

Marcel van der Linden

## 8.4. Trade Unions

About what trade unions are exactly, opinions vary greatly.<sup>1</sup> The literature provides dozens – and possibly even hundreds – of definitions which sometimes highlight very different aspects. The common thread is that trade unions are organizations that enable employees to protect their interests. The employees concerned may include regular wage-earners, but also self-employed workers who are formally independent entrepreneurs, but who in fact work for only one or two employers, or who are agricultural share-croppers, bonded wage labourers, or slaves-for-hire.

Employees who join a union have two main kinds of interests to defend. These concern the exchange of labour power for money (the implicit or explicit labour contract) and the actual “consumption” of the labour power bought by the employer, during the labour process. Trade unions therefore deal both with wage negotiations, sick pay arrangements, etc., and with working conditions, labour intensity, and the like. A strike, or the threat of a strike, is the ultimate weapon a trade union has to enforce these interests. Although strikes are not the only weapon available to unions, a union that never calls a strike, or seriously threatens a strike, is not a trade union.

Trade unions have a long history. On 24 May 1345, the Captain of the Italian City of Florence arrested the wool-carder Ciuto Brandini and his two sons “because he said Ciuto wished to form a company at Santa Croce and make a sect and assembly with the other workmen in Florence.” The specific charge of the authorities was as follows:

“Ciuto had deliberated together with many others seduced by his words to form with the largest membership possible a brotherhood between the wool-carders and wool-combers and the other workers of the *Arte della Lana*, and to nominate from such new corporations, *Consoli* and Heads, and to this end had on different occasions and places assembled very many workmen of the worst reputation, and had in such assemblies proposed that each should contribute a certain sum (a matriculation tax) in order that thus it would more surely succeed.”

Despite the massive strike and riots that Ciuto’s companions staged in protest, Ciuto was hanged by the authorities.<sup>2</sup>

Ciuto appears to have been trying to organize a union, complete with a dues system and elected leaders. From that time, there have been countless attempts across the whole world to form unions. Although Ciuto’s experiment seems to have been a spontaneous, isolated initiative – we cannot be entirely sure – unions arose in many

---

<sup>1</sup> This chapter includes material published in Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World. Essays toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden and Boston, 2008), chapters 11 and 12.

<sup>2</sup> Niccolò Rodolico, “The Struggle for the Right of Association in Fourteenth-Century Florence”, *History*, 7 (1922–23), pp. 178–190, at 184.

other ways as well, through imitation and transformation of already existing organizations.

## Trade unions and strikes

Unions exist primarily to enable collective bargaining over wages, rights and conditions, with the capacity to call a strike as their ultimate bargaining weapon. But they use other means of action as well, such as restriction of output, violence, etc. (see Chapter 8.3) and there is no *necessary* transition from strike action to industrial organization, even though trade unions have often experienced spectacular membership growth during and after strike waves.<sup>3</sup>

Trade unions come in many shapes and sizes. Classified according to their frequency of resorting to strikes, we can distinguish broadly between unions that exist exclusively, or almost exclusively, to organize strikes; unions that organize strikes, but serve other purposes as well; and unions intended to prevent strikes where possible. Given that, apart from autonomous trade unions where the members have a direct or indirect say, there are also heteronomous trade unions ultimately controlled by employers or third parties, we obtain the following typology:

**Table 1:** A general typology of trade unions

|   | Autonomy   | Heteronomy                   |
|---|--|------------------------------|
| Union is intended primarily to organize strikes     | Revolutionary<br>Syndicalism,<br>“mushroom” unions | —                            |
| Union is not intended primarily to organize strikes | Craft societies<br>Bargaining unions               | Autocratic unions<br>Rackets |
| Union is not intended to organize strikes           | —  | Yellow unions                |

Let us elaborate these categories.

i) *Autonomous unions intended primarily to organize strikes* comprise two sub-types. On the one hand, some trade unions are formed at the start of, or during a strike, and disband quickly afterwards (regardless of whether the strike ends in victory, defeat, or compromise). These kinds of unions are often called “mushroom organizations.” A great many “mushroom unions” existed. In the early twentieth century, for example, John Commons wrote that newly proletarianized Jewish workers in the United States were zealous, enthusiastic and resolute in labour conflicts, but that

---

<sup>3</sup> Eric Hobsbawm has even noted that all “‘explosions’ of labour unionism with which I am familiar” were “the *result* of worker mobilization and not its cause.” Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour. Further Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1984), p. 291. Even if this is true, many cases of worker mobilization did *not* cause an explosion of labour unionism.

“once the strike was settled, either in favor or against the cause [...] that ends the union.”<sup>4</sup> The same trend is visible across the world. In Nigeria in the 1950s, many workers “would feel obliged to support the union financially, and otherwise, only when there is a wages agitation, or to make a contribution to its coffers after a new award has been won.”<sup>5</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty has noted about the Calcutta jute workers: “Each outburst of labour protest, especially from the 1920s, resulted in some kind of organization. Once the outburst spent itself, however, the organization as a rule disintegrated.”<sup>6</sup> About Argentina, Ruth Thompson writes: “Before the 1900s, most of the unions that existed were short-lived, formed to fight a particular campaign but not durable thereafter.”<sup>7</sup>

The second type consists of the trade unions that outlast a single labour conflict, and organize a series of strikes. Best known among such “serial strike organizations” are the revolutionary syndicalist trade unions, which operated on all continents between 1890 and 1940. These organizations regarded the conflict between workers and employers as a “class war”, to be won through ongoing guerrilla efforts.<sup>8</sup>

ii) *Autonomous trade unions that do not exist solely to organize strikes*, but develop other activities as well, include three types. Firstly, there are organizations that do *not* negotiate with employers, but instead practice unilateral control. Such organizations were common in early nineteenth-century Britain, where union members frequently refused to work for employers who did not observe the traditional rules of the trade and the rates of pay.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, there are trade unions willing to negotiate about some issues, but not others. Thirdly, many organizations are willing to negotiate with the employers. These organizations are now typical of the “modern” trade union movement everywhere in the world.

iii) *Heteronomous trade unions not intended exclusively to organize strikes* but with other responsibilities as well include two sub-types. In autocratic unions, officials have accumulated so much power that they cannot, or can no longer, be deposed by the members. Secondly, there are “rackets”, set up by organized crime to benefit from industrial relations and regulated by violence. This type of “hold-up unionism” (Robert F. Hoxie) disciplines employers by threatening “labour trouble”, and exacts tribute from workers. This will often give rise to “a double-sided monopoly”, because the union bargains with favored employers “not only for the sale of its labor

4 John R. Commons, quoted in Will Herberg, “Jewish Labor Movement in the United States: Early Years to World War I”, *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 5, 4 (July 1952), pp. 501–523, at 503.

5 T.M. Yesufu, *An Introduction to Industrial Relations in Nigeria* (Oxford, 1962), p. 68.

6 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890–1940* (Princeton, NJ, 1989), p. 124.

7 Ruth Thompson, “Trade Union Organisation: Some Forgotten Aspects”, in: Jeremy Adelman (ed.), *Essays in Argentine Labour History, 1870–1930* (Basingstoke and London, 1992), pp. 160–176, at 160.

8 Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe (eds). *Revolutionary Syndicalism: An International Perspective* (Aldershot, 1990).

9 Richard Hyman, *Industrial Relations. A Marxist Introduction* (London and Basingstoke, 1975), p. 44.

but for the destruction of the business of rival employers”, while “the exclusion of rival workmen from the craft or industry” is achieved.<sup>10</sup>

iv) *Heteronomous trade unions that never or rarely organize strikes* should I think include all unions established by employers, or by institutions working with employers, to keep “industrial peace” and prevent autonomous trade unions. Such organizations are also known as “yellow unions.” Examples include the “national” trade unions in Germany and France before and shortly after World War I, the many “company unions” in the United States in the 1920s and 30s, and similar organizations at American multinationals in developing countries.<sup>11</sup>

I am not aware of any heteronomous trade unions intended primarily to stage strikes, or of autonomous trade unions *never* willing to strike. Nor are the distinctions between the different types always clear. In some borderline cases, trade unions cannot be assigned to one specific category. Take for example, the so-called Japanese “second unions” or “unions by appointment” (*goyō-kumiai*), that sometimes arose when a radical trade union organized a strike which caused dissent among the strikers, and management seized the opportunity to encourage the establishment of a second union willing to reach a compromise, and resume work.<sup>12</sup> Such organizations appear midway between yellow unions and bargaining unions.

Some trade unions mutate. Sections of the Italian revolutionary-syndicalist trade union movement turned fascist in the early 1920s, for example, while some radical unions in Shanghai became rackets or yellow unions during the 1920s and 30s.

## Domain of control

Labour markets are subdivided into all kinds of more or less permeable segments, and workers intending to establish a trade union will need a domain of control. This means that they must be in a position to close off a segment of the labour market, account for a substantial share of that labour-market segment, and coordinate their operations. The segment could be defined by skill, economic sector, employer, religion, ethnicity, caste, locality, etc. Every union type moreover has its own idiosyncrasies. Craft-based unions for example tend to have a clear gender-bias. The “craft” concept is frequently loaded with masculine connotations which mean the exclusion

10 Daniel Bell, “The Racket-Ridden Longshoremen”, in: Bell, *The End of Ideology*. Revised Edition (New York: The Free Press, 1962), pp. 175–209; Paul A. Weinstein, “Racketeering and Labor: An Economic Analysis”, *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 19 (1965–1966), pp. 402–413.

11 George L. Mosse, “The French Right and the Working Classes: Les Jaunes”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 7 (1972), pp. 185–208; Klaus Mattheier, *Die Gelben. Nationale Arbeiter zwischen Wirtschaftsfrieden und Streik* (Düsseldorf, 1973); Jingying Rao, “The Shanghai Postal Workers’ Union: Sample of a Yellow Union”, *Chinese Studies in History*, 27, 1–2 (1993), pp. 148–161.

12 Ronald Dore, *British Factory – Japanese Factory. The Origins of National Diversity in Industrial Relations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1973), pp. 327–328.

of women.<sup>13</sup> Enterprise-based unions for their part usually serve tenured workers, and are inclined to identify with their “own” enterprise.

*Opportunity to close off the labour-market segment.* The success of a group of workers depends primarily on the opportunity to separate “insiders” from “outsiders” effectively. “Any convenient and visible characteristic, such as race, language, social origin, religion, or lack of particular school diplomas, can be used to declare competitors as outsiders.”<sup>14</sup> If a group of employees lacks the means to establish a threshold, forming an effective organization will become virtually impossible. Benjamin Marquez studied one such case, that of the Mexican-American garment workers in El Paso, Texas, during the early 1990s. He concluded that the would-be trade union La Mujer Obrera faced “virtually insurmountable barriers” to mobilization efforts, as the major manufacturers could easily transfer their operations elsewhere or even abroad.<sup>15</sup>

*Relative size.* It is difficult to fix a minimum group size relative to the size of the labour-market segment it aims to control. But the numerical ratio of the employees willing to join the trade union to those refusing to join should be sufficient to prevent non-members from taking over members’ work. Partial unemployment among the labour segment will make organizations harder to establish.

*Coordination.* Potential trade union members need to coordinate their operations. To this end, they must at least be aware of each other’s existence, and be in a position to communicate with each other. Coordination of members within the chosen domain may be direct-democratic, indirect-democratic or autocratic, but these distinctions may in practice be vague. Direct-democratic coordination proceeds through joint plenary consultation, or elected delegates. Indirect-democratic coordination occurs via controlled union officials, or other “specialized” strike coordinators. Autocratic coordination involves unsupervised managers, such as sub-contractors.

Effective coordination depends mainly on the physical aspects of communicating with members (location and distance, etc.) and the quality of the formal or informal leaders.<sup>16</sup>

Strikes are the ultimate test of the ability to control a domain. If the domain withstands a confrontation with the employer or employers, it is solid enough to establish a permanent organization. That is the deeper reason why strikes have so often resulted in trade unions. Conversely, a group of employees *technically* able to stage a strike

---

<sup>13</sup> Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor, “Sex and Skill: Notes Towards a Feminist Economics”, *Feminist Review*, 6 (1980), pp. 79–88.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond Murphy, “The Structure of Closure: A Critique and Development of the Theories of Weber, Collins, and Parkin”, *British Journal of Sociology*, 35 (1984), pp. 547–567, at 548.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Marquez, “Organizing Mexican-American Women in the Garment Industry: La Mujer Obrera”, *Women and Politics*, 15, 1 (1995), pp. 65–87, at 67.

<sup>16</sup> Marshall Ganz, “Resources and Resourcefulness: Strategic Capacity in the Unionization of California Agriculture”, *American Journal of Sociology*, 105 (1999–2000), pp. 1003–1062.

may nevertheless decide against this option, for example because a strike would displease, or harm, the general public. One example is that of nurses, who were typically very difficult to organize in the past, because nurses assumed that unionization would inevitably lead to hospital strikes. Moreover, the idea “that a hospital worker might desert her ‘calling’ and leave a patient on the operating table to join a picket line was a frightening prospect to both patients and the community at large.”<sup>17</sup>

## Threats to the domain of control

A union’s success in stabilizing control over its domain depends partly on its own ability to organize and partly on external influences over which the organization has little or no control. I will first explore the *internal* risks that trade unions face. To serve as effective coordinator of the domain, the trade union needs to cultivate loyalty and cooperation from its members. Factors influencing such cooperation can be many. They include:

- The relative *burden of membership*. The “costs” can include not just entrance fees and dues, but also a required investment in time (depending on the frequency of meetings, the rotation of delegate duties, and the availability of paid officials) plus other possible costs (the danger of losing one’s job, ending up in prison, etc.).
- The relative *burden of non-membership*. Potential members who refuse to join may face certain risks as well. For instance, they may lose their job if the company becomes a closed shop, i.e. an arrangement where the employer makes union membership a condition for employment.
- The presence or absence of *selective benefits*. Goods and services available to members have included travel money (*viaticum*) for artisans and journeymen unable to find work in one city and therefore forced to move to another city; labour mediation for members looking for work; insurance plans (sickness and other funds for members); legal council in the event of individual labour conflicts; and additional opportunities, like access to holiday homes, discounts on household appliances, services etc.

How effective such means can be depends on the rate of labour turnover. If members work at a certain establishment or in a certain occupation only briefly, their union loyalty is much more difficult to cultivate or maintain than if the rank and file is stable and sedentary. Workers with strong rural links were often difficult to organize permanently, because they were frequently short-term migrants, who performed wage

---

<sup>17</sup> Susan Reverby, “Hospital Organizing in the 1950s: An Interview with Lillian Roberts”, *Signs*, 1 (1976), pp. 1053–1063, at 1054.

labour to reach a certain financial “target”; as soon as they had accumulated that amount, they returned to their villages of origin.

Excepting “mushroom” organizations, financial stability is a second important internal aspect. Regular payment of membership dues is of course crucial, but for the members trade union dues are always a somewhat risky investment, since their return is never fixed in advance. Whether members pay their dues regularly, depends on the amount and “permanence” of their income, and on their self-discipline. The first factor complicates organizing among seasonal workers, casual labourers, and the like. The second factor is also closely related to seasonal influences. On Java in the 1910s, the managers of the railway and tram workers’ union regularly complained of “the difficulty of squeezing dues out of [the members] on a regular month to month basis” – because members “could see little tangible benefit.”<sup>18</sup> In Manila in the 1920s, many cigar makers considered themselves union members, although they paid no dues. They argued “that there was no need for that because they would readily contribute to a strike fund if there were a strike. In the meantime, they needed their money for family expenses.”<sup>19</sup> In early twentieth-century Argentina, many union members defaulted on their dues. “The union and left-wing press carried frequent appeals to *morosos* (‘shirkers’) throughout the period to regularize their position with their respective union.”<sup>20</sup>

Organizational discipline is of critical importance. Effective organization depends on whether officials do their duty, and on whether members attend meetings. Many organizations have tried to encourage such discipline through a vast system of penalties, a remarkable imitation of sanctions imposed by employers on their staff.

*External* threats can be both economic and non-economic. *Economic influences* may include many different factors, such as business cycles, concentration trends in corporate industry, or shifts on the world market. *Non-economic influences* may include resistance by the authorities, and entrepreneurs or third parties preventing unions from maintaining control over their domain. Until today, legal measures may outlaw unions, or make it extremely difficult for them to continue their activities with any effect.<sup>21</sup> Unions have been violently repressed, their funds confiscated and their leaders arrested.

If trade unions are legalized, entrepreneurs may nevertheless try to prevent or discourage their employees from joining. One strategy is to intimidate workers, for example by threatening to sack them if they join. As a formalized method of employer intimidation, the so-called *yellow dog contract* is “a promise, made by workers as a condition of employment, not to belong to a union during the period of employment, or not to engage in certain specified activities, such as collective bargaining or strike-

---

<sup>18</sup> John Ingleson, *In Search of Justice: Workers and Unions in Colonial Java, 1908–1926* (Singapore, 1986), p. 81.

<sup>19</sup> Melinda Tria Kerkvliet, *Manila Workers’ Unions, 1900–1950* (Quezon City, 1992), p. 56.

<sup>20</sup> Thompson, “Trade Union Organisation”, p. 165.

<sup>21</sup> See the reports of the International Labour Organization in Geneva.



ing, without which the formal right to belong to a union is wholly valueless.”<sup>22</sup> Overt or covert violence occurs as well. In the 1960s, some entrepreneurs in Japan made arrangements so that employees who tried to set up a trade union were physically attacked. “Workers reported being kicked, having lit cigarettes put to their skin, and being threatened with worse violence.”<sup>23</sup> In contemporary India, employers still beat their “insubordinate” agricultural workers to death sometimes.<sup>24</sup> Entrepreneurs have also mobilized militias and gangs of thugs to break strikes and suppress other forms of resistance. Sometimes they block trade unions by refusing to negotiate and at the same time improve working conditions and the standard of living of employees. In several cases, large companies took the next step by establishing company unions (yellow unions) to reduce support for autonomous trade unions. In addition, employers wage propaganda campaigns against the unions, and try to turn the general public against them, for example by referring to “the red menace”. They have also tried to block employee actions through espionage.

## Precarious democracy

In an ever-expanding capitalist economy, maintaining union power requires expanding its domain gradually, either horizontally (through endogenous expansion, collaboration with other unions, or setting up new unions with the same domain elsewhere) or vertically (through endogenous expansion, collaboration with other unions, or setting up new unions with adjacent domains in the same region). If the union exists only locally, the need will arise (i) to work with other local unions, (ii) to establish sister organizations in other places, or (iii) to join an established, larger trade union. Unions organized nationally may benefit from international cooperation.

Establishing a stable union that stays effective as its domain expands, invariably affects its internal balance of power. The initial domain of a new trade union is nearly always relatively small, with a rank and file concentrated in one place and/or with one employer. Really small unions nearly always have either a direct-democratic or autocratic structure. The smaller a union, the more homogeneous its membership, the more transparent the interests of members and officials, and the greater the direct-democratic influence of the rank-and-file will tend to be. Autocratic unions, however, usually arise when the founder is one person who aims to retain full control over “his” or “her” initiative. Stephen Large describes how the Japanese trade union

---

<sup>22</sup> Joel I. Seidman, “The Yellow Dog Contract”, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 46 (1931–1932), pp. 348–361, at 348.

<sup>23</sup> Christena L. Turner, *Japanese Workers in Protest. An Ethnography of Consciousness and Experience* (Berkeley, CA, 1995), p. 35.

<sup>24</sup> Jan Breman, “Silencing the Voice of Agricultural Labourers”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 33 (1999), pp. 1–22.



Yūaikai, established in 1912 and camouflaged as a mutual insurance society, was run by its founder Suzuki Bunji: “From his offices [...] Suzuki Bunji maintained a firm personal control over the movement during its initial growth in the 1912–16 period. He had conceived the Yūaikai, named it, selected its leaders, recruited the services of distinguished sympathizers, dominated the formulation of Yūaikai goals and programs, delegated authority in the movement, represented the Yūaikai in dealing with business and political leaders, and even personally designed the Yūaikai emblem.”<sup>25</sup> In nearly all cases, the indirect-democratic form arose only derivatively, either when the further growth of a union’s domain precluded a functioning direct democracy, or when an autocratic union became more democratic.

Even in relatively small unions, a heterogeneous membership quickly leads to differences in power. Women members, for example, are often less influential than male ones. Women often had more difficulty paying their dues on time, because they ordinarily earned far less than men, and because their dependent status (usually as wives or daughters) meant they lacked full control over the expenditure of their earnings. Sometimes ethno-cultural influences were relevant as well. In some communities, a woman could not attend an evening meeting without being escorted by a man, while in other communities women had important economic responsibilities, and were considered to be responsible for their own affairs. Factors unrelated to gender can promote power differences within unions as well, such as religion, race, political beliefs, age, education, or region. Wherever they enter the picture, complex interlocking hierarchies can result.

## Structural shifts in the internal relationships

The growing union domain eventually creates three interrelated, structural organizational consequences. Firstly, the inevitable increase in the scale of organizing necessitates greater coordination of the activities of more and more branches and work sites. Secondly, as controlling the domain becomes more difficult, full-time union officials (“professionals”) are needed to support the organization as a whole. Professionalization may already occur in relatively small unions. In an organization with two hundred members, if each member contributes 0.5 percent of his earnings, enough funds exist to appoint one full-time official. At least four factors can promote professionalization as the union domain expands.

- The number of work sites within the domain, affecting the number of contacts that must be maintained and the caseload of organizers.
- The communicational distance between the work sites, i.e. the amount of time and energy required to maintain contact among workers in the domain.

---

25 Stephen S. Large, *The Rise of Labor in Japan. The Yūaikai, 1912–19* (Tokyo, 1972), p. 29.

- The nature of work sites, i.e. whether the work sites are relatively permanent (e.g. factories) or move constantly (e.g. construction sites).
- The relative mobility of the workers, i.e. the frequency with which employees change work sites and/or employer.

Third, professionalization leads to anonymization of relationships within the union. Early, small-scale unions often already had elaborate regulations. But professionalization leads to a depersonalized system of rules, i.e. a bureaucracy. The official is transformed from a “commercial traveller in the class struggle” into an “employee equipped with technical knowledge.”<sup>26</sup>

Professionalization promotes the transition to centralized structures, because the transaction costs of a unitary organization are proportionately lower. After all, the principal communications are between the branches and the central office, rather than among the local chapters.<sup>27</sup> Centralization coincides with the disappearance of the internal direct democracy, provided that such a system actually exists. A growing membership, dispersed across ever more work sites with large communication distances from each other, virtually precludes regular decision-making by all members on all matters of importance. Inevitably, a system of representation will emerge, in which the rank and file cedes areas of authority, temporarily or permanently, to elected representatives. The measure of indirect influence that the members retain depends in part on the extent to which the professionals are elected democratically.

## Collective bargaining, centralization and opposition

Collective bargaining is in fact the opposite of individual bargaining. While the latter term refers to negotiations conducted by *individual* employees with their employer, the former refers to negotiations involving a *group* of employees. Very broadly speaking, *every* workers’ collective action involving negotiations with the employer is a form of collective bargaining. Ordinarily, however, the scope of collective bargaining is restricted to negotiations by a group of employees with one or more employers, which culminate in a collective agreement – a written or an unwritten contract that both parties agree to observe for a specific period (e.g., a year), regardless of whether this contract is, or is not, legally enforceable.

Collective labour agreements are reached only under certain conditions. Firstly, neither the employers nor the unions may prevail. Consider the case of a single large union negotiating with several employers, without the employers having formed a combination. Such a situation is conceivable, if the employers expect the costs of

---

<sup>26</sup> Robert Michels, *Political Parties. A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (New York, 1959), p. 301.

<sup>27</sup> Oliver E. Williamson, *Markets and Hierarchies: Analysis and Antitrust Implications. A Study in the Economics of Internal Organization* (New York, 1975).

forming a coalition to exceed the benefits. In such a case, the union may unilaterally stipulate the conditions. Conversely, an employer who thinks he can easily withstand any union pressure to negotiate will rarely be inclined to negotiate. In other words, unions must be in a position to threaten to industrial action; they must have a “recognized *potential of power*”, as a consequence of which “concessions are likely to be made not because members have struck, but in order to avoid a strike.”<sup>28</sup> Generally, therefore, a certain power balance is assumed between the two parties. Secondly, employers should be willing to surrender part of their sovereignty in the firm. Thirdly, unions do not expect a radical change of the balance of power in the short term. Fourthly, the negotiating union typically has professional negotiators. Although collective agreements can be reached by direct-democratic unions in theory, they are much more likely to be achieved by unions with full-time officials. After all, negotiations for collective agreements ordinarily require union negotiators who are available for weeks, and possibly even months, and who have sufficient expertise. Fifthly, negotiators for both sides need to be firmly in control of their rank and file, to ensure that each will keep to their side of the bargain when the contract is signed. Finally, the legal and political institutions should allow the unions sufficient freedom to operate.<sup>29</sup>

Overall, few cases where employers and trade unions are pitched against each other meet all these criteria. This is part of the reason why only a minor fraction of the world labour force works according to collective agreements.

As an organization grows and becomes more centralized, bureaucratized and anonymized, members lose influence in how it is run. Under a collective agreement, for example, the union leadership has a moral, and in some cases a legal, obligation to ensure that workers do not go on strike, so long as the employer complies with agreements made. In some cases, however, the rank and file becomes dissatisfied with the agreement, and wants to reopen negotiations, even though the term of the agreement has not yet expired. This may lead to a genuine *wildcat strike*, a strike “in which the formal union leaders have actually lost control and the strike is led by individuals whose position in the formal structure does not prescribe such a role for them.”<sup>30</sup> Eventually, new unions may be organized which claim to have closer ties with the rank-and-file members. Thus, despite the constant drive toward centralization, countercurrents may emerge which reverse part of the trend at certain critical moments.

---

<sup>28</sup> Claus Offe and Helmut Wessenthal. “Two Logics of Collective Action (1980)”, in: Offe, *Disorganized Capitalism: Contemporary Transformations of Work and Politics* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 170–220, at 216.

<sup>29</sup> Adolf Sturmthal, “Industrial Relations Strategies”, in: Sturmthal and James G. Scoville (eds), *The International Labor Movement in Transition* (Urbana, IL, and London, 1973), pp. 1–33, at 9–10.

<sup>30</sup> Alvin W. Gouldner, *Wildcat Strike: A Study in Worker-Management Relationships* (New York, 1954), p. 93.

## Internationalization

Often, trade unions develop solidarity across national borders. The first significant expressions of organized internationalism stemmed from London, the main centre of world capitalism during the lengthy period of economic growth from the late 1840s to the early 1870s. The establishment of the International Working Men's Association (IWMA, also known as the First International) in 1864 was an expression of this development. It was primarily based on the cooperation of English and Continental European workers; its first piece of activism concerned an attempt at strike-breaking in 1866. In April of that year, the London tailors organized themselves, demanding a wage increase of a penny an hour. The employers responded with a lock-out, and tried to recruit strike-breakers in Germany, which they had done on other occasions. The IWMA helped to block their efforts in Hamburg and Berlin, thus contributing to the successful outcome of the tailors' action.<sup>31</sup> It is important to note that such cross-border solidarity was sub-national. As no national trade unions as yet existed, international contacts were always between local organizations. It was in fact a "sub-national internationalism".

The IWMA collapsed in the early 1870s. Around the turn of the twentieth century, when national consolidation of trade unions in the North Atlantic region was already far advanced, a new stage, that of nation-based internationalism, entered the picture. There seem to have been at least three areas in which international cooperation grew more or less as a matter of course out of practical activities.

Firstly, there was the area of highly skilled (artisan) occupational groups with international mobility. Amongst printers, for example, there were long-standing cross-national relationships, especially in certain regions sharing a common language (e. g. the French region comprising France, parts of Belgium and Switzerland); they had attended the conferences of fraternal trade organizations in other countries as early as the 1860s. Issues like the *viaticum* (travel money) loomed large in those years.<sup>32</sup>

International migration constituted a second area of international activity. Countries with fast-growing economies attracted hundreds of thousands of immigrants from less developed parts of the world. Chinese and Japanese migrated to California, Poles and Italians to Germany, etc. Trade unions in the recipient countries tried either to organize the new arrivals, or to exclude them from the national labour market. The

---

<sup>31</sup> Iorwerth Prothero, *Radical Artisans in England and France, 1830–1870* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 116.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Chauvet, *Les Ouvriers du livre en France de 1789 à la constitution de la Fédération du Livre* (Paris, 1956), pp., 632–634; *idem*, *Les Ouvriers du livre et du journal: La Fédération Française des Travailleurs du Livre* (Paris, 1971), p. 245; A.E. Musson, *The Typographical Association* (London, 1954), pp. 305–308.

German federation of construction workers sought to organize Italian immigrants, sometimes successfully.<sup>33</sup>

A third area was international transport. Here the labour market and the labour process were inherently international, which facilitated collaboration. The tendency towards internationalism was particularly marked in this section of the working class, as evidenced by the large-scale international transport strike of 1911, and by the fact that branches of the British seamen's union (NAS&FU) existed briefly in the early 1890s in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands.<sup>34</sup>

The first organizations set up were international trade secretariats, federations of national trade unions representing different occupational groups. A substantial impetus was given by the founding of the Second International in 1889 as a cooperative mechanism for socialists (and anarchists until 1896). The congresses held by the International were important meeting points for trade unionists. With the establishment of the international trade secretariats well under way, cooperation between national trade union confederations gathered pace as well. In 1903, the ISNTUC (International Secretariat of National Trade Union Confederations) came into being. At the urging of the AFL, it became the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) in 1913. The ISNTUC and the IFTU remained primarily focused on the North Atlantic region well into the twentieth century.<sup>35</sup>

The brief period between 1889 and 1903 was of exceptional importance for the subsequent rise of the international trade union movement. The structures devised during those years persisted, largely unchanged, throughout the twentieth century. The course of events a century ago endowed the international trade union movement with the dual structure of international trade secretariats on the one hand, and international confederations (with changing names) on the other. But it is not altogether the most logical structure. The international trade secretariats could have formed an international federation of their own. Had they done so, only one international umbrella organization would exist today, an arrangement that would probably have been more effective.

While the structure consolidated at the beginning of the twentieth century remained unchanged for many decades, several significant shifts *within* the structure did take place over the years. Prior to the First World War, Germany occupied the dominant position. In 1913, the headquarters of at least seventeen of the twenty-

---

33 Hermann Schäfer, "Italienische 'Gastarbeiter' im deutschen Kaiserreich, 1890–1914", *Zeitschrift für Unternehmensgeschichte*, 27 (1982), pp. 192–214, at 208–210; Ulrich Herbert, *Geschichte der Ausländerbeschäftigung in Deutschland 1880 bis 1980* (Berlin and Bonn, 1986), pp. 68–70; René del Fabbro, *Transalpin: Italienische Arbeitswanderung nach Süddeutschland im Kaiserreich 1870–1918* (Osnabrück, 1996).

34 Arthur Marsh and Victoria Ryan, *The Seamen: A History of the National Union of Seamen, 1887–1987* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 51–52.

35 Geert Van Goethem, *The Amsterdam International. The World of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), 1913–1945* (Aldershot, 2006).

eight trade secretariats were in that country. The major exceptions to the rule were the miners and textile workers, whose headquarters were in Manchester.<sup>36</sup> After 1918, Great Britain and the USA assumed the leading role. Whereas the German trade union movement had stood more or less “outside” its own state, in the post-war years the TUC and AFL(-CIO) entered into close collaboration with their respective states. For a while, collaboration between the labour federation and the US government and big business was so close, that it was likened by some to a corporative structure, a *blocco storico* à la Antonio Gramsci.<sup>37</sup> During the Second World War, the British TUC moved towards “a close relationship with the government in developing labour policy in the colonies”, often emulating the enlightened extension of a colonial power in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean.<sup>38</sup>

In the course of the “national” phase of internationalism, the number of international trade secretariats both swelled through the advent of additional umbrella organizations, and dwindled as the result of amalgamation. The social-reformist mainstream of the IFTU and its successor after 1949, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), was in time confronted with a number of rivals. They included not only the syndicalist international calling itself, like the First International, the IWMA (since 1922) but also the communist Red International of Labour Unions (RILU, 1921–37) and the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions (IFCTU, since 1920).<sup>39</sup> In 1945, The IFTU joined forces with the communist trade unions in the WFTU, but their alliance ended with the onset of the Cold War. The ICFTU was founded in 1949, while the WFTU fell under communist domination.<sup>40</sup>

In the inter-war years, interest in trade unionism increased in the peripheral and semi-peripheral countries. The RILU sought to put down roots in those regions almost from the moment of its inception in 1921. It was followed a few years later, from about 1928, by the IFTU, partly to counter the rival communist organization, which was intent on gaining greater influence in the colonial and semi-colonial

---

36 Michel Dreyfus, “The Emergence of an International Trade Union Organization (1902–1919)”, in: Marcel van der Linden (ed.), *The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions* (Bern, 2000), pp. 25–71, at 36–9.

37 Robert W. Cox, “Labor and Hegemony: A Reply”, *International Organization*, 34 (1980), 159–176.

38 D.I. Davies, “The Politics of the TUC’s Colonial Policy”, *The Political Quarterly*, 35 (1964), pp. 23–34, at 24.

39 Wayne Thorpe, *“The Workers Themselves”: Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour, 1913–1923* (Dordrecht, 1989); *idem*, “Syndicalist Internationalism before World War II”, in: van der Linden and Thorpe, *Revolutionary Syndicalism*, pp. 237–260; Patrick Pasture, *Histoire du syndicalisme chrétien international: La difficile recherche d’une troisième voie* (Paris, 1999); Reiner Tosstorff, *Profin-tern*. The IFCTU became the World Confederation of Labor (WCL) in 1968, and merged with the ICFTU in 2006, out of which the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) emerged.

40 Anthony Carew, “The World Federation of Trade Unions, 1945–1949”, in: van der Linden, *International Confederation of Free Trade Unions*, pp. 165–184; Carew, “Towards a Free Trade Union Centre”, *ibid.*, pp. 187–339.

countries.<sup>41</sup> Another factor was the concurrent growth of the labour movement in the Third World, making the question of what course it would pursue all the more urgent. The IFCTU followed the same path somewhat later. Up to the Second World War, it was solely oriented toward Europe, but this changed of necessity after 1945, in part because several of its former member organizations had disbanded or amalgamated with trade unions encompassing all ideologies (e.g. in Germany and Austria). The IFCTU set up a reasonably successful regional organization in Latin America (1954), and recruited support in Vietnam and Africa as well.<sup>42</sup>

The IFTU and ICFTU were both dominated by the British TUC and the American AFL(-CIO), investing them in the Third World with the reputation of allies of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Such suspicions were not entirely unfounded. The ICFTU tried for years to propagate a certain “model” of “proper unionism.” One of the aims formulated at the time of its founding in 1949 was “to provide assistance in the establishment, maintenance and development of trade union organizations, particularly in economically and socially under-developed countries.”<sup>43</sup> It was assumed that “proper” trade unions would remain fully independent of political parties and states; concentrate on collective bargaining and lobbying for social security legislation; defend and promote parliamentary democracy. These principles often proved difficult to apply in the so-called Third World.<sup>44</sup> Much later, Adolf Sturmthal observed that especially in the Anglo-American countries (whose trade unions dominated the ICFTU) there had been “a naïve belief in the universal applicability of some form of collective bargaining.”<sup>45</sup> He listed a series of conditions for “a genuine collective bargaining system”, including “a legal and political system permitting the existence and functioning of reasonably *free* labour organizations” (a condition that was fully compatible with the early ICFTU views) and the requirement that “unions be more or less stable, reasonably well organized, and fairly evenly matched with the employers in bargaining strength.”<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Ken Post, *Revolution's Other World: Communism and the Periphery, 1917–39* (Houndmills, [etc.]: Macmillan, 1997), p. 49.

<sup>42</sup> Gerhard Wahlers, *CLAT: Geschichte einer lateinamerikanischen Gewerkschaftsinternationale* (Witerschlick/Bonn, 1990); Patrick Pasture, *Histoire du syndicalisme chrétien international: La difficile recherche d'une troisième voie* (Paris, 1999).

<sup>43</sup> *Official Report of the Free World Labour Conference and of the First Congress of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, London, November-December, 1949*, p. 226.

<sup>44</sup> Sometimes they also seemed insincere. Regarding the emphasis placed by the British TUC in the 1950s on the non-political nature of “proper” trade unionism, Davies has correctly observed: “Some of these sentiments sound odd in the context of the history of the British trade union movement, which had supported a general strike, maintained a close association with the Labour Party, and in its annual congresses regularly debated resolutions on a large number of issues outside the field of industrial relations” Davies, “Politics of the TUC's Colonial Policy”, p. 26.

<sup>45</sup> Sturmthal, “Industrial Relations Strategies”, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.



“Effective unions have rarely if ever been organized by ‘non-committed’ workers, i.e. casual workers who change jobs frequently, return periodically to their native village, and have no specific industrial skill, even of a very simple kind. Yet even fully committed industrial workers with little or no skill are capable of engaging in effective collective bargaining only under certain conditions which are rarely found. In most (though by no means all) newly industrializing countries, large excess supplies of common labour are available for nonagricultural work. Not only are unskilled workers rarely capable of forming unions of their own under such conditions; if they succeed in doing so, their unions have little or no bargaining power.”<sup>47</sup>

Since the 1960s, the international trade union movement has been confronted with a substantial number of new challenges that together progressively undermined the old model of “national internationalism.” Significant changes include the decolonization process; the new transnational division of labour; the emergence of regionalism and trading blocs, such as the European Union, NAFTA, ASEAN and Mercosur; the collapse of communist governments in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe; the rise of feminist movements; the spread of wage labour in the periphery and semi-periphery, both expanding the so-called “informal sector” with breathtaking speed and increasing the influence of women; and the digital revolution.

The following major challenges currently facing international trade unionism are worth noting:

- The impressive growth of *foreign direct investment* in the core countries and the semi-periphery of the world economy, and of *transnational corporations*. In response to this development, World Corporation Councils were set up in the mid-1960s, notably in the chemical and automobile industries. Although many trade union militants had high expectations of these new bodies, their effectiveness has been rather less than anticipated, owing to the conflicting interests of employees in different countries.<sup>48</sup>
- The formation of *trading blocs*. They led to a certain equalization of legal and political parameters, so that the building of transnational trade union structures within each bloc was an obvious step. In NAFTA, this collaboration is not evolving primarily at the top level of national trade union confederations, but at the sub-national or branch level. In many cases, institutions other than trade unions (such as religious and human rights organizations) are also partners in projects of this kind. Examples include the 1980s Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladores, the Comité Frontizero de Obreras, and La Mujer Obrera.<sup>49</sup> Equally worthy

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> Burton Bendiner, *International Labour Affairs: The World Trade Unions and the Multinational Companies* (Oxford, 1987); Werner Olle and Wolfgang Schoeller, “World Market Competition and Restrictions upon International Trade Union Policies”, in: Rosalind E. Boyd, Robin Cohen and Peter C.W. Gutkind (eds), *International Labour and the Third World* (Aldershot, 1987), pp. 26–47; Kurt P. Tudyka, “Die Weltkonzernräte in der Krise”, *WSI-Mitteilungen*, 39 (1986), pp. 324–329.

<sup>49</sup> Ralph Armbruster, “Cross-National Labor Organizing Strategies”, *Critical Sociology*, 21, 2 (1995), pp. 75–89, at 77–8, 80–2.

of note in this context is the Council of Ford Workers, founded by the United Auto Workers.

- The formation of *new supranational institutions* to regulate the dynamics of the “new” capitalism. The foremost example is the World Trade Organization established in 1995.
- *Social and economic changes in the periphery and semi-periphery* of the world economy, facilitating the emergence of new, often militant, workers’ movements (social movement unions) in countries such as Brazil, South Africa, the Philippines, Taiwan and South Korea.
- *New forms of rank-and-file trade unionism* outside the established channels appearing since the 1970s, with international connections at the shop-floor level “bypassing altogether the secretariats, which they see as too often beholden to the bureaucracies of their various national affiliates.”<sup>50</sup> A well-known example is the Transnationals Information Exchange (TIE), a centre in which a substantial number of research and activist labour groups exchange information on TNCs. Another example is the “counter foreign policy” existing since the early 1980s in the AFL-CIO.<sup>51</sup>
- *Joint actions against TNCs* conducted over the past decade by trade unions representing particular occupations in different countries (e.g. coal miners, electrical workers).<sup>52</sup> When the French car-maker Renault announced the closure of its Belgian factory in February 1997, solidarity strikes and demonstrations were organized in France, Spain, Portugal and Slovenia, giving birth to the new term “Euro-strike.”
- Spurred on by the uneven development of trade unions in core and periphery countries, a growing tendency on the part of international trade secretariats to engage in the *direct recruitment of members in the periphery*. (See the activities of the secretariat for the service sector Union Network International relating to IT specialists in India).
- The increasing number of activities carried out by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that should in theory be the responsibility of the international trade union movement, such as the struggle to regulate and abolish child labour.

All these challenges compel the international trade union movement to review its aims and activities. The need for such a review is further underscored by the fact that the changing composition of the world working class highlights the relative weakness of the movement. On a global scale union density is almost insignificant.

---

<sup>50</sup> Andrew Herod, “Labor as an Agent of Globalization and as a Global Agent”, in: Kevin R. Cox (ed.), *Spaces of Globalization: Reasserting the Power of the Local* (New York, 1997), pp. 167–200, at 184.

<sup>51</sup> Hobart A. Spalding, “Two Latin American Foreign Policies”.

<sup>52</sup> Herod, “The Two Latin American Foreign Policies of the U.S. Labor Movement: The AFL-CIO Top Brass vs. Rank-and-File”, *Science and Society*, 56 (1992), pp. 421–439, at 342; Armbruster, “Cross Border Labor Organizing.”

Independent trade unions organize only a small percentage of their target group worldwide, and the majority of them live in the relatively wealthy North Atlantic region. By far the most important global umbrella organization is the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), founded in 2006 as a merger of two older organizations, the secular reform-oriented International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the Christian World Confederation of Labour (WCL). In 2014 the ITUC estimated that about 200 million workers worldwide belong to trade unions (excluding those of China's), and that 176 million of these are organized in the ITUC.<sup>53</sup> The ITUC also estimates that the total number of workers is roughly 2.9 billion (of whom 1.2 billion in the informal economy). Therefore, global union density currently amounts to no more than seven percent (200 million as a percentage of 2.9 billion).<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> This calculation is probably misleading. A significant, but unknown, part of the union membership consists of pensioners. It is therefore likely that the number of employed or employable members is lower.

<sup>54</sup> *Building Workers' Power. Congress Statement* (Berlin: International Trade Union Confederation 2014), p. 8.

## Suggested reading

- Addison, John T. and Claus Schnabel (eds). *International Handbook of Trade Unions* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2003).
- Allen, V.L. *The History of Black Mineworkers in South Africa*. Vol. 1: *The Techniques of Resistance, 1871–1948* (Keighley: Moor Press, 1992); Vol. 2: *Apartheid, Repression and Dissent in the Mines, 1948–1982* (London: Merlin, 2005); Vol. 3: *Organise or Die, 1982–94* (London: Merlin, 2005).
- Chesneaux, Jean. *The Chinese Labor Movement, 1919–1927* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1968).
- Forrest, Kally. *Metal That Will Not Bend. National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa, 1980–1995* (Johannesburg : Witwatersrand University Press, 2011).
- Frank, Dana. *Bananeras. Women Transforming the Banana Unions of Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: South End, 2005).
- French, John D. *The Brazilian Workers' ABC. Class Conflict and Alliances in Modern São Paulo* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).
- Gamba, Charles. *The Origins of Trade Unionism in Malaysia. A Study in Colonial Labour Unrest* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1962).
- Ganguli, Debkumar. *History of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). Yesterday-Today-Tomorrow 1945–2000* (New Delhi: WFTU, 2000).
- Gerteis, Christopher. *Gender Struggles. Wage-earning Women and Male-dominated Unions in Postwar Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
- Gordon, Andrew. *The Evolution of Labor Relations in Japan. Heavy Industry, 1853–1955* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).
- Hensman, Rohini. *Workers, Unions, and Global capitalism. Lessons from India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
- Ingleton, John. *In Search of Justice. Workers and Unions in Colonial Java, 1908–1926* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986).
- Kerkvliet, Melinda Tria. *Manila Workers' Unions, 1900–1950* (Quezon City: New Day, 1992).
- Large, Stephen S. *The Rise of Labor in Japan. The Yūaikai, 1912–19* (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1972).
- Montgomery, David. *The Fall of the House of Labor. The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- Munck, Ronaldo, Ricardo Falcón and Bernardo Galitelli. *Argentina from Anarchism to Peronism. Workers, Unions and Politics, 1855–1985* (London: Zed Books, 1987).
- Phelan, Craig. *Trade Unions in West Africa. Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011).
- Phelan, Craig (ed.). *Trade Unionism since 1945. Towards a Global History*. 2 volumes (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009).
- Posusney, Marsha Pripstein. *Labor and the State in Egypt. Workers, Unions, and Economic Restructuring* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
- Pringle, Tim. *Trade Unions in China. The Challenge of Labour Unrest* (London: Routledge, 2011).
- Rodríguez García, Magaly. *Liberal Workers of the World, Unite? The ICFTU and the Defence of Labour Liberalism in Europe and Latin America (1949–1969)* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010).
- Roxborough, Ian. *Unions and Politics in Mexico. The Case of the Automobile Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
- Seidman, Gay W. *Manufacturing Militance. Workers' Movements in Brazil and South Africa, 1970–1985* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

- Tosstorff, Reiner. *The Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), 1920–1937* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016).
- Van der Linden, Marcel (ed.). *The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions* (Berne [etc.]: Peter Lang Academic, 2000).
- Van der Linden, Marcel and Richard Price (eds). *The Rise and Development of Collective Labour Law* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000).
- Van der Linden, Marcel and Wayne Thorpe (eds). *Revolutionary Syndicalism. An International Perspective* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1990).
- Van Goethem, Geert. *The Amsterdam International. The World of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), 1913–1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).
- Webb, Sidney and Beatrice Webb. *The History of Trade Unionism* (London: Longmans, Green, 1911).