

TWENTY YEARS  
ICFTU

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## FOREWORD

by Harm G. Buiters, General Secretary of the ICFTU

This booklet is not, as the name might suggest, a history of the ICFTU's first twenty years : it does not follow a strictly chronological order, nor does it try to be a complete record. Those who want to know all the ICFTU has done and experienced during this period will have to consult the reports of activities which we have published for each of our congresses.

Our aims were more modest. All we wanted to do was to give an account - to ourselves and to the others - of certain aspects of our work which we consider particularly important and significant : what were our aims in these respects, by which ways and means did we pursue them and where do we stand now after twenty years ? We have tried to be as objective as possible shortcomings or setbacks have by no means been glossed over.

It would therefore not be difficult to find evidence in these pages to support the view that our achievements in the fight for bread, freedom and peace fall short of our aims. There are still millions of hungry people in the world; in many regions the economic and social reforms we are fighting for, are making very slow progress; many workers are even to-day without basic trade union rights, many trade unions are still or again suppressed or hampered by hostile governments, and, worst of all, prospects of establishing a lasting peace in the world are still as far off as ever.

All this is quite true and we have, indeed, stressed these facts in our booklet. Yet it would be very wrong to dwell entirely on the gloomy side of the picture. For one, find it astonishing how much the ICFTU has achieved, after all, with the very limited means at its disposal. We lack the material possibilities of our totalitarian enemies, and in the fight against economic exploitation we are faced by forces which, in order to maintain their privileges, spend more in a single day than we can muster in our whole year's budget. Since we can do but little by direct action, we constantly have to appeal to the solidarity of our affiliates, to public opinion and to the governments of the world. It is a measure of the success of this method that many of our ideas and proposals which at first seemed unrealistic or even utopian, have by now become generally accepted - so much so that it needs a booklet like the present one to recall where they originated from.

But what is much more important and precious to us is the knowledge that countless men and women all over the world trust us and look to us for support. Reports which keep on reaching us, sometimes by very roundabout ways, bear out our claim that in constantly raising our voice for justice and freedom, we are speaking for those fighters who linger in communist or fascist prisons, for the victims of the new dictatorships in Africa and Latin America, for the millions in many countries who are struggling for decent wages and human dignity. While this is so, we can leave it to others to argue about our successes or failures. We will carry on with our work-

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## INTRODUCTION

In the twenty years of its existence the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions has rooted itself so deeply in the thoughts and actions of the workers of the free world, has found so general recognition as their voice in the councils of the international organisations, and has contributed so decisively to the rise of free trade unionism in the developing countries that the question comes to mind what had happened to the idea of trade union internationalism before its foundation.

The answer is that the idea of international organisation of labour was slower to develop in the trade union field than on the political scene. The first international ties were among unions having the same industrial or craft specialisation in different countries. Thus the International Trade Secretariats, at present so powerful a support of trade union internationalism, were the first to realise the idea. The first International Trade Secretariats were founded in 1889 and in the following years their number grew rapidly.

The first general international action in the trade union field originated not from the trade unions themselves, but in connection with the formation of the (Second) Socialist International (in Paris, 1889). It was on that occasion that the idea of establishing a day of struggle for the achievement of the Eight-Hour-Day was conceived - an idea which proved to be very fruitful at a time when the working day was generally still very much longer than eight hours. Twelve years later a plan to form a permanent international link among the trade unions of the individual countries, outside of their professional international ties was put forward. An International Trade Union Secretariat was created in 1903 and the German trade union leader Karl Legien was chosen to head it. It was not until the eve of the First World War (1913) that the International Trade Union Secretariat, at a Zurich meeting, was transformed into a full-fledged international organisation, the International Federation of Trade Unions.

While it was not surprising that this young organisation could not hold its own against the cataclysm of war, it had enough resilience to resume its activities immediately after the end of the war. The trade unions played a major part in establishing the International Labour Organisation, and here the International Federation of Trade Unions found solid ground for forceful action for social progress on an international scale. In the interwar period both the communist and the fascist movements arose. Soviet communism attempted - without much success - to split the international trade union movement by the formation of the Red Trade Union International while nascent fascism robbed the International Federation of Trade Unions of its strongholds first in Italy and later in Germany, Austria and Spain. Membership in the International Federation of Trade Unions was more or less confined to the industrial countries, and contacts with young trade unions in economically underdeveloped countries were just being established when the outbreak of the Second World War reduced the possibilities of international trade union action to a minimum.

Under the impact of the joint war efforts of the Western Allies and the Soviet Union against the fascist axis the attempt was made to join forces also on the trade union scene. In the very last stage of the war (in February, 1945) a World Trade Union Conference was held in London, which in September-October of the same year was followed by the formation of the World Federation of Trade Unions.

It became, however, clear from the outset that this attempt of combining the forces of free trade unionism with the government-controlled communist trade unions was doomed to failure. There was simply no common ground between the government - dominated trade unions of the Soviet bloc and the free trade unions of the non-communist countries. The split between the two forces became manifest when the communist group of the World Federation of Trade Unions, in accordance with the opposition of the Soviet Union to the recovery programme for war-devastated Europe - the Marshall Plan - refused to cooperate with it. The end was in sight when in March 1948 the trade unions of eighteen European countries which had accepted the recovery programme met in conference and subsequently formed the Trade Union Advisory Committee for the European Recovery Programme - a committee which is still very much alive and performs valuable functions as the representative of the free trade unions (affiliated with the ICFTU and with the World Confederation of Labour, the former International Federation of Christian Trade Unions) in the OECD. From that moment on

events moved fast and the preparations for organising a new international composed of free trade unions culminated in a Preparatory International Trade Union Conference, held in Geneva in June 1949, in which 43 million workers in 35 countries were represented. It was at that conference that the historic decision was made to convene a World Trade Union Conference with the purpose of establishing an « international trade union organisation which will embrace all free and democratic trade union organisations throughout the world,,. A Preparatory International Trade Union Committee was elected by the Conference which agreed to convene the Free World Labour Conference in London on 28 November 1949. The stage was set for the birth of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions.