

# THE AMSTERDAM INTERNATIONAL

THE WORLD OF THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF  
TRADE UNIONS (IFTU), 1913-1945

GEERT VAN GOETHEM



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**THE WORLD OF THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF**  
**TRADE UNIONS (IFTU), 1913–1945**

GEERT VAN GOETHEM

*Archive and Museum of the Belgian Labour Movement, Belgium*

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# STUDIES IN LABOUR HISTORY

## GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

Labour history has often been a fertile area of history. Since the Second World War its best practitioners – such as E.P. Thompson and E.J. Hobsbawm, both Presidents of the British Society for the Study of Labour History – have written works which have provoked fruitful and wide-ranging debates and further research, and which have influenced not only social history but history generally. These historians, and many others, have helped to widen labour history beyond the study of organised labour to labour generally, sometimes to industrial relations in particular, and most frequently to society and culture in national and comparative dimensions.

The assumptions and ideologies underpinning much of the older labour history have been challenged by feminist and later by postmodernist and anti-Marxist thinking. These challenges have often led to thoughtful reappraisals, perhaps intellectual equivalents of coming to terms with a new post-Cold War political landscape.

By the end of the twentieth century, labour history had emerged reinvigorated and positive from much introspection and external criticism. Very few would wish to confine its scope to the study of organised labour. Yet, equally, few would wish now to write the existence and influence of organised labour out of nations' histories, any more than they would wish to ignore working-class lives and focus only on the upper echelons.

This series of books provides reassessments of broad themes of labour history as well as some more detailed studies arising from recent research. Most books are single-authored but there are also volumes of essays centred on important themes or periods, some arising from major conferences organised by the Society for the Study of Labour History. The series also includes studies of labour organisations, including international ones, as many of these are much in need of a modern reassessment.

Chris Wrigley  
British Society for the Study of Labour History  
University of Nottingham



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# INTRODUCTION

*'The history of labor internationalism is a history of failure, of dreams disappointed, ideals compromised, and institutions corrupted'*  
(Victor Silverman)'

Edo Fimmen had already predicted it in 1933: 'the judgement of history upon the labour movement in the years immediately following the war, and especially upon the leaders of that movement, is not likely to be a merciful one.'

The International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) was founded in July 1919 in Amsterdam. This 'Amsterdam International' declared war on war and wanted to liberate the workers from capitalism. For Edo Fimmen, one of the fathers of the IFTU, it had been clear ever since 1923 that things would take a different course, and for a long time, he kept on urging in vain for the international trade union movement to take a firm stand. It repeatedly brought him into conflict with the leaders of the IFTU, a conflict that was also partly personal.

On the facing page is a photograph of the leaders, the Executive Board of the International Federation of Trade Unions in 1930: sitting from left to right are Léon Jouhaux (France), Johannes Sassenbach (Germany), Walter Citrine (Great Britain), Walter Schevenels (Belgium), and Theodor Leipart (Germany); standing are Rudolf Tayerlé (Czechoslovakia), Corneel Mertens (Belgium), and Hans Jacobsen (Denmark). In 1930, the IFTU had just recovered from a severe internal crisis. Its membership had grown steadily and had reached a record number of 13.5 million members in twenty-nine countries. It also had a new and stronger executive. In this photograph, the leaders radiate willpower and self-confidence. The future looked bright, and it shows. The picture was taken in July 1930 in Stockholm. The first storm clouds were already gathering on the horizon, but no-one could suspect that the next decade would be an infernal era of economic catastrophes, political crises, and armed conflicts. The world of the IFTU was an insecure and dangerous one. This is amply illustrated by the eminently fickle fortunes of the members of the Executive Committee: *Léon Jouhaux* was imprisoned during the war by the French Vichy regime and was deported to Germany in 1943. After the war, he became the leader of the Force Ouvrière and he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1951. *Johannes Sassenbach*, the German general secretary of the IFTU, was close to retirement in 1930; he retreated to Germany but was arrested by the Nazis and died in November 1940. The British president, *Walter Citrine*, had assumed leadership of the IFTU in 1928 and was one of

the figureheads of both the British trade union movement and of Labour, together with Ernest Bevin. He was knighted in 1935 and even became Lord Citrine in 1947. The Belgian deputy general secretary, *Walter Schevenels*, succeeded Sassenbach in 1931. He led the struggle of the IFTU against Nazism and the aid campaigns of the international labour movement for the Spanish Republic. Schevenels spent the war in London and helped to create the World Federation of Trade Unions. With the support of the British, he tried consecutively, to become general secretary of the World Federation of Trade Unions and of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU); both attempts failed. *Theodor Leipart*, the leader of the German trade union movement, was arrested on 2 May 1933 and his organisation was banned. Leipart survived his imprisonment, but died shortly after the end of the war. The Czech *Rudolf Tayerlé* was arrested after the German invasion of his country and was one of the 120,000 people who were killed in the Mauthausen camp. *Corneel Mertens* was the general secretary of the Belgian Socialist union. He retired in 1939 and the war left him a sick man. *Hans Jacobsen*, the popular Danish union leader, retired in 1940 and died in 1943.

The history of the international organised labour movement may have been a succession of failures, the wrong analyses, and tragic developments; many of the people who made its history paid the price for it. The failure of the International Federation of Trade Unions must also then be considered within the context of its inability to achieve its primary goal: to safeguard peace. Of course, in light of these catastrophes its achievements pale into relative insignificance, which also influences its historiography. Many authors convey a sense of disenchantment at the ostensible 'betrayal' of the internationalist ideal by organised social democracy. It even sometimes leads them to question the point of studying the history of the international trade union movement, since the result can never be anything but 'an elegy for dashed hopes'.<sup>4</sup>

This is likely to be one of the reasons why the history of the international workers' movement has received so little attention. But this situation is changing rapidly and in recent years, a great number and variety of publications have been devoted to mainly institutional histories of organisations belonging to the international trade union movement. Especially for the larger national federations, a fairly complete picture is starting to form.<sup>5</sup> Until recently, we had to make do with the writings of former officials *Walter Schevenels*<sup>6</sup> and *Hans Gottfurcht*<sup>7</sup>, and the more critical, yet quite broad-ranging work of *Lewis L. Lorwin*,<sup>8</sup> all published more than forty years ago. Now, we also have a series of publications at our disposal that are based on sound archival research. Through 'The Dilemmas of Internationalism', *Susan Milner* wrote the history of the International Secretariat of National Trade Union Centres<sup>9</sup>, in which she focuses on the conflict between the French and German trade union models. In 2000 a general history of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) was published. This book was the result of the collaboration of several researchers (*Anthony Carew*, *Michel Dreyfus*, *Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick*, *Marcel van der Linden*, and myself).<sup>10</sup> Commissioned by the International Associa-

tion of Labour History Institutions (IALHI), this team engaged in an intense collaboration for four years, which resulted in a remarkably homogeneous book that places the development of the ICFTU as a worldwide umbrella organisation of the 'free' trade union movement, in the framework of its historical development. Finally, a number of theses have recently been devoted to union history. In his 'Histoire du Syndicalisme Chrétien International', Patrick Pasture (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) presents the history of Christian trade union internationalism from its origins to 1975<sup>11</sup> and the *Habilitationsschrift* by Reiner Tosstorff (Mainz University) is an account of the history of the Communist Red International of Labour Unions between 1921 and 1937.<sup>12</sup>

With this study, it is my intention to fill the gaps in the written history of the international 'free' trade union movement.<sup>13</sup> The focus is the institutional history of the International Federation of Trade Unions, from its creation in 1913, through its reconstitution in 1919 in Amsterdam, to its final dissolution in 1945. I will in particular formulate questions as to its policy, its strategies, its alliances, and its ideas. I have drawn from discussions held at congresses and resolutions, but without according them more weight than they deserve.<sup>14</sup> The IFTU survived a succession of severe internal crises and was a forum for the discussions that caused dissension within the international social democracy throughout the period between the two World Wars. In this study, I want to investigate how a superstructure of national union leaders handled these problems together with a small group of international officials. I would like to make it clear from the outset, the history of the international labour movement is one of a relatively small group of men: the 'leaders' with whom Fimmen had such difficulties.

This study is intended to provide elements for further research, which should extend beyond the purely institutional history of the various organisations, and concentrate on the questions of how and why national trade unions set up and maintained international alliances and partnerships. In an even wider framework, it is about the development of transnational labour movement organisations and the role of the international federations in this development. It is a debate that ties in with the growing tendency to adopt a multidisciplinary perspective in the study of social movements.<sup>15</sup>

Although this last point of mine is in line with recent trends in social historiography, the traditional and originally Marxist-inspired genre of institutional historiography has generally become somewhat of a rarity in these last few decades, having been superseded by new themes (gender, ethnicity, religion, etc.) that have both broadened the field and opened up the discipline. Moreover, the contemporary historian likes to write from the perspective of the people and prefers to take a bottom-up view of things. The institutional angle is now often considered 'sterile'. It has acquired an old-fashioned image and for a long time, it seemed to have nothing of interest to contribute to the debate. This negative image has of course, been fed to a considerable extent by a flow of publications that should really be classified as

*festschriften*, as their main purpose is to heap praise on organisations on the occasion of their anniversary, in an uncritical and even idolising manner. This is a genre of 'history' that is written for and on behalf of the current leaders of these organisations, who are usually also the clients and financiers of these books.

The renewed attention for the history of the organisations of the international trade union movement now gives us an opportunity to revive the institutional angle. In this context, I also refer to the contribution of Ira Katznelson to the roundtable debate on the future of labour history in his 'International Labor and Working-Class History'. In this article, he makes out a case for a 'fresh look at the institutionalist scholarship', away from the 'uncritical, atheoretical, and celebratory mode' of the 'older labor history'. He wants a new 'labor' history 'that refuses to choose between currently fashionable alternatives' and that finds a way of incorporating such purportedly superseded subjects as institutional history in 'the center of the discipline' in order to arrive at 'a labor history more multiple in its theoretical strategies, more ironic in its rhetorical stance, and more open in its search for understanding.'<sup>16</sup>

While the historiography of the international organisations of the labour movement may have taken great strides in just a few years, this does not mean the debate is already closed. On the contrary, it has only just been opened.

## Sources

This history was written without my being able to consult the archives of the IFTU. The actual IFTU archives fell victim to the rapacity of the Nazis in June 1940.<sup>17</sup> One of the first concerns on starting this study was therefore to attempt to trace these lost archives. This search led to the archives of the Nazi intelligence service, the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA), which turned out to be a very important source, but contained no information on the fate of the IFTU archives.

Many of the documents that were confiscated by the Nazis have been resurfacing in Russia in recent years. In his search for Belgian archives in Moscow, dr. Wouter Steenhaut also looked for traces of the IFTU archives upon my request.<sup>18</sup> He found nothing in Moscow but in 1997, when Steenhaut was studying the archives of the Office of Military Government for Germany – United States (OMGUS), he came upon a trace that pointed not to Russia, but to France.<sup>19</sup> The OMGUS archives contain a receipt in which French Major E. Simon states to have received, on 15 November 1946, six 'cases' (trunks) containing material of the 'Fédération Syndicale Internationale' from the military commander-in-chief of the US in Germany.<sup>20</sup> The restitution was part of a set of forty-seven trunks containing 'archives and library documents' from French ministries, the Alliance Israélite, and several trade unions, among them the Confédération International des Syndicats Chrétiens. Of course, the designation 'trunks' does not allow us to accurately assess how many documents were transferred, nor does the description 'archives and library documents' make it possible for us to

estimate the value of these documents. It was logical for the American authorities to restore the documents of the IFTU to the French because in 1940, when they were confiscated, the headquarters of the IFTU were located in Paris. In 1946 however, the IFTU no longer existed, and it is not clear what the French army did with these documents. Wouter Steenhaut has appealed to the French authorities with copies of the receipt, but has been waiting three years for a reply. Consequently, the fate of the IFTU archives, which were confiscated in Paris in June 1940, remains unclear to this day.

Considering the ambition of this study was to write the history of the IFTU based on original archival research, the absence of the organisation's archives presented a serious impediment. To compensate for this absence as much as possible, the only option was to locate IFTU materials and documents concerning the IFTU kept in other archives. The first and obvious place to look was the IFTU archives of the International Institute for Social History (IISH). Of course, these are not the archives of the IFTU itself (which would be impossible), but a collection that was assembled after the war by Walter Schevenels and Annie Adama van Scheltema. Although the collection is interesting, it contains few original documents. It mainly consists of draft reports and offprints of miscellaneous publications.

The IFTU was an umbrella organisation of national trade unions and maintained relations with friendly international trade secretariats (ITSs). Therefore I immediately directed my search for sources towards the archives of the main national confederations that were members of the IFTU, the major leaders, and the ITSs.

Alas, many of these archives met with the same fate as the IFTU archives and disappeared during the Nazi period. Therefore I was compelled to limit my study to trade union archives in those countries that had not been occupied and had played a major role in the IFTU, which automatically led me to Great Britain and the United States.

The archives of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), kept in the Modern Records Centre of Warwick University, turned out to be a real gold mine. The TUC occupied the presidency of the IFTU from November 1920 until the dissolution of the organisation in 1945. Although the first presidents (A.A. Purcell and J.H. Thomas) were not strong leaders, the General Council and the International Committee of the TUC kept close track of the actions of their representatives in the international trade union movement. As a rule, TUC delegates and representatives drew up separate and confidential reports on each of their foreign missions, which were submitted to the competent executive bodies together with the official minutes. Thanks to these internal reports, I was fortunate to get a look behind the scenes. The TUC archives are therefore actually even more interesting than the IFTU archives themselves might have been. In addition, the continuity of this series allowed me to gain a good insight. The drawback of course, is that these reports were all written from a British point of view. I was able to complete the British picture by consulting the archives of the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU), a confederal structure that operated alongside the TUC. The GFTU represented the British labour movement on the international scene between 1901 and 1920 and also provided the first president (W.A. Appleton) of

the IFTU in 1919. The archives of the GFTU were important for the reestablishment of the IFTU in 1919 and the struggle for power with the much larger TUC, which was to end with the defeat of the GFTU in 1920.

The archives of the British organisations thus already provided a solid foundation for my research. However, it was important to broaden the perspective. The archives of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in the George Meany Memorial Archives in Maryland contained a lot of relevant additional material, even though the AFL was a member of the IFTU only for a short period (1909–1919 and 1937–1945). The archives of the Danish Samvirkende Fagforbund i Danmark mainly proved that the smaller national federations had to be represented by very strong personalities to carry any real weight with the giants that dominated the movement. The Danes had few influential people in the IFTU.

Still, the personal angle offered fresh opportunities. Although the IFTU purported to speak on behalf of many millions of members, in effect its politics were determined by a very small number of people. The president, vice-presidents, and secretaries formed the executive body that was the real centre of power. Frequently, the circle was really even smaller, and decisions were taken or prepared by the president and a single secretary, or by a vice-president and a secretary. Therefore I conducted a systematic search for the personal papers of the main leaders.

The key figure was the British president of the IFTU and general secretary of the TUC, Walter Citrine. Citrine was appointed president in 1928 and remained in this office until 1945. His personal papers are kept in the British Library of Political and Economic Science (BLPES), the archives department of the London School of Economics. The archives mainly contain Citrine's diaries. Apart from a few confidential or internal documents, all the others went into the TUC archives.

The French general secretary of the CGT, Léon Jouhaux, was vice-president of the foundation from 1919 until 1945. His personal archives could not be located. However, major files on Léon Jouhaux are kept by the Archives Nationale (Fonds F7-Police), the Préfecture de la Ville de Paris, and the Musée de l'Armée de Terre.

No personal archives could be found belonging to the Belgian, Dutch or German union leaders, with the exception of the files of Johannes Sassenbach, who was general secretary of the IFTU from 1927 to 1931. However, the Sassenbach archives contain only a few fragments on the IFTU.

The personal papers of Samuel Gompers, leader of the AFL, and one of the key figures behind the reconstitution of the IFTU in 1919, have been published on microfilm.

The Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace of Stanford University in California holds the personal records of Walter Schevenels, general secretary of the IFTU from 1931 to 1945.

In addition to the archives of national confederations and leading figures within the IFTU, I studied the archives of the international organisations that were in close contact with the IFTU. The main source in this category was the Labour and Socialist

International (LSI), whose archives are kept at the IISH. Secondly, the archives of the International Labour Organization (ILO) also proved important. Although the ILO is an official body that was founded in 1919 in the context of the League of Nations, its relations with the IFTU, especially at the time of director Albert Thomas (1920–1932), also had a strongly informal character. In the ILO archives, which are kept at the headquarters of the organisation in Geneva, I was able to consult the personal papers of the successive directors (Thomas, Butler, and Winant).

As regards the international trade secretariats, I made a thorough study of the archives of the International Transportworkers Federation (ITF). These archives are divided between two locations: the Modern Records Centre (Warwick) and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (Bonn). In addition, I consulted the archives of the International Metalworkers' Federation and the International Textile Workers' Federation, both now in the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, neither of which contained many important documents from before 1945. The International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), an organisation<sup>21</sup> operating in the United States and Canada, provided an important archive. Stimulated by its leader, David Dubinsky, the ILGWU developed major initiatives in support of union resistance against fascism and Nazism. The archives of the ILGWU and the personal papers of David Dubinsky were consulted in the Kheel Center of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

Several times during its existence, the International Federation of Trade Unions aroused the special interest of a number of governments and public bodies. Especially during the two World Wars and at moments of international tension, the highest authorities of Great Britain, the United States, and France actively concerned themselves with the international trade union movement. This involvement left traces in a number of archives, such as those of President Roosevelt (Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York), the State Department (NARA, College Park, Maryland), Winston Churchill (Public Record Office, Kew), the Foreign Office (Public Record Office, Kew), and the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (Quai d'Orsay, Paris). A number of governments also charged their intelligence and espionage services with checking and monitoring the IFTU. Some intelligence services collaborated with people and organisations of the international workers' movement and the German intelligence service in particular, actively sought to suppress the international workers' unions. Although many countries currently still have an embargo on the archives of their intelligence services for the period under study, the consultation of a number of archives belonging to this category yielded some highly valuable material. The archives of the German Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA), which were kept in the Bundesarchiv Abteilungen Potsdam and the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz at the time of my study, contain dozens of files on the IFTU. Very recently, the Public Record Office released a part of the archives of the Special Operations Executive (SOE). In the US, there were the important and well-known archives of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS); although their declassification is still far from complete, they contain a wealth of information. The reports and analyses of the OSS are of a

very high quality and are therefore of great importance in helping to understand the evolution towards a worldwide federation of trade unions at the time of the Second World War. In the Netherlands, finally, the Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis (ING) is working on a project to open up a part of the Centrale Inlichtingendienst (CID) archives in its collection.

In the margin of this research, I also consulted several archives containing files concerning the IFTU: Paul Tofahrn, Transport and General Workers' Union (Modern Records Centre, Warwick), Clement Attlee (Bodleian Library, Oxford), Ernest Bevin (Churchill College, Cambridge), Marjorie Nicholson (University of North London), Abraham Plotkin (Kheel Center, Ithaca), National War Fund (NARA, College Park), Hans Gottfurcht, Walter Auerbach, Martin Plettl, Internationale Sozialistische Kampfbund, Restakten ADGB (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn), Jef Rens (Studiecentrum Oorlog en Hedendaagse Maatschappij, Brussels), and Jay Lovestone (Hoover, Stanford).

### **For a clear understanding**

When one looks at the history of an organisation as if it were the story of a life, one is soon tempted to give it the form of a chronological account. However, such an approach imposes too many restrictions when there are several important issues that warrant a more thorough and separate treatment. On the other hand, a thematic approach comes with the drawback that it tends to obscure the general picture. Therefore, I have chosen to steer a middle course. The first and most voluminous chapter doubles as a general introduction, in which the origins and the evolution of the Amsterdam International are placed in their historical context. This chapter introduces the leading figures and organisations and describes their ideas and actions. This first chronological chapter is followed by eight thematic chapters, each of which focuses on one particular aspect of the IFTU in greater detail. They cover those issues that led to heated discussions and caused serious problems within the IFTU: its relations with the communists, the international trade secretariats, the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the American trade union movement, and finally, the battle against fascism and Nazism. In addition, there is a short chapter on the women in the international trade union movement. I would also have liked to devote a chapter to how the IFTU dealt with the issues of colonialism, but as it would not have run to more than a few paragraphs, I opted to incorporate it in the chronological section. The work concludes with two chapters which already look ahead to the events that took place after 1945: the evolution towards a world federation of trade unions and the cooperation of organised labour with the Western intelligence services.

In my experience, the readability of an international institution's history is very often hampered by a frequent use of acronyms. Sentences such as 'the relationship between the IFTU and the ITSs came under pressure due to the fact that the ITF and

the IMF, amongst others, thought they were not carrying enough weight within the ILO' read rather like a secret code. I have attempted not to use the acronyms of organisations that are only mentioned sporadically, but there was no getting round the fact that this is a history of an umbrella organisation, and many of its member organisations are mentioned so frequently that it was impossible to avoid the use of acronyms altogether. However, I believe this should present no difficulties to anyone who is familiar with the issues at hand, and it takes only a small effort to memorise the most frequently used acronyms.

The official name of the organisation that was called the 'Amsterdam International' by many of its contemporaries was 'International Federation of Trade Unions' (IFTU). In addition to the IFTU, there was a whole series of international affiliations that had formed along industrial lines, culminating in the international trade secretariats or ITSs. The major ITS was the International Transportworkers Federation (ITF).

Besides these key players, there was a wide range of national federations and confederations. The most important among them are the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in the UK, the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) in France, the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund* (ADGB) in Germany, the *Commission Syndicale* in Belgium, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in the U.S.A., and its rival the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and the *Nederlandsch Vakverbond* (NVV) in the Netherlands. I have aimed at using the names of all the national federations in their original language. However, some quotations refer to a more or less literal translation or frequently, simply to their country of origin, as in: 'the Finnish TUC', 'the Belgian Central' or 'Swiss organisations'.

The IFTU had a few rivals, the greatest of which was the Communist Red International of Labour Unions (RILU). However, this RILU is frequently known by its other name, the Profintern.

In its everyday operations, the IFTU also had contacts with the Labour and Socialist International (LSI) and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

## Acknowledgements

Since 1982, I have had the good fortune of collaborating on the development of the Amsab Institute of Social History in Belgium. As a researcher and head of department, I have been involved in numerous projects that have resulted in publications and exhibitions. In 1990, I put together an exhibition in the Bruges Belfry on the international history of May Day. One of the members of the patronage committee was Johnny Vanderveken, then general secretary of the ICFTU. Through him, we came in contact with André Dewill, a former financial director of the ICFTU, who was also responsible for the archives. It is rare for an organisation of the labour movement to have well-preserved and ordered archives, and the ICFTU was no exception to this rule. Fortunately, there was sufficient historical awareness and commitment to

search for a permanent solution for its 'paper heritage'. The archives were transferred to the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, which has meanwhile drawn up an inventory.<sup>33</sup>

In the meantime, talks had been started on the feasibility of publishing a history of the ICFTU on the occasion of its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1999. This finally resulted in the publication of a general history of the ICFTU, to which I contributed with a chapter on the period between the two World Wars.<sup>34</sup> I was encouraged by the director of Amsab, Dr Wouter Steenhaut, and its chairman, Prof. Dr Herman Balthazar, to elaborate my research in greater depth with a view to a Ph.D. dissertation. Prof. Dr Marcel van der Linden proposed that I defend this thesis at the Universiteit van Amsterdam. I took up this suggestion with pleasure because in doing so, the Amsterdam International would, in a sense, be returning home again.

During my more than five years of research, I visited about thirty archive centres and became acquainted with as many information retrieval systems. I adapted to thirty different sets of internal regulations, dutifully filled in registers, applied in writing to custodians for permission to consult documents, addressed governments with requests to lift embargoes, always carried passport photos so I could instantly produce some whenever required for a membership card or pass, and paid all manner of admission fees and charges. In my experience, keeping strictly to the rules usually earns one smooth and courteous assistance. But there are exceptions. In one particular instance, I had passed through all the ordeals and removed all obstacles – or so I thought. I had notified my arrival in writing from Belgium, confirmed by telephone, had had my photograph taken for a badge and even paid an admission fee of FRF 100, only to find out that I could and would not get to see the one file that had been the sole object of all my efforts. Therefore, my thanks to the Archives Nationale de France need not be taken too literally.

But that was the exception. In some archives, I met very conscientious and friendly people, many of whom went far beyond the call of duty to help me. For that, I am grateful to Richard Storey, Christine Woodland, and Richard Temple of the Modern Records Centre in Warwick, Christine Coats of the University of North London, Klaus Mertsching of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Remo Becci of the International Labour Organization, Bob Reynolds of the George Meany Memorial Archives, Richard Strassberg and Patricia Sione at the Kheel Center, and Tab Lewis, John Taylor, and Milton Gustafson at the National Archives and Records Administration.

My special thanks go to the staff of the IISH. In the course of the several months I spent working there, I am afraid I made extensive demands on the staff of the reading room and the repositories.

I also wish to thank those colleagues who let me read their manuscripts, Dieter Nelles and Reiner Tosstorff, and my coauthors in the ICFTU project, Michel Dreyfus, Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick, Tony Carew, and Bart De Wilde. Thanks also to Katrien Van de Genachte and Renilde Kerstens for proofreading my texts and Martine Vermandere for her assistance with the research.

I especially wish to extend a word of thanks to my supervisor, Prof. Dr Marcel van der Linden, not only for his invitation to come to Amsterdam, but also for his careful reading of my text and his comments.

I owe a great deal to Wouter Steenhaut and Herman Balthazar. Our connections go back to 1977 when, as a licentiate student, I first developed an interest in the history of the labour movement. This was a choice that was to determine everything I have done since then. I have not regretted it for an instant and that is certainly due to a large extent to the support, understanding and friendship of Wouter and Herman.

To my family, I should extend apologies rather than thanks. My wife Hilde and my two children, Els and Jeroen, can tell you something about what Willem Elsschot described so aptly as 'the man whom they called their father, sitting immobile and silent at the fireside'.<sup>4</sup> My preoccupation was not only tangible, it was also very much in evidence. Dozens of boxes with copies of archives and publications were a permanent fixture in our household for almost two years. I shall miss them, but I do believe their absence will not be regretted by anyone else.

## Notes

- 1 Victor Silverman, *Imagining Internationalism in American and British Labor, 1939–1949*, Urbana & Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2000, p. 2.
- 2 Edo Fimmen, general secretary of the International Transportworkers Federation, to Walter Schevenels, general secretary of the International Federation of Trade Unions, 31 January 1933 (MRC, TUC Archives, 292/915.2/7).
- 3 This was the nickname given to the IFTU by its communist rivals. As is frequently the case, it became better known by its nickname than by its official name, and to this day, one will look in vain in many archives and documentation centres for material on the IFTU, because they are most frequently classified under the heading of 'Amsterdam'.
- 4 Ira Katznelson, *ILWCH Roundtable*, 1994.
- 5 On the recent recorded history of the international trade unions, see page 128.
- 6 Walter Schevenels, *Fifty-five Years IFTU*, Brussels, IFTU, 1956.
- 7 Hans Gottfurcht, *Die Internationale Gewerkschaftsbewegung im Weltgeschehen*, Cologne, Bund, 1966.
- 8 Lewis L. Lorwin, *The International Labor Movement. History, Policies, Outlook*, New York, Harper, 1953.
- 9 Susan Milner, *The Dilemmas of Internationalism: French Syndicalism and the International Labour Movement, 1900–1914*, Oxford, Berg, 1990.
- 10 Anthony Carew, Michel Dreyfus, Geert Van Goethem, Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick, and Marcel van der Linden (ed.), *The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions*, Berne, Peter Lang, 2000.
- 11 Patrick Pasture, *Histoire du Syndicalisme Chrétien International*, Paris, l'Harmattan, 1999.
- 12 Reiner Tosstorff, *Moskau oder Amsterdam*, Habilitationsschrift, Universität Mainz, 2000.
- 13 Whoever claims to wish to write a history of the international *free* trade union movement promptly elicits the question of what is meant exactly by the adjective *free*. It is a concept

that was introduced in international trade unionism mainly via Anglo-Saxon countries. National confederations used it as a criterion for exclusion, to deny competitors and adversaries admission to the international level, which means that its interpretation was variable and depended on the needs of the moment. The free trade union movement was non-communist and, in principle, it was not linked to any political party or regime. However, when the IFTU was founded in 1919 and its criteria of affiliation were drawn up, there was a strong emphasis on its 'socialist' nature, which especially served to exclude the non-aligned and Christian organisations. Communist unions were barred by adding 'democracy' and 'freedom of association' to the criteria. The politico-ideological criterion gradually lost strength, but at the time of the Second World War, when everyone's prime concern was to win the war, it looked as if every general requirement would be abandoned. At the outbreak of the cold war and the formation, in 1949, of the International Confederation of *Free Trade Unions*, the 'democratic' requirement once again came to constitute an impassable dividing line.

- 14 In the past, the history of the labour movement's international organisations has often almost exclusively been written based on congress reports. This effectively attaches over-much importance to what Jolyon Howorth describes as: 'Elaborate public relations exercises designed to impress governments and socialist militants alike.' (Jolyon Howorth, 'French Workers and German Workers: The Impossibility of Internationalism, 1900–1914', *European History Quarterly*, 15 (1985), p. 72.)
- 15 Marcel van der Linden, *Het naderende einde van de vaderlandse geschiedenis en de toekomstige studie der sociale bewegingen*, Amsterdam, 1999.
- 16 Ira Katznelson, 'The "Bourgeois" Dimension: A Provocation About Institutions, Politics, and the Future of Labor History', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 46, 1994, pp. 7–32.
- 17 Karl Heinz Roth and Karsten Linne, 'Searching for Lost Archives', *International Review of Social History*, (38), no. 2, August 1993, pp. 163–207.
- 18 J. Lust, E. Marechal, W. Steenhaut and M. Vermote, *Een zoektocht naar archieven: Van NISG naar AMSAB*, Ghent, 1997.
- 19 W. Steenhaut, 'Foreword', in *The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions*, A. Carew et al., p. II.
- 20 Allied Control Authority Reparation Deliveries and Restitution, Receipt for Cultural Objects, 15 November 1946 (NARA, OMGUS. Records of the Property Division – Ardelia Hall Collection, RG 260, no. 390/45/17-18/7-2 Box 39).
- 21 Which today is a section of the larger amalgamated union UNITE!
- 22 Erhan Tuskan, *Inventory of the Archives of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU)*, Amsterdam, IISH, 1998.
- 23 Geert Van Goethem, 'Conflicting Interests: The International Federation of Trade Unions (1919–1945)', in *The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions*, A. Carew et al., pp. 73–163.
- 24 From *Het Huwelijk* (The Marriage) by Willem Elsschot.

# THE WORLD OF THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS

*Amsterdam, Berlin, and Paris*

*Labour – The World!*

## The International Secretariat

Internationalism and nationalism are frequently presented as contradictory concepts but from its inception, the international trade union movement was both an arena where national interests did battle and a driving force towards international development. This developed naturally from its origins: the international trade union movement grew both out of national structures and out of the deliberative and consultative bodies on which the leading representatives of these structures met one another.

Originally, the national framework was the only reality for the labour movement as a whole, when it started to develop in the last quarter of the nineteenth century as a mass movement. This was a reality that was quite different from one country to another, politically as well as economically. These movements increasingly became reformist, and this too resulted in a greater interest in the national sphere. Their reformism concentrated on feasible reforms and on the development of an organisational counterforce. This assumed a priority of national action over international operations. Moreover, the spirit of the age was also conducive to nationalism in all European countries, or in the words of Horace Davis, 'nationalism had become so much a way of life, for the working class as for everyone else, that even the workers who talked about internationalism practiced nationalism as a matter of course'.<sup>3</sup>

It was the German social democrats who started to elaborate the reformist model from around 1870 onwards. It was not until this process had spread to other European countries that the first initiatives were taken to set up a form of international cooperation, though without attempting to reconcile mutual differences. When the Second International was founded in 1889, this was a confirmation of the creed of the German model of social democracy, with its emphasis on the development of a broad network of associations on a national basis. The Second International was the umbrella organisation that was, in principle, supposed to encompass this entire field.

The domain covered by the International was very broad and was certainly not restricted to politics; quite the contrary in fact. Many of the issues addressed by the International, such as the eight-hour working day and social legislation were, by nature, also those of the workers' unions. By the turn of the century, the attention of the Second International was even largely absorbed by issues which belonged predominantly, though not exclusively, to the domain of the unions. Moreover, roughly half of the members of the Second International were trade union organisations.<sup>3</sup> A certain division of labour or specialisation was therefore a logical development, but this too was one that occurred first at the national level.

In most industrialised countries, trade unions were initially a heterogeneous group of regional and/or occupational (i.e., craft or trade) organisations. Between 1888 and 1905, the unions grew so strongly almost everywhere that they became mass organisations. One of the consequences of this growth was an increasing need for coordinated cooperation at the national level. This led to the formation of a whole series of national confederations around the turn of the century<sup>4</sup>: the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (1895, France), the *Commission Syndicale* (1898, Belgium), the *Nationaal Arbeids-Secretariaat* (1893, the Netherlands), the *Generalkommission der Gewerkschaften* (1890, Germany), the *Samvirkende Fagforbund i Danmark* (1898, Denmark), the *Landsorganisationen i Sverige* (1898, Sweden), and the *Arbeidernes Faglige Landsorganisasjon* (1899, Norway). This development also reflected the Marxist view that the proletariat was to fight on two fronts: the political and the economic. But there were great differences of opinion on the question of whether these two battles were also to be waged in the separate structures, and on the nature of the relations that should be maintained between these structures. These debates were fought both at the national and international level.

Apart from these discussions, a trend emerged around the turn of the century. Although it took on a different form depending on the local background, it was unmistakably of similar inspiration everywhere: trade union movements started to aspire to greater autonomy, though without wanting to break away from the political parties. The party and the union became like two sides of the same coin, each with a clearly defined task and profile.

The foundation in 1901 of an international consultative body where the leading officials of the diverse European national federations could meet and discuss, was an expression of this urge for greater independence of the trade unions. The idea of bringing these young national federations together at regular intervals came from the president of the Danish federation, J. Jensen, and was sanctioned in 1900 by Isaac Michel of the British General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU). The German Carl Legien,<sup>5</sup> backed by the powerful German federation, the *Generalkommission der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands*, that had more than one million members, was willing and able to bear the administrative and logistic expenses. The International Secretariat of National Trade Union Centres (ISNTUC) was subsequently founded at a conference in Copenhagen on 21 August 1901.<sup>6</sup> At first, the role of the ISNTUC re-

mained limited to exchanging information and giving support to the development of national federations in the various countries. Programmatic union issues remained exclusively the sphere of the Second International. This is why the organisation was later labelled a 'post-box' organisation,<sup>7</sup> although a number of developments did in fact start within the ISNTUC, along with a particular organisational culture that would long outlive the organisation itself.

The ISNTUC (also known simply as the 'International Secretariat', or IS for short) played an important role in the gradual process of bringing the European trade union movement into the same reformist line, and in the evolution towards a greater organisational independence and a more distinct political role of the trade unions. But this was an evolution that took place in an atmosphere of conflict, in which the most politically engaged organisations, such as the French CGT, were also the least reformist.

The IS thus had an eventful and conflict-ridden history. It was divided at the core between two contradictory union concepts: the syndicalist concept, which was mainly advocated and embodied by the French CGT, and the social democratic concept of the German trade union movement. For the German-led majority within the IS, the case was straightforward: the trade union international was to be subordinate to the political international. Historian Susan Milner therefore concluded that 'The IS consciously limited its competence and authority, and it deferred to the Socialist International on almost all matters of general significance'.<sup>8</sup> The real discussions about the relations between the party and the union were therefore not held in the IS, but in the Second International, where feelings on this subject ran high. In 1907, the congress of the International in Stuttgart would even address the question as a burning issue,<sup>9</sup> and it was a bone of contention again in Copenhagen in 1910. While the Second International remained divided about the relations between the political and the economic organisations, the IS took pains to prevent this question from being a divisive element by imposing strict limits on its own activities.

In any case, the IS had no monopoly. In addition to the international of the national organisations, industrial federations had started to unite into international trade secretariats (ITSS) ever since 1890. By the time the IS was founded, there were already seventeen of these ITSS, and their number rose to twenty-eight by 1914. It was a development that was viewed with suspicion by the national confederations. For IS secretary Legien, the proliferation of ITSS was 'premature and futile' and international cooperation was to remain the province of 'established centralist organisations'.<sup>10</sup> But thanks to its superior numbers, the German federation was able to call the tune here too. Of the twenty-eight ITSS, twenty-four had their headquarters in Germany, which meant that just like the IS, they were also financially and logistically dependent on the German organisations.<sup>11</sup>

The ideological discussion within the Second International was mirrored in the unions: there too, the social democratic model gradually became the dominant one, increasingly suppressing the syndicalist model. But in the trade unions themselves,

the syndicalists were able to keep up their resistance for longer. However, there were not only syndicalists. The IS also had important neutral and politically non-aligned members. The most important member of this category was the American Federation of Labor (AFL). In addition, there was the British General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU). The British Trades Unions Congress (TUC), already an established organisation with a long tradition by 1900, remained absent from the IS.<sup>15</sup> For that matter, the TUC did not have a clear political affiliation either, and was more of a loose collaboration of autonomous trade unions, lacking a powerful executive body. When British trade unions needed international connections, they would go through their own ITS. The idea that the TUC itself would become active on the international forum was especially advocated in Labour Party circles and would only become generally accepted during the war.<sup>15</sup>

After a few difficult early years, the formula of the IS was no longer satisfactory, and there was a growing body of opinion that wanted it to have wider powers. The affiliates, who were no longer content with the modest information meetings that passed for congresses of the IS, called for 'real' congresses, and the organisation was urged to assume a more coordinating role. The advocates of this new strategy were not the social democrats; on the contrary, they were the French CGT and the American Federation of Labor, with its legendary leader Samuel Gompers.<sup>16</sup> The CGT, which did not take part in the Second International, had already been in favour of a more programmatic approach of the international trade union movement since the start of the IS. The French tried to impose their own syndicalist accents by putting tactical items to the agenda. For instance, in addition to the issue of the eight-hour working day, they insisted on addressing the question of the general strike. But Legien saw this as a 'project competing with the socialist International',<sup>16</sup> which made him reject every attempt in this direction. This was the reason why the CGT withdrew from the organisation between 1905 and 1909.<sup>16</sup> The AFL too had political-strategic reasons for advocating a more active and autonomous international labour movement. The Americans rejected all political interference in the trade unions at home, so they could hardly agree to a complete subjection of the union international to the political international at the global level. By weight of numbers alone, this position of the American trade union movement was a strong signal that could not be ignored by the European organisations.

However, the German leaders would not swerve, though they had to accept formal changes. Therefore at the 1913 congress in Zürich, the IS was converted into the 'International Federation of Trade Unions' (IFTU). The name was changed following an AFL resolution that formulated more general objectives for the international trade union movement, e.g.: 'the protection and advancement of the rights, interests and justice of the wage-workers of all countries and the establishment of international fraternity and solidarity'.<sup>17</sup> At the congress itself though, the American delegate stated that he would be satisfied with a change of name, a suggestion Legien was only too pleased to take up. The new name was therefore an expression of the ambition to in-

novate rather than the start of a new organisation, as the IFTU simply continued along the lines of its predecessor. The conversion of the IS into the IFTU was originally no more than a facelift.<sup>18</sup>

Again, this can be explained by the fear of the German and Austrian social democrats of competitive currents in workers' circles. They believed that it would only be possible to develop a powerful and effective international labour movement once all the national movements had conformed to the social democratic model. According to this view, held by Theodor Leipart<sup>19</sup> amongst others, it was of paramount importance for the federations in the different countries to work towards the same goal: 'this uniformity of aims, together with certain agreed principles, form the foundations for the effectiveness of the International Federation of Trade Unions'.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the international closed its ranks and pursued a selective policy. The rule was that only one national federation would be recognised in each country. This was a means of achieving the desired ideological homogeneity.

Therefore, in spite of its apparently insignificant role, the IS was an important instrument in the German trade union movement's tenacious efforts towards unity. Although on the face of it, the story of the IS would seem to be the story of the victory of the German model over the French one, it was the French radical tradition that would eventually survive the war and whose ideas, such as the general strike, were to cause such discordant discussions later on.

## **The First World War**

By the beginning of the war, the German leaders of the IFTU had turned the organisation into a well-oiled machine that fulfilled an important supporting function for its members in the field of the exchange of literature and information. The secretariat had a staff of twelve full-time employees comprising four English, four Swiss, an American, a Dane, and two Germans,<sup>21</sup> and was strongly international in its outlook. After the outbreak of the hostilities, the IFTU virtually ceased to operate. The staff was dismissed or left of their own accord, and publication of the bulletin, *Correspondance Syndicale*, was perforce discontinued. But although the federation had practically suspended its activities, its international contacts were not broken off entirely. President Legien kept up an active international correspondence, with which he attempted to maintain at least some of his personal ties with leaders of affiliated organisations.<sup>22</sup>

However, the war had divided the international labour movement into three camps. On the side of the Entente countries, a British-French axis soon formed whose ambition was to develop their collaboration 'with a view to maintaining the existing understanding, and the organising of joint efforts'.<sup>23</sup> The unions of the Allied countries no longer wished to be associated with the German trade unions and urged for the headquarters of the IFTU to be moved.<sup>24</sup> Legien conceded in part. In consultation with Jan Oudegeest<sup>25</sup> of the Dutch central (NVV), a so-called 'liaison office' was

set up in Amsterdam. But this was not enough for the unions of the Allied camp. They saw it as a manoeuvre of the Germans because according to the French, Oudegeest was 'devoted to Legien'.<sup>26</sup> Apparently, the pre-war dominance of the Germans made public opinion suspicious of the IFTU as a whole. W.A. Appleton<sup>27</sup> of the GFTU even claimed that 'it will take some years even to convince large numbers of our people that the International Secretariat is not a part of the German system of espionage'.<sup>28</sup> In order to shake off all involvement with the former German colleagues, it was eventually decided in July 1916 at a conference in Leeds, to set up a 'correspondence office' in Paris, to be led by Léon Jouhaux.<sup>29</sup>

A second issue over which opinion was divided during the war was the question of who would convene an international conference, where, and when. The Allied, neutral and German blocs all tried to gain control over these decisions, conscious that the party setting the agenda and issuing the invitations would also have a considerable influence on the outcome of this conference. From the start of the war, Samuel Gompers of the AFL advocated the organisation of an international labour conference concurrently with the peace conference. Oudegeest tried to organise a conference in mid-1915 in consultation with Legien, but met with general unwillingness. There was more agreement on the principle that 'labour', represented by the trade union organisations, should play an important role in the forthcoming peace conference. In Leeds in 1916, the Allied camp supported the conclusions of a report by Léon Jouhaux, in which he pleaded for 'industrial clauses to be inserted into the peace treaty'.<sup>30</sup> The TUC also backed up this call for the 'participation of labour in peace negotiations'.<sup>31</sup> Jouhaux's memorandum was taken up again one year later at the conference of organisations of the neutral and Axis countries in Berne, where it was discussed and accepted. Eventually, it would serve as the basis for the programme of demands that was laid down immediately after the war by the international trade union conference of February 1919 in Berne. In spite of the rift between the different blocs, this development did lead to a consensus on the new role for organised labour as a participant in the future international community, and a framework was drawn up for a reform programme.

In addition, the difficulties presented by the possibility of an international conference in Stockholm exercised many minds in the unions. As it turned out, this conference was of little importance for the international trade union movement. On 8 June 1917, a select company met at Legien's invitation, 'in order to deal beforehand with the social legislation problems'<sup>32</sup> which would be discussed at the actual conference by the delegates of the various political parties. However, as it was obvious that the organisations present in Stockholm could not possibly be considered representative, they had no choice but to convene another international trade union conference in Switzerland at a later date.

Then the US entered the war and the revolution broke out in Russia. Developments gained momentum. Both events strengthened the influence of the labour movement, especially in the Allied countries. In the US, the AFL was one of the pillars

of President Woodrow Wilson. As regards the young Soviet Union, the socialist parties, which were part of the various Allied governments, were the obvious channels for convincing the new leaders of the Kremlin to stay in the war.

Moreover, the October Revolution was a signal to the established political and economic powers that they had better take the demands of the labour movement seriously if they wanted to avoid disaster. Consequently, the demand for a greater input of the labour movement in the upcoming peace conference was positively received and given due attention.

The great commotion that swept the various participants from 1917 onwards was partly due to this. The general feeling was that they stood on the brink of historic events and that the leaders of the labour movement would be able to have a substantial influence on their outcome. Leaders of labour organisations entered the forum of the great statesmen, or, in the words of Gary Busch, 'national centres of the Allied Powers were interested in building a role for themselves in the creation of a framework for the eventual peace negotiations'.<sup>33</sup>

Within the Allied camp, two trends emerged. On the one hand, there was the British Labour Party led by Arthur Henderson,<sup>34</sup> which believed in a peace by settlement and wanted to participate in the Stockholm conference. Henderson was even willing to give up his portfolio in the government for it. He wanted to proceed to a restoration of the Second International as quickly as possible and would grasp at the first opportunity to engage in talks with the enemy camp. On the other hand, there was Gompers of the AFL, who refused to talk to the Germans as long as the war was still on. Gompers was not interested in restoring the political international, as he would have nothing to do with it, but he was very keen on resurrecting the trade union international and even cherished the ambition to lead it. Additionally, he envisaged a major role in the peace talks for himself and for his organisation.

The other actors, both in the Allied camp and in the neutral bloc, held positions in between these two extremes. The French CGT was hesitant. It was less rigid than the AFL in its rejection of the Germans, but supported the reconstitution of the IFTU more than the TUC did. Among the Belgians, the dominant feeling was one of aversion to the Germans, whom they did not wish to meet, either in the political or in the trade union international. The Dutch however, had maintained quite cordial relations with the German camp throughout the war and were able to build a bridge, but the Americans distrusted them. The leaders of the British GFTU stuck scrupulously to the AFL line, in the vain hope they would be able to count on the support of the AFL in their rivalry with the TUC. Finally, the TUC showed a growing interest in international issues and wanted to be represented both in the political and trade union international, for which purpose it was busily making deals both with Labour and the GFTU.

After the military defeat, the Germans were forced to relinquish their former dominance. Although they continued to try to influence the debate, they were sent into the wilderness for almost ten years. There is some evidence that this drove the Germans to seek an alliance with the Dutch and the French. According to the French

embassy in Switzerland, a secret conference took place in August 1918 between socialist groups from the three camps, attended by representatives from the Netherlands, Germany, France, and Switzerland.<sup>35</sup> The IFTU was represented by Legien. It is not clear what the outcome of this conference was, but it could explain why the CGT adopted such a recalcitrant attitude towards the AFL.<sup>36</sup>

### **Berne and Versailles**

By the end of the war, the key question was therefore when and where to organise an international 'labour' conference. The Inter-Allied and Socialist Conference of 17–19 September 1918, organised by Henderson's British Labour Party, was the occasion for reaching a compromise on this question in the Allied camp.<sup>37</sup> Samuel Gompers seemed to have carried the day there. The conference decided not to make any contact with 'enemy labour' before the end of war, accepted the entire fourteen-point programme of President Wilson,<sup>38</sup> and endorsed the old demand of Gompers: the organisation of an 'international labor conference' at the same time and place as the official peace conference. The organisation of this conference was entrusted to the quadrumvirate of Emile Vandervelde,<sup>39</sup> Albert Thomas, Arthur Henderson, and Samuel Gompers. 'This result constitutes the triumph of the programme championed by M. Gompers',<sup>40</sup> concluded the French embassy in London.

But the consensus between the organisations of the Allied countries was fragile, and a number of problems remained unspoken. Henderson, Vandervelde, and Thomas were hardly interested in a trade union international at that time. They were preoccupied by matters of much greater importance, such as the political outcome of the war, the new situation that would present itself in their different countries, and the role that would be reserved in the new order for their socialist parties. Gompers for his part stubbornly resisted any possible alliance of the trade union movement with political parties and wanted a new trade union international that would be politically neutral.

The distrust of the German socialists harboured by the Allied governments, and especially the fear that the peace conference would offer a forum for radical socialist elements if they were admitted in Paris, torpedoed the proposal of the Allied countries. For the French and British governments, holding a workers' conference at the same place and time as the peace conference was out of the question, but they did not oppose the organisation of a conference in a neutral country. Gompers could argue as much as he wanted that it was not his intention 'to meet with a political party' and merely wished for a conference of 'a new international federation of labor',<sup>41</sup> it fell on deaf ears outside the US. However, the American delegation did travel to Europe to take part in the Versailles peace conference, in which Samuel Gompers would play a prominent role as the president of the 'Commission on International Labour Legislation'.

Arthur Henderson now saw his opportunity to force through his idea for a general conference of the parties and trade unions of the three blocs. For this purpose, he made use of the mandate that had been given in London to the quadrumvirate of Vandervelde, Thomas, Henderson, and Gompers. In January 1919, he convened a conference in Lausanne of the Allied groups that had also been present in London.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, he agreed with the secretary of the Second International, Camille Huysmans,<sup>43</sup> and the Swede Hjalmar Branting,<sup>44</sup> to hold a conference between the organisations of the neutral and central countries,<sup>45</sup> at the same time and place.

Finally, this conference was not held in Lausanne, but in Berne, from 5 to 9 February 1919. Viewed from a trade union perspective, this conference was important because it formulated a broad reform programme and paved the way for the reconstitution of the International Federation of Trade Unions. As part of the conference, a separate union session was held, that brought together trade unions from the three camps for the first time in four years.<sup>46</sup> The tone of both the British and the French delegates was one of reconciliation.<sup>47</sup>

As Berne brought together both the political parties and the trade unions, the question of their mutual relations naturally arose at once. The fact that the trade unions wanted to meet separately placed the British TUC in a difficult position. Although it was qualified to take part in the political meeting, it lacked a clear mandate to do the same at the trade union conference. Moreover, the TUC delegation feared that the two conferences might well reach different conclusions on the same issues. Jouhaux, however, did not think such an outcome was a problem, because 'the trade union conference will decide on the questions concerning workers' interests'.<sup>48</sup> Still, the British left the conference, to return the following day. The Swedes, Austrians, and Germans also claimed to hold only a mandate for the socialist conference, though this may have been a pretext for not having to discuss the headquarter question.

Although Berne was not a regular conference, the debate was an interesting one. Oudegeest, who arrived a few days late, had not yet caught onto the new mentality. In the discussion on the League of Nations, Jouhaux voiced a number of political demands: the abolition of the national armies, the internationalisation of the arms industry and control over the distribution of raw materials. But Oudegeest reminded the delegates that the earlier international trade union conferences had decided that 'only questions of administration and organisation should be dealt with at the international trade union conferences'.<sup>49</sup> The German Janson too was still following the pre-war tradition and pointed to the unanimity that had reigned so far at the international conferences, 'when only Trade-Union questions were on the agenda'.<sup>50</sup>

However, the French replied that: 'if the new Trade-Union International should like to remain without ideals, without a final purpose, it could not long be a unity. It would be disrupted and its separate parts would join the political international'.<sup>51</sup> Finally, a committee was formed and formulated a compromise that no longer overtly referred to the political anti-war objectives, but stated that the League of Nations, besides a political role, also had an economic remit in the field of control on

the distribution of raw materials, the regulation of the financial markets and transportation, and the development of labour legislation. The greater moral authority of the French CGT at this point in time, combined with the weakened position of the Germans, led the international labour movement to shift its ground and adopt more politically inspired standpoints, an evolution that would continue over the following months.

One of the key subjects of debate in Berne was the international programme for social reform. The French, German, and British delegates, building on the decisions of the congresses of Leeds (1916) and Berne (1917), succeeded in drafting a programme that was meant to be the guideline for the workers' representatives on the 'Commission on International Labour Legislation' of the peace conference, that was meeting at the same time in Paris, chaired by Samuel Gompers. This Berne programme demanded the general implementation of a whole series of social laws, including the right of association, the eight-hour working day, unemployment insurance, equal pay for equal work for women, the minimum wage, and an international body for labour legislation on which the organised workers would be officially represented. However, Gompers refused to recognise the Berne decisions and simply forced his own views on the committee, to the great disappointment of many, including Léon Jouhaux.

There was also disagreement in Berne on the problem of the structure and headquarters of the future IFTU. The participants could not find a solution and resolved to convene a fully-fledged IFTU conference. The only question that remained was who would send the invitations. After some discussion, this task was entrusted to the correspondence office in Paris and the liaison office in Amsterdam.<sup>52</sup> This too could point to the formation of a coalition. As it happens, according to the French intelligence services, another secret meeting took place between Oudegeest, Legien, and Jouhaux at this point, in which they agreed that the headquarters of the IFTU would be transferred from Berlin to Amsterdam and that 'Oudegeest shall lead it'<sup>53</sup> (meaning he was to be president). The Dutchmen in charge of the Amsterdam liaison office, Edo Fimmen<sup>54</sup> and Jan Oudegeest, then contacted the various national headquarters over the following months and managed to find enough national federations willing to participate in the reconstitution congress of the IFTU in July 1919 in Amsterdam. Together with Jouhaux, they also laid down the agenda and the programme, which had a clear political slant.

The Berne conference was also a further step towards the ideological harmonisation of the European national trade union movement. Although the conference explicitly refused to exclude organisations that did not invoke the class struggle, the reform programme, aimed at the rapid improvement of the working and living conditions of the working class, was linked to a long-term perspective, 'the suppression of capitalist society'.<sup>55</sup> This closed the doors to the confessional trade unions and those of 'bourgeois-liberal' signature.<sup>56</sup> The pre-war difficulties were gradually being solved, now that the British TUC had politically associated itself with the now clearly social democratic Labour Party, and the majority movement within the

French CGT had renounced syndicalism. To those who criticised his actions, Léon Jouhaux retorted: 'to achieve revolution, it is not enough to organise a riot, which is always easy; it is a matter of organising the order of the things which must replace those we set out to destroy'.<sup>57</sup>

In Berne, there was never really a chance of restoring unity within the international trade union movement, simply because a number of important partners were absent. The AFL, apparently to the displeasure of even the American government,<sup>58</sup> did not waver from its refusal to deal with any representatives of the central powers before the formal end of the war and the signing of the peace treaty. The Belgian Trade Union Commission took the same line, and the British GFTU, to its great chagrin, had not even been invited by the TUC.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the trade unions present in Berne also rejected Huysmans's idea for structural international cooperation between the three main branches of the socialist movement: the parties, the trade unions, and the cooperatives. According to Edo Fimmen, the time was now ripe for a trade union international,<sup>60</sup> whereas the Austrian Grünwald spoke of the 'wish to be a real International'.<sup>61</sup> Even many of those who were not present in Berne held similar views: 'the bona fide trade union movement of various countries should have some sort of Federation with a closer relationship than has existed heretofore, and in such a Federation I am firmly convinced that the politicians from any of the political parties of any of the countries should be rigidly excluded', wrote Appleton to Gompers.<sup>62</sup> Thus, the great discussion that had dominated the IS for so many years was finally closed. There was to be a fully-fledged and autonomous trade union international with a broad, activist and, all in all, rather moderate reform programme.

One of the main reasons why the national confederations were in such a hurry to reestablish the IFTU was the impending international labour conference that was scheduled for the autumn of 1919 in Washington. At this conference, one of the major demands of the labour movement, namely the creation of the International Labour Organization (ILO), would be granted. The reformist trade unions wanted to secure a place for themselves at the head of this new international organisation. But in order to fulfil these leadership ambitions, they needed a representative organ, and that was to be the IFTU.

### **Amsterdam: to have a go at Gompers**

'A new organisation, a new tactic and new action will show that the international organisation of the trade union movement of 1919, is no longer that of 1914 and the preceding years',<sup>63</sup> this was the ambitious objective set out by Edo Fimmen at the opening of the IFTU's constituent congress in Amsterdam on 28 July.

There had previously been a brief meeting of the 'old' IFTU, 'for the purpose of hearing the views of the Belgian Labour Party'.<sup>64</sup> For the Belgian delegation, led by Corneel Mertens,<sup>65</sup> it was 'necessary to first discuss the past before starting on the

future'.<sup>66</sup> In fact, the Belgian Trade Union Commission insisted that the German delegation should only be granted access to the union international on condition they make a public admission of guilt. It finally came from Johannes Sassenbach.<sup>67</sup> It was a weak statement that admitted injustice had been done to the Belgian people, while justifying the attitude of the German trade unions. Sassenbach claimed that the German people had been honestly convinced that the war was a war of defence. Had they known the fact of the matter, he claimed, the German workers would have opposed the war with all the resources at their disposal, but they had simply not known: 'If everything that was published recently had been known at the start of the war, we would not have been deceived by our government and then, at any rate, the German workforce and its supporters would have been in a very different position'.<sup>68</sup> Still, the Belgians indicated they were satisfied with the statement, thereby opening the door not only to the Germans, but also to themselves.

The war still loomed large. The Dutch organisers lodged the delegations of the various camps in different hotels. 'In the street, people just passed each other by'.<sup>69</sup> Sassenbach later reminisced how, whenever he dared to speak to a delegate from one of the Entente countries, his German colleagues would cast accusatory glances at him, 'as if I were about to commit treason'.<sup>70</sup> This atmosphere of tension also pervaded the press reports: 'The wartime hostility still weights heavily; the electricity in the air is tangible'.<sup>71</sup> Even agenda items relating to order proved to be hurdles, and especially Samuel Gompers was frequently unbending and repeatedly attacked Legien. The press and public opinion also remained sensitive to nationalistic sentiments. Reports in the German press of Sassenbach's confession of guilt caused a storm of protests in Germany, after which the rest of the German delegation<sup>72</sup> declared, on the fifth day of the congress, 'that we only arrived after Sassenbach's declaration in Amsterdam and cannot condone its wording',<sup>73</sup> a statement with which the Germans once again placed themselves with one foot outside the international.

The actual constituent congress of the IFTU was held in the Amsterdam *Concertgebouw* in the presence of trade union confederations from fourteen countries.<sup>74</sup> Together, they represented 17,740,000 members. With the exception of the AFL, they were all from Europe. The only absent industrialised country was Italy, but that was due to passport problems. Samuel Gompers raised his prestige by the mandate he held from the Pan American Federation of Labor (PAFL),<sup>75</sup> an international federation of trade unions from North and South America that had only just been formed a few weeks before. In principle, only one national organisation per country was admitted to the congress, though there were three exceptions: the British delegation, which acted as one<sup>76</sup> but was a mixture of GFTU and TUC delegates; the Dutch delegation, in which both the Trade Union Federation (NVV) and the syndicalist National Labour Secretariat (NAS)<sup>77</sup> were represented, and the German delegation, which combined representatives from the Generalkommission der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands and from the syndicalist Vereinigung Deutscher Gewerkschaften, which had 60,000 members at the time.<sup>78</sup>