

Reflections on the International Trade Union Movement

Bona fide trade unions can emerge, survive, and become powerful, only if workers need them in solving their problems and improving their living and working conditions. This formulation is also valid for the international trade union movement. The precondition for a powerful international trade union movement is the need of the national working classes and their trade unions for international cooperation and solidarity in solving their problems and promoting their interests. From the onset, a clear distinction should be made between internationalism and international cooperation and solidarity.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels published the Communist Manifesto (Manifest of the Communist Party) in February 1848. The book ends with the following sentences: “Die Proletarier haben nichts in ihr zu verlieren als ihre Ketten. Sie haben eine Welt zu gewinnen. Proletarier aller Laender, vereinigt euch!” (English: “The proletarians have nothing to lose in this world but their chains. You have a world to win. Workers of all lands, unite!”).¹ This was a call for internationalism, that is, the joint struggle and unity of fate of the workers of the world. More than 170 years have elapsed since the publication of this book, which is one of the books read perhaps by hundreds of millions of people ever since.

Marx and Engels were not calling for the solidarity or the cooperation of the workers of different countries. Their expectation, desire, and hope, was the unity in fate and struggle of the workers worldwide. The International Workingmen’s Association (the “First International”) was an attempt at this direction; but it failed. Ever since then, many international political and trade union organisations of workers have been founded. According to the *World Employment and Social Outlook, Trends 2022* report of the ILO, in 2005 there were 1282.3 million waged and salaried workers in the world, and in 2021 there were 1739.6 million².

Today we have the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) with its claimed 200 million members organised in 338 national affiliates in 168 countries and territories of the world. The Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR) in the Russian Federation with a claimed membership of 20 million disaffiliated from the ITUC in April 2022,

due to the differences of opinion concerning the Russian – Ukrainian War. There is the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), claiming to represent 45 million workers organised in 93 trade unions in 41 European countries. Then there are also the global union federations (GUFs), and the European Trade Union Federations. While the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) today claims to represent 195 million workers in 133 countries. And the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), with its claimed 260 million members, is not officially affiliated with any international trade union organisation.

Apart from the aforementioned organisations, there is the BRICS Trade Union Forum, established on 11 December 2012 in Moscow. This informal trade union body is the reflection of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) cooperation initiative. The trade unions in this informal organisation claim to represent more than 200 million workers, exceeding the total membership of the ITUC.

Another informal initiative is the Southern Initiative on Globalization and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR), formed in May 1991 by COSATU of South Africa, ACTU of Australia and trade union centres in Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia. Today it claims to include trade unions in 35 countries in Africa, Asia and Australia.

The International Islamic Confederation of Labour established in 1981, and which convened its first congress on 10-11 June 1999 in Geneva, proved to be a failure.

There are also many more regional and even international organisations of trade unions, which are not worth mentioning.

Are these organisations effective in uniting the workers or at least practicing genuine international solidarity and cooperation? If not, what are the objective conditions for the emergence of internationalism and international solidarity?

Internationalism: a Necessity

The analysis of the international trade union movement should start with the analysis of the problems, expectations, tendencies of the workers in various countries of the world. Then, attempts of structures outside of the working class (such as

The history of the international trade union movement cannot be understood apart from the efforts by various intelligence organisations to control and use workers’ organisations

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We see also organisations that give the impression of international solidarity, but which are financed by employers and States

intelligence organisations) to control and use the workers should be taken into consideration. Ignoring these two factors, the history of the international trade union movement cannot be understood.

During the first half of the 19th Century, the Industrial Revolution had transformed the living and working conditions of the workers (especially in the UK) into hell, leading to uprisings of a spontaneous nature. On the other side of the class conflict was the united bourgeois and aristocrat forces of Europe, especially the Holy Alliance.

Therefore, any progressive struggle would meet the repressive power of the united reactionary powers of continental Europe. The high mobility of labour among the various countries of Europe had also created, to a certain extent, an international working class. Thus, the objective interest of the workers in Europe at the time of the publication of the Communist Manifesto was internationalism. The workers had to unite in fate and struggle in order to improve their living and working conditions. The First International was a belated response to this need.

Then the bourgeoisie changed its strategy.

Marx, after the 1848 revolutions, was expecting the next revolutionary upsurge following the next economic crisis. That was why he studied political economy in the British Museum for years. Then the 1857 crisis came and, to much surprise, nothing happened. The workers of the UK did not rise against the bourgeoisie as anticipated and hoped by Marx and Engels.

Engels's letter to Marx in 1858 perhaps summarises the future of internationalism and the international trade union movement.

Marx and Engels on the Integration of the Working Classes in the Developed Capitalist Countries with Colonialism

Engels wrote a letter to Marx on 7 October 1858, in which he referred to the transformation of the British working class into a bourgeois proletariat:

*“The fact that the English proletariat is actually becoming more and more bourgeois, so that the ultimate aim of this most bourgeois of all nations would appear to be the possession, alongside the bourgeoisie, of a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat. In the case of a nation which exploits the entire world this is, of course, justified to some extent”*³.

Engels, in his letter to Marx on 8 April 1863, wrote about the disappearance of the revolutionary energy of the English proletariat: “The English proletariat's revolutionary energy has all but completely evaporated and the English proletarian has declared himself in full agreement with the dominance of the bourgeoisie”⁴.

Marx, in a letter to Engels on 9 April 1863, complained about the English working class in the following words: “How soon the English workers will throw off what seems to be a bourgeois contagion remains to be seen”⁵.

Marx, in a letter to Wilhelm Liebknecht on 11 February 1878, incriminated the English working class for being the appendage of the bourgeoisie: “The English working class had gradually become ever more demoralised as a result of the period of corruption after 1848, and had finally reached the stage of being no more than an appendage of the great Liberal Party, i.e. of its oppressors, the capitalists”⁶.

Engels, in a letter to Karl Kautsky on 12 September 1882, criticised the attitude of the British working class on colonialism as follows: “You ask me what the English workers think of colonial policy. Well, exactly what they think of any policy - the same as what the middle classes think. There is, after all, no labour party here, only conservatives and liberal radicals, and the workers cheerfully feast in England's monopoly of the world market and colonies”⁷.

Engels, in his article “England in 1845 and in 1885”, published in the *Commonweal* magazine in England in its March 1885 issue, had the following remarks concerning the benefits derived by the working class of the industrial monopoly advantages of England:

*“The truth is this: during the period of England's industrial monopoly the English working class have to a certain extent shared in the benefits of the monopoly. These benefits were very unequally parcelled out amongst them; the privileged minority pocketed most, but even the great mass had at least a temporary share now and then. And that is the reason why since the dying-out of Owenism there has been no Socialism in England. With the breakdown of that monopoly the English working class will lose that privileged position; it will find itself generally - the privileged and leading minority not excepted - on a level with its fellow-workers abroad. And that is the reason why there will be Socialism again in England”*⁸.

These observations of Marx and Engels during pre-imperialist stage of capitalism are further reinforced during the age of imperialism. This integration concerned not only the labour aristocracy, but the working class as a whole.

The emergence of the international trade union movement, the International Trade Secretariats (ITS) and later the International Secretariat of National Trade Union Centres (ISNTUC), coincided with the emergence of monopoly capitalism and imperialism. Thus, the imperialist countries of the world handed over some of the economic surplus transferred from the colonies to their working classes and transformed them from the grave-

diggers of capitalism to the pillars of imperialism and capitalism. The working classes in the imperialist countries also preferred to unite forces with their bourgeoisies and states, rather than fighting against them to improve their living and working conditions.

The interests of both of the parties necessitated cooperation. This was the end of internationalism and even the genuine international cooperation of workers of the world. From this time onwards, even the international organisations of workers were used to the benefit of the imperialist countries. Of course, there were times when the working classes of the imperialist countries waged staunch struggles against their bourgeoisies and states; but it was a struggle within the family and could be reconciled quite easily.

In ancient Rome the citizens were divided into three social classes: the *patricians*, the *plebs* and the *proletarii*. The *proletarii* were poor citizens, deprived of the ownership of the means of production. They were, thus, potential allies of the slaves and such an alliance would have been detrimental to the interests of the patricians. The first Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus (Gaius Octavius) who ruled the Roman Empire in the 27 BC – AD 14 period, imported grain from Egypt and distributed it free of charge to the *proletarii*. Then reforms were made in the military, so that the expensive helmet, sword, shield and armour of the Roman soldier were freely given to the *proletarii*. The *proletarii*, potential allies of the slaves, were, thus, turned into the backbone of the Roman army and they in return identified themselves with the Roman Empire. The working classes of the colonial and later imperialist countries have been treated in the same manner. The international trade unions founded and led by the trade unions of these countries are *de facto* allies of their countries and bourgeoisies.

International Trade Unionism

The international trade union organisations from the International Trade Secretariats onwards - the International Secretariat of National Trade Union Centres (ISNTUC), the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) - are all under the control of the trade union centres of the imperialist countries and their policies are formulated in line with the national interests of these countries.

The second group of international trade union centres emerged following the Russian Revolution in 1917. Trade union centres controlled by the communists were accepted as affiliates in the Communist International (the “Comintern” or “Third International”), founded in early March 1919.

However, the Leninist conception of trade unions as the transmission belts of the communist party with the working classes, necessitated a hierarchical relationship. Thus, the trade unions disaffiliated from the Comintern and established in 1920 the Council of International Trade Unions, which in July 1921 was transformed into the Red International of Trade Unions (RILU), also known as the “Profintern”. The Profintern was under the direct control of the Comintern, and even its dissolution in 1937 was decided not by its competent bodies, but by the Comintern.

There was a brief period in the history of international trade unionism when the national trade union centres of countries with different political systems were parts of the same international organisation. This extraordinary and temporary relationship was the result of the international alliances in the world following Germany’s attack to the Soviet Union in June 1941. The alliance of the USSR, the UK and the USA against fascism during the Second World War was reflected in the re-organisation of the international trade union movement in 1945. The International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) dissolved itself and the World Federation of Trade Unions was established, including all important trade union centres of the countries of this alliance. Only the American Federation of Labor refrained from joining.

However, with the change of alliances in the international political arena in 1946 and the introduction of the Marshall Plan, the activities of the WFTU were practically suspended and the national trade union centres of the imperialist countries (except for the trade unions under communist control, for instance the CGT in France and the CGIL in Italy) disaffiliated from the WFTU and established in 1949 the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).

The WFTU since then was under the direct control of the USSR. When the relations of the USSR with Yugoslavia, the People’s Republic of China and Albania deteriorated, the national trade union centres of these countries left the WFTU. When the USSR disintegrated in late 1991, the WFTU was transformed into an international organisation that can be ignored in practice.

The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) is a perfect example of international trade union organisations’ integration with States. The activities of the ETUC are financed mainly by funds received from the European Commission, the executive power of the EU.

Another group of international trade union centres includes regional bodies such as the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU) and the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU). These organisations are also under the control of their States.

The imperialist countries handed over economic surplus from the colonies to their working classes and transformed them into pillars of imperialism and capitalism

The Appearance of International Solidarity

From this time onwards, even the international organisations of workers were used to the benefit of the imperialist countries

Apart from these international trade union organisations, there were and are a number of organisations with the *appearance* of international trade union solidarity. The most outstanding of these were the Asian American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI), the African American Labor Center (AALC) and the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD)⁹ of the USA. These organisations tried to give the impression of international solidarity, since the AFL-CIO was directly involved. But in reality, their activities were financed mainly by funds provided by the employers and the USA state; and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was quite active in these bodies. After their real nature was disclosed and revealed extensively, they were dissolved and replaced by the Solidarity Center (ACILS), which is again financed and administered in the same manner. The Germans are also quite active in “international solidarity”(!). The Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation are active in “cooperating” with the left-wing political parties and trade unions in some countries of the world. Their reports of activities, however, reveal that their activities are almost totally financed by the German state.

There were cases, of course, when these international trade union organisations which identify themselves with their imperialist states have benefited the workers in other countries. Even a defective clock shows the correct time twice a day. For instance, the solidarity of the ICFTU with the trade unions in South Africa was important; but it was in line with the policies of the imperialist countries. These organisations supported Solidarity in Poland; but again, it was in line with the policies of these countries, and the international trade union movement was used by these countries in disintegrating the Soviet bloc.

In brief, so long as the imperialist system exists and it is possible for the working classes of the imperialist countries to benefit from the plundering of the underdeveloped world, these classes do, and will continue to, identify themselves with the class interests of their respective states and bourgeoisies. They constitute not a “labour aristocracy”, but the “bourgeois proletariat” about which Engels had written to Marx in 1858. Internationalism and even genuine international solidarity and cooperation

amongst the working classes of the world is possible only if the imperialist exploitation can be terminated. Until then, the international trade union movement is what Dan Gallin, the former general secretary of the IUF, described in his 2004 article “Not With a Bang But With a Whimper”, when the ICFTU and the WCL were to merge:

“This brings us to the main topic of the article, which is the discussions under way between the ICFTU and the WCL for a merger, or rather, the joint creation of a new International, by the end of 2006. Since no one is paying attention today to either ICFTU or WCL, the idea is that a new International cobbled together by the ICFTU and the WCL, and sweeping up other international and national structures on the way, would represent a power no one could ignore. Not even Bush. This is a strange assumption. Power is not generated by adding together superstructures which are in themselves powerless. Numbers mean nothing if there is no political thought and no political will. Organisations are what converts numbers into action and strength. When such organisations are dysfunctional, nothing happens. Most of the 151 million members of the ICFTU and the largely fictional 26 million members of the WCL don’t even know these organisations exist. In a political vacuum, 151 times zero equals zero, 26 times zero equals zero, zero plus zero equals zero”¹⁰.

These words are valid for whole of the international trade union movement today, as well.

Notes

- 1 Marx-Engels, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, (Dietz Verlag, Berlin, 1975), p.83.
- 2 ILO, *World Employment and Social Outlook, Trends 2022*, (Geneva, 2022), p.106.
- 3 Marx-Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol.40, p.344.
- 4 Marx-Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol.41, p.465.
- 5 Marx-Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol.41, p.468.
- 6 Marx-Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol.45, p.299.
- 7 Marx-Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol.46, p.320.
- 8 Engels, F., “England in 1845 and in 1885”, in Marx-Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol.26, p.301.
- 9 For first-hand information about the involvement of the CIA in the AIFLD activities, Philip Agee, *Inside the Company, The CIA Diary*, (Penguin Books, Suffolk, 1978), p.243-245.
- 10 Gallin, D. “Not With a Bang But With a Whimper” in *Solidarity: Selected Essays of Dan Gallin* (Labourstart, 2014)

Yıldırım Koç’s new book, *Uluslararası Sendikacılık Tarihi* (English: *History of International Trade Unionism*), (Tekgıda-İş, 2023) is a detailed, insightful, and unsentimental account of the international trade union movement, drawing on many years of first-hand involvement. See: <https://www.yilirimkoc.com.tr/>.