



WORLD FEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS: SOVIET FOREIGN POLICY TOOL

August 1983

The World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) was founded in Paris on October 3, 1945, in the brief postwar era of good feeling between the victorious Western nations and the Soviet Union. The British Trades Union Congress, the American Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and the Soviet Union's All Union Central Council of Trade Unions (AUCCTU) were the principal architects of the WFTU. However, by 1949—following the WFTU's communist-engineered attack on the Marshall Plan—all the Western trade unions except the communist-dominated ones had left the organization. In a 1949 declaration, the CIO stated that the "WFTU is no longer a trade union organization, but is entirely dominated by communists and their puppets, and little more than an instrument of the Soviet government." The major democratic trade centrals, including the U.S. American Federation of Labor (AF of L),¹ thereupon formed the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).²

In 1951 the French Government charged the WFTU with conducting "subversive activities" and expelled its headquarters from Paris. In 1956 the Government of Austria expelled the WFTU headquarters from its second home, Vienna, for "endangering Austrian neutrality." The WFTU has since been headquartered in Prague.

The WFTU has developed into one of the Soviet Union's most significant front organizations, reflecting Marxist ideological emphasis on the importance of the working class in the "evolving world order." Only the World Peace Council, with which the WFTU maintains close relations, compares with it. As with other front organizations, some deviation from the strict Soviet line occasionally is tolerated as the price for the continued membership of Western communist-controlled labor unions, such as the French Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT), and Third World labor organizations. The history of the WFTU, however, demonstrates that Soviet tolerance of deviations is limited.

¹The AF of L, which merged with the CIO to form the AFL-CIO in 1955, did not join the WFTU in 1945. Its longstanding policy has been to avoid relations with communist "trade union" organizations because it does not consider them to be legitimate representatives of the communist-state working class.

²The ICFTU was founded in London in December 1949 by delegates from 53 countries dissatisfied with Soviet domination of the WFTU. Membership is open to all trade union organizations "independent of any outside domination, deriving their authority only from their members, with a freely and democratically elected leadership . . ." Unions in the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe, being under government control, are not eligible for membership. Most ICFTU members belong to West European labor centrals with a social-democratic heritage. The AFL-CIO disaffiliated in 1969 but rejoined in 1982. Claiming to represent more than 85 million members in 134 affiliates, the ICFTU is headquartered in Brussels.

Historical Background

The WFTU's original 1945 constitution proclaimed its main objective to be the improvement of the living and working conditions of all peoples of the world. Just what this meant to the communist members, however, became clear shortly after U.S. Secretary of State George C. Marshall's June 1947 speech proposing a huge U.S. effort (later known as the Marshall Plan) to help reconstruct Europe. Nine days later, the WFTU General Council issued, without the consent of the noncommunist members, a response that firmly aligned the organization with the communist camp:

Capitalist monopolies are making use of their economic power to intensify the exploitation of labor. They seek to impose unacceptable and anti-democratic political conditions before economic aid is extended to countries devastated by war.

This response, predating even the Soviet's Union's rejection of the Marshall Plan, was the first strong signal to the West of Soviet plans for the WFTU. Together with the WFTU's attempt to dominate existing international trade secretariats, opposition to the Marshall Plan resulted in the crisis of democratic disaffiliation from the Organization and then totalitarian control of the WFTU.

Since that time the WFTU has followed the Soviet line as closely as possible without losing all its Western communist and Third World affiliates.

- In 1950 the WFTU's Executive Committee expelled the Yugoslav trade unions, reflecting the Yugoslav-Soviet dispute. WFTU publications claimed the "Tito clique" had transformed Yugoslavia "into a base for imperialist aggression against the U.S.S.R. . . ." (After Yugoslav-Soviet relations improved in the 1970s, the WFTU invited the Yugoslavs to rejoin.)

- In 1953 it supported the Soviet military action in East Germany.

- In 1956 the WFTU approved extreme Soviet pressure on a restless Poland and the Soviet invasion and occupation of Hungary.

- In the 1960s the deteriorating Sino-Soviet relationship was dramatically underscored when the Chinese and their Albanian allies walked out of the organization, although officially they are still members.

- In 1968 Soviet dominance of the WFTU was evident in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Influenced by its Prague location, the WFTU Secretariat reacted with uncharacteristic anger to the invasion. Pierre Saillant, the French Secretary General, responding to an appeal from the WFTU Czechoslovakian affiliate, circulated a

letter from himself and the Italian WFTU president, Renato Bitossi, condemning the invasion and expressing "full solidarity with the workers and people of Czechoslovakia." The WFTU Secretariat vote to publish the letter triggered a successful Soviet campaign to discipline the organization. Saillant, under heavy pressure to disavow the WFTU letter, pleaded illness and resigned shortly thereafter. He was replaced by the more pliable Pierre Gensous. At the same time, the leadership of the Czech WFTU affiliate was replaced by persons acceptable to the Soviets.

Despite the dissatisfaction of such Western members as the Italian Confederazione Generale Italiana de Lavoro (CGIL), the Czech question was not raised during the 1969 congress in Budapest. This apparently resulted from an agreement whereby the Soviets did not demand a formal retraction of the Saillant-Bitossi letter in exchange for conference silence on Czechoslovakia. The Budapest congress then went on to rewrite WFTU statutes, ensuring that the Secretariat would never again take such "embarrassing" independent action as it had on Czechoslovakia.

Membership and Organization

The WFTU claims to be the largest trade union confederation in the world, with more than 206 million affiliated members encompassing 90 different organizations. Although these organizations exist in many countries, over 70% of the affiliated membership is located in communist states where "union" membership is mandatory for workers. Over half the affiliated membership is derived from the Soviet Union's All Union Central Council of Trade Unions. Consequently, the U.S.S.R. and its allies have an overwhelming voting majority in WFTU deliberations. However, some members of the WFTU, particularly those from the Third World, are not aligned with communist parties.

The WFTU's highest authority is the World Trade Union Congress, which meets every 4 years, most recently in Havana in 1982. This constitutional feature is similar to that of rival democratic confederations, the ICFTU and the World Confederation of Labor (WCL).³ However, the WFTU's quadrennial congress is unique in that a large number of observers are encouraged to attend and vote on conference resolutions. More than half of the 358 participating organizations at Havana were from nonaffiliated organizations.

Between congresses, the WFTU is directed by a General Council, with representatives from each affiliated trade central, and by an Executive Bureau of 33 members. The last General Council meeting of more than 200 delegates from 81 countries was held in Cyprus in April 1983. The Secretariat in Prague, employing more than 200 people, provides day-to-day direction. It is divided into various regional and functional departments, including a press and propaganda section which publishes *The World Trade Union Movement*, a monthly magazine translated into nine languages, and *Flashes*, a weekly newsletter.

³The WCL, the smallest of the Internationals, originated in the 1920s when Catholic and Protestant unions appeared as alternatives to socialist and anarchist organizations. Originally it was known as the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions. Members of this organization remained outside the WFTU in 1945 when the latter refused to allow dual affiliation. In 1973 the WCL, which adopted its present name in 1968, claimed 14.5 million affiliated members, but a more likely estimate is 4-5 million. The WCL derives much of its following from the less developed countries. Headquarters are in Brussels.

ACRONYMS

AFL-CIO: American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (U.S.)

AUCCTU: All Union Central Council of Trade Unions (U.S.S.R.)

CGIL: Confederazione Generale Italiana de Lavoro (Italy)

CGT: Confederation Generale du Travail (France)

ICFTU: International Confederation of Free Trade Unions

ILO: International Labor Organization (UN)

WCL: World Confederation of Labor

WFTU: World Federation of Trade Unions

Trade Union Internationals. One department of the WFTU is responsible for the 11 Trade Union Internationals,⁴ international organizations of unions of the same trades. Unlike their major rival democratic organizations—the International Trade Secretariats associated with the ICFTU—the Trade Union Internationals are controlled by their parent body, the WFTU. However, to lend the appearance of autonomy, the WFTU in 1966 directed each affiliated Trade Union International to write its own constitution. Members generally are drawn from the ranks of WFTU members and frequently are headed by French CGT members.

International Affiliations. The WFTU coordinates closely with the Permanent Committee for Trade Union Unity of Latin America with headquarters in Mexico City, but maintains looser relations with the Organization of African Trade Union Unity and with the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions. The WFTU is trying to strengthen its representation in the Far East where it has a small office in Ho Chi Minh City. It also gives financial support to education centers for trade unionists in Prague (International Trade Union Center), Bernau (Fritz Heckert Institution), Sofia (Georgi Dimitrov Center), and Havana (Lazaro Pena Center). Instruction at these centers concentrates more on political than trade union subjects, according to participants.

The WFTU has official status in several UN-sponsored organizations: Economic and Social Council; International Labor Organization; Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; and the Food and Agriculture Organization.

Funding and Control

The Soviet affiliates support non-Soviets in the positions of General Secretary and President of the WFTU to promote an image of WFTU independence and nonalignment. Before 1978 the Soviets arranged for a French CGT representative to be General Secretary. In 1978, however, nominal dissatisfaction with the WFTU's "rigidity" caused the CGT to withdraw General Secretary Pierre Gensous as a candidate

⁴The Trade Union Internationals are: Agricultural, Forestry and Plantation Workers (headquartered in Prague); Workers of the Building, Wood, and Building Materials Industries (Helsinki); Chemical, Oil and Allied Workers (Budapest); Workers in Commerce (Prague); Workers of the Food, Tobacco and Beverages Industries and Hotel, Cafe and Restaurant Workers (Sofia); Metal and Engineering Workers (Moscow); miners Trade Unions International (Warsaw); Public and Allied Employees (East Berlin); World Federation of Teachers Unions (East Berlin); Textile, Clothing, Leather and Fur Workers (Prague); and Transport Workers (Budapest).

for reelection. Enrique Pastorini, a Uruguayan, was elected but retired before the 1982 Havana congress. The present General Secretary, Ibrihim Zakariya of Sudan, then became acting General Secretary before formally assuming the post in Havana. The President of the Executive Bureau is Sandor Gaspar, Secretary General of the Central Council of Hungarian Trade Unions. The most important staff member, one of the five secretaries nominally under Zakariya, is Boris Averyanov, a former international secretary of the Soviet AUCCTU.

There is no public record of the source of WFTU operating funds. Presumably, the Soviet Union is the major contributor both through the AUCCTU and through other channels. Most of the remaining funds come from Eastern-bloc nations, where "trade unions" are under communist party control and governments heed Moscow's wishes.

In turn, the WFTU was reported to have disbursed about \$1 million a year during the mid-1970s from its "Solidarity Fund." This fund helps to support trade unions in noncommunist countries, including those in the major developed countries when possible, and to assist "national liberation" struggles.

WFTU Strategy

Trade Union Unity. Using a well-established "united front from above" strategy, the WFTU preaches the need for worldwide trade union unity regardless of ideological differences. To this end, the WFTU has attempted to bring the democratic trade union confederations—the ICFTU and the WCL and their affiliates—into meetings and joint campaigns to establish an all-Europe trade union conference.⁵

According to WFTU Executive Bureau President Gaspar:

Joint action by the trade unions as a militant contingent of the world labor movement is the path to follow in order to eliminate poverty and hunger among millions. . . . Trade unions everywhere must search for solutions to common problems.⁶

Gaspar leaves no doubt, however, which system holds the solutions to such problems:

In socialist countries the government and the agencies in charge of the economy look on the trade unions primarily as partners enjoying equal rights with them. . . . Socialism is not free of objective contradictions, but unlike previous social formations, socialism can cope with these contradictions and overcome objective and subjective difficulties.⁷

By contrast, Gaspar states that in capitalist countries:

. . . trade union work goes on amid insoluble contradictions between the exploited and exploiters. . . . The authorities in capitalist countries want trade unions "to swear allegiance" to the bourgeois system while they foment anti-Sovietism in order "to divert the working people's attention from the general crises of capitalism. . . ."⁸

Trade Union Unity and Disarmament. Under the banner of trade union unity, the WFTU has associated itself with the Soviet Union's peace and disarmament campaigns. "All sensible people, whatever their ideology and political likes or dislikes, declare for peace and mutually beneficial international cooperation," Gaspar claims. Thus, he has called upon the ICFTU and the WCL to "adopt measures without delay

⁵In the past the WCL has attempted to cooperate with the WFTU in various areas, maintaining a more accommodating position toward the WFTU than has the ICFTU. However, after October 1982 the WCL declared that it would cease all contact with the WFTU because of differences over Polish issues.

⁶For Unity of Action: Objectives of the International Trade Union Movement," World Marxist Review, July 1982, p. 17.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁸*Ibid.*

aimed at averting the arms race." When it comes to assessing blame for the arms race, however, Gaspar's real sentiments emerge:

The uptrend in international tension is a direct result of the renunciation of detente by extremist monopoly capitalist forces in the United States and other NATO countries. It is an open secret that every new round of the arms race is imposed on the Warsaw Treaty Organization by NATO.⁹

Reflecting Soviet direction, "peace and disarmament" has become the WFTU's main theme, overshadowing traditional trade union concerns. Thus, at the April 1983 General Council meeting in Cyprus, Secretary General Zakariya warned against:

. . . the increasingly dangerous imperialist policies under which the leadership of the most reactionary circles in the United States, headed by the Reagan Administration, are bringing the world to the brink of nuclear catastrophe.

In recent Soviet peace campaigns, the WFTU has pressed European governments not to allow intermediate-range missiles in Western Europe. In particular, the WFTU was a major participant in the 1981 Paris conference on "The Social and Economic Consequences of Disarmament." This conference established the International Trade Union Committee for Peace and Disarmament, headquartered in Dublin. This group holds periodic "peace" meetings, such as a May 1983 Vienna conference at which the WFTU and the Soviet AUCCTU were prominently represented.

The WFTU's peace and disarmament campaign also aims at winning adherents in the Third World. Thus, the Tenth World Trade Union Congress was held in Havana in February 1982—the first congress convened outside Europe. While its official theme was "Trade Unions and the Challenge of the 1980s," most of the 150 speeches reflected Soviet policy on disarmament. The conference awarded medals to Fidel Castro and Leonid Brezhnev.

Solidarity Meetings. The WFTU regularly sponsors a large number of "solidarity" committees which meet to bring attention to regions and subjects of WFTU political interest. There are "International Trade Union Committees of Solidarity with the Peoples and Workers" of Aden, Palestine, South Africa, Africa, and Chile, as well as committees on particular subjects, such as the "International Committee of the Workers' Struggle Against the Offensive of the Monopolies." Conferences, sponsored by either the WFTU or its subsidiaries, have been held in recent years on such subjects as the "Problems of Women Workers" and "Working Youth."

In November 1982 the Permanent Committee for Trade Union Unity of Latin America sponsored a solidarity meeting with the Sandinista government in Managua. In April 1983, in conjunction with the General Council meeting in Nicosia, the WFTU hosted a "Special Session on Cyprus" in which speakers blamed the Cyprus problem on "imperialist elements" and "foreign intervention." In May 1983, the Trade Union International of Chemical, Oil and Allied Workers sponsored a conference in Ho Chi Minh City entitled "The International Trade Union Movement Against Chemical and Biological Warfare." The Fourth Trade Union Conference for Unity and Solidarity in the Caribbean is planned for 1984. In conjunction with the projected 1985 LIN International Youth Year, the WFTU has scheduled national conferences for 1983 in Burundi, Mali, Mozambique, Romania, and the U.S.S.R.; and regional conferences are planned in Benin, India, Brazil, and Grenada before the 1985 Fourth Trade Union Conference on the Problems of Working Youth.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Poland. The Polish trade union Solidarity has presented the WFTU with an embarrassing problem since the WFTU claims to lead the struggle of the working class and some of its Western and Third World members sympathize with the suppressed union. To bypass this issue, the WFTU adopted the stance that Solidarity is solely an internal matter for the Polish people, although Executive Bureau President Gaspar has stated that Poland's problems are due in part to past neglect of trade union matters. Moreover, the WFTU, as of July 1983, still had not recognized the Polish Government-backed unions, although such recognition is likely.

However, Gaspar publicly approved the December 1981 imposition of martial law in Poland. In at least three trips to Poland in the last 2 years he did not meet with Solidarity leaders—even during the period when the Polish Government recognized Solidarity as a legal union. In contrast, Gaspar met with numerous Polish officials, including General Jaruzelski.

Solidarity was not invited to the Havana congress. Instead, a Polish Government-approved delegation attended. Over the objections of some delegates, particularly the French and Japanese, the congress declared "imperialist forces" were conducting a "detestable campaign of slander" against Poland. "Solidarity," the statement asserted, "has turned into an 'antisocialist and antistate political movement.' "

Underlying Soviet Ideology. The WFTU closely adheres to the Soviet approach to trade unionism. Unlike trade unions in Western and many Third World countries, which are subordinate neither to management nor government, "trade unions" in communist countries, according to Marxist ideology, are not independent from the ruling communist party. As Pravda stated in late 1981, "Our [Communist] Party's history has demonstrated with utmost clarity the absurdity of the concept of independent trade unions." Internationally, the WFTU strives to reflect Lenin's dictum that "trade unions" are the "transmission belt" between the party "vanguard" and the "masses."

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