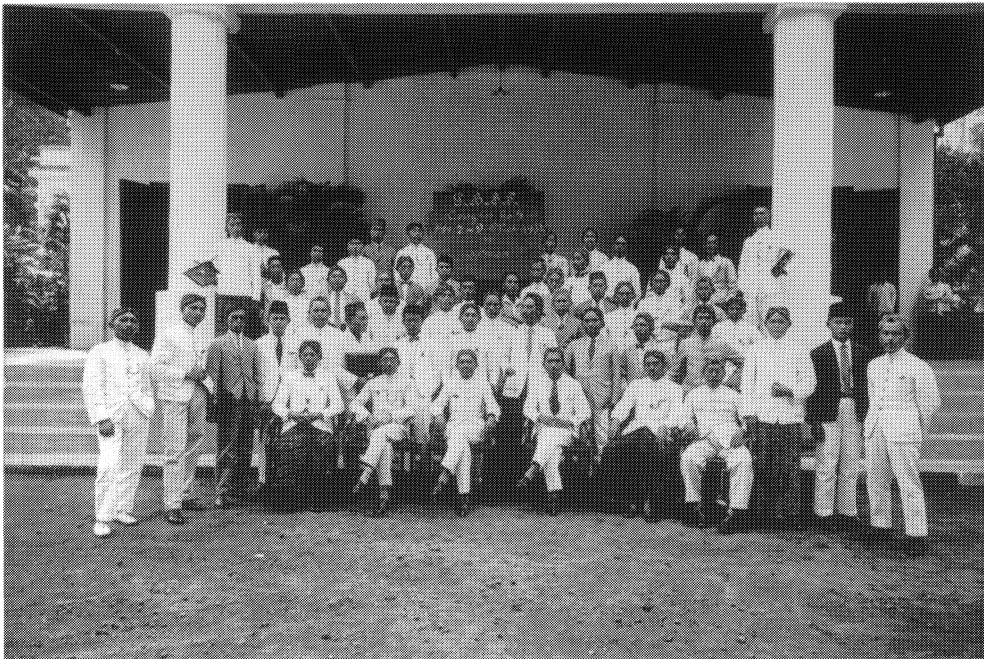
Eventually, it was Fimmen himself who embarked on several tours to spread the word about international trade unionism. By the time of the Stockholm congress in 1928, which endorsed his plans to travel, the ITF had nine affiliates from outside Europe. The British and Dutch governments refused Fimmen permission to travel to either

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ITF General Secretary Edo Fimmen with the leaders of the Japanese Seamen's Union during his Far East trip in 1931.

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A May 1931 congress of the Indonesian Tramway Workers' Union which was affiliated to the ITF. Edo Fimmen would have attended this meeting but he was denied an entry visa to Indonesia by the Dutch Colonial Administration. He was also denied a visa to enter British India by the then British Labour government of Ramsay MacDonald.

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Indonesia or India but he made trips to North Africa, Canada, Japan and China. The 1930 congress in London voted to enlarge the general council to include one delegate from India and Japan after the affiliation of unions representing more than 100,000 Indian railway workers and seafarers and the 80,000 members of the Japanese Seamen's Union.

After visits to unions in Montreal, Toronto and Winnipeg in Canada, Fimmen went to Japan for a five-week stay as guest of the Japanese Seamen's Union. This was the first-ever visit by a European trade union official and Fimmen was given official 'protection' by the Japanese government. He left with more than 100 kg of printed information from his visit. His trip to China was more problematic, given difficulties in finding a suitable interpreter and due to political problems caused by the Japanese occupation of Manchuria and the civil war between Shanghai and Nanking. Fimmen also ran into the delegation of the communist Red International of Labour Unions, whose representative was none other than Tom Mann - one of the founding members of the ITF, but now a member of the Communist Party.

Plans had been drawn up for the development of regional secretariats. An attempt to set up a regional organisation in Japan was hindered by political problems, leading eventually to the Japanese government forcing the seamen's union to withdraw from the ITF in 1939. The idea of a regional secretariat in Latin America was first put forward in 1932 and a final decision to establish one was taken six years later. However, before Trifón Gómez, the Spanish railwaymen's leader, could be despatched to Mexico, the Second World War had begun.

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The 1931 congress of the Japanese Federation of Labour (attended by Edo Fimmen).