

## Chapter Ten

### **Post-war Reconstruction**

The leaders of the ITF were as busy preparing for peace as they were in supporting the war. They were conscious of the certain need for a huge reconstruction effort to rebuild a devastated Europe. They also wanted to establish mechanisms to try to prevent further conflict.

As soon as the liberation process was established in Italy in 1943, and later in France and Germany, exiled trade unionists returned to recreate the union movement. Hans Jahn was one of the first to go to Italy, where he made contact with former colleagues in Germany. Later, as soon as his homeland was occupied by allied forces, he moved back.

Both the ITF's seafarers' and railway workers' sections had been active during the war, partly because of the presence of so many exiled organisations in London. Seafarers held regular meetings and were able to participate in the work of the ILO's Joint Maritime Commission. The drafting of the far-reaching International Seafarers' Charter was completed, which was to form the basis for worldwide action for improvements in seafarers' conditions. This was

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a vital part of the ITF's success at the first post-war ILO Maritime Conference, held at Seattle in 1946, when 80 important international conventions and recommendations relating to seafarers were adopted. Railwaymen's discussions formed the framework for the ITF's transport policy in the post-war period.

By the end of 1943, the ITF journal was full of debates on how the unions could take part in constructing a new world order. The Seafarers' Charter was published in 17 languages in 1944 and declared: 'It may be said that this charter is the most comprehensive international programme of trade union demands that has ever been presented ... The principles outlined in this charter are also to apply to Asiatic, African and West Indian seamen, who continue to be employed under conditions less favourable than those obtained by white seamen. The seafarers' trade union organisations are resolved to end this state of affairs, which is detrimental to the best interests of all seafaring people, and to take all necessary action to regulate wages and working conditions of those seamen by collective agreement.'

Jaap Oldenbroek, who had taken over as general secretary, maintained that when peace came the ITF had to be all-embracing, to be ready to welcome the unions of the Axis states every bit as warmly as those of the allied states. The test for eligibility had to be a union's freedom from outside controls, whether of governments or employers or political parties. But if that test were passed, then the ITF had to continue to practise the maximum tolerance and not to force any particular view of the world on its members.

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The ITF Congress which opened in the Congress House in Zurich on 6 May 1946 was the first since the Luxembourg Congress in 1938. The list of effective affiliates was impressive. Not surprisingly, British unions were by far the biggest national group with a total membership of over 788,000, compared with 561,000 for the other 18 countries represented. They also supplied more than 80 per cent of the affiliation fees in 1945. By the time of the congress, transport unions in Belgium, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and Norway had begun to recover and were once more substantial and committed affiliates. Affiliations also came from America with the Seafarers' International Union of North America (SIU) and the American Railway Labor Executives' Association (RLEA).

Almost immediately following the war, there began to develop increasing tensions in a previously united allied front against the Nazis. Despite the fact that American and Soviet union leaders had sat down together at ITF conferences, the world - and the trade union movement - gradually began to divide along political lines. The division, which would ultimately develop into the Cold War, touched virtually every important decision made by the ITF and its larger affiliates.

At first the British TUC had proposed the establishment of an idealistic World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) and the first conference was attended by both Americans and Russians. The hope was that if the two major powers could co-operate in war, they could also do so in peace. The Zurich congress, despite some reservations, agreed to open talks with the new organisation in the following manner: 'The Congress accepts the principle of incorporation of the ITF in the WFTU and instructs the Executive

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Committee to continue negotiations with the Executive Bureau of the WFTU with a view to securing acceptable terms. The terms finally negotiated to be submitted to a further Congress for ratification.'

Leaders of the ITF wanted to retain their independence, wanted to be free from outside control and wanted to look after the day-to-day interests of transport workers in a way they thought fit. As the WFTU gradually became more and more dominated by Communist unions and influenced by Soviet centralised thinking, such objectives became impossible to achieve. Little more than 12 months after the formation of WFTU, it became clear that the ITF was never going to negotiate 'acceptable terms', and by 1948 the inevitable had been officially recognised and all attempt at negotiations halted.



Omer Becu, leader of the pre-war International Mercantile Marine Officers' Association (IMMOA) which merged into the ITF after the war. Becu was ITF President from 1947 to 1950 and ITF General Secretary from 1950 to 1960.

The ITF was not alone in breaking off talks. All the non-Communist union centres of Western Europe followed suit and the WFTU became an exclusively Communist international. Once again, events were set in motion for the creation of a second international organisation and in December 1949 the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) was founded. The establishment of the ICFTU had another impact on the ITF - Jaap Oldenbroek was unanimously elected its first general secretary. Omer Becu, who had established the first ITF office in New York during the war, was asked to take over as acting general secretary.

The split between the WFTU and the ICFTU had widespread implications for the transport sector, as many French unions affiliated to the country's national centre, CGT, had close connections with the Communist Party.

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The French seamen's union disaffiliated from the ITF in 1947 and other groups of dockers, seamen, road transport and railway workers followed. Later a rival non-Communist alternative, 'Force Ouvrière', was established and its unions were accepted into the ITF in April 1948. The Italian unions were also split and the CGIL, the national centre dominated by Communists, decreed in 1947 that its members should not pay affiliation fees to the ITF.

Despite these problems, the affiliation of the American unions quickly led to an expansion of ITF membership and by the end of 1949 more than 830,000 American transport workers were represented. German and Japanese affiliations also came back - more than 636,000 Germans and 631,000 Japanese transport workers in five unions. The end of the wrangle over international structures left the ITF with more time to concentrate on industrial matters, but the political divide was not to heal as the union movement entered the Cold War.