RECENTLY THERE HAS ARisen in Italy a movement involving workers in the metal, chemical, cement and building industries, and elsewhere, which has drawn in more than 2,500,000 workers, to speak of the industrial sector alone. In the course of the last month alone, Italian workers engaged in 250 million hours of strike action. All these groupings are acting in unity for a national contract and for the right to negotiate at the level of the enterprise on the main aspects of workers' conditions. The main demands in the national contract are a wage increase of around 20 per cent; the 40-hour working week in five days; and trade union rights.

Apart from its great breadth, the principal characteristic of this movement is its unity. Once the demands were drawn up, the trade union organisations began to work in close unity of action, effecting a striking development of trade union democracy through rank and file consultations which involved millions of workers. This continuous participation of the workers in union decisions is still proceeding through the discussion on the forms of struggle, which are decided in the factories, and will continue throughout the period of the negotiations.

We are negotiating while strike action continues. It is important to underline that the methods of struggle adopted — strikes of a few hours duration each day, often with several work stoppages during the day — are having a big influence on production, while at the same time permitting the workers to earn a part of their wages. This enables them to resist for longer and favors the participation of all workers in the movement. For these reasons, almost everywhere the percentage of workers taking part in strike action is extremely high, and in many enterprises clerical staff and technicians have joined in.

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AUSTRALIAN LEFT REVIEW—FEB.-MARCH, 1970
To lead such a vast and differentiated movement is no easy thing, but gives rise to many problems. In some enterprises, for example, small groups of an anarcho-syndicalist character — prodded from outside, but not to be confused with the student movement — are seeking to give the actions an extremist character which would rapidly lead us into an impasse. Up to the present, the workers have replied with firmness to these tendencies, which we are struggling against. But further than this, from within the movement itself we have witnessed the daily emergence of tendencies seeking the untimely extension and generalisation of the action, or its sharpening in various ways, which would, if they prevailed, lead to the isolation of certain enterprises or sectors from the rest of the masses.

The trade union organisations are leading the struggles and intervene to correct and guide the action, while involving in the discussions not only the active groupings but the broad masses of workers as well. Thus, the trade union struggle becomes also an important aspect of the development of democracy and participation. In fact, these struggles also have political importance and significance. With their advanced objectives, they seek not only to change the distribution of income, but also the relations between social forces. These struggles are in fact contesting the mechanism of capitalist accumulation and are broadening the class groupings around the working class. By their sacrifices, by hundreds of millions of hours of strike action, the workers are seeking a new weight in society and the enhancement of their influence in the control of economic and social policy. Thus, the trade union confederations are demanding reforms also in matters concerning housing, social security and taxation. General strikes have taken place in scores of towns for these aims, and the CGIL affirms the need for a national general strike before the end of the current month.

I have already said that the predominant characteristic of these struggles is unity. This, naturally, is a unity in action, but it is a very close unity, which brings us closer to trade union unification, an objective for which we strive with the greatest determination. All these programs of demands and forms of struggle are decided upon autonomously by the trade unions, but that takes nothing away from the weight exerted by these struggles on the social and political life of the nation. The autonomy of the trade unions has been revealed once again on this occasion as the essential condition of unity, since workers who are all firmly convinced of the need to win the demands presented and who therefore participate in a massive class struggle are still quite often divided in their political and ideological positions.

It seemed to us it was our duty to present to the Congress a synthesised picture of the successes and the struggles which are at present proceeding in Italy in order to bring forward their characteristic of deep unity, resulting from a correct trade union policy,
but at the same time to indicate their limitations. Actually, while we are fully aware of the political value of these struggles, we are unable to present them superficially as the product of a bloc of monolithic and undifferentiated forces. If we, as has been done in the Report, in analysing these movements in Western Europe, were to come to the conclusion that they pose — and these are the exact words used in the Report — "the question of power, of a genuine democracy, of the socialisation of the means of production, of socialism," we would be falsifying the presentation of reality, at least as far as our country is concerned.

In our view, what needs to be emphasised is the confluence in these movements of working class forces of diverse political orientations. It must be said that in the general front of workers' struggle, within the framework of a correct general line, there have emerged anarcho-syndicalist and pan-syndicalist tendencies which deny the value of all political forces. Other, by no means negligible groupings, while they take part in the struggle to improve the conditions of life of the workers and to enhance the class power expressed by the trade unions, nevertheless refuse to the advanced parties of the working class the place that is their right in democratic life.

The advances made should not lead us into making superficial assessments. Today, it is incontestable that the idea of socialism is making headway even if by new paths and diverse forms when compared with those already existing. Moreover, the forces fighting for progressive and democratic solutions are growing, even if these forces are non-socialist. The genuinely anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist character of the process at present under way must be recognised, but here we have a phenomenon of the world situation which should not be interpreted by the World Federation of Trade Unions as an opting for socialism. Taking account of the political diversity which characterises these struggles, the WFTU should evaluate the stimulus which flows from them to the building of progressive and anti-capitalist societies, recognising the right of each national trade union organisation to interpret its own situation freely and autonomously.

While there exists in Italy trade union unity of action and the political will to overcome the obstacles confronting an organic unity of the trade union movement, big problems still remain in the matter of evaluation of the international situation. There is for example unity of opinion on the anti-fascist struggle and on the need to extend solidarity to the workers of Europe oppressed by fascism in Spain, Portugal and Greece; there is a good measure of unity on the question of extending support to the heroic struggle of the Vietnamese people, on the problems of the Middle East and on European security.
We believe that these observations are true not only for our country but also for Western Europe in general. The economic and social phenomena described in the report by Comrade Gensous have in general sharpened class conflicts on questions of full employment, wages, trade union rights, the powers of trade unions to negotiate on questions of the organisation of labor and the orientation of economic policy. Faced with these phenomena, a tendency is appearing in European society — however varied and differentiated this society is — for a broader affirmation of the personality of the worker, for a democracy with a higher content, for new levels of unity and international solidarity.

Not only in Italy and France, but throughout the West, the workers are struggling with increased vigor. And even in those countries where the unions, still bound by old formulas, have remained prisoners of a bureaucratic incrustation which has weakened their fighting character, the workers are struggling and pushing the traditional trade union movement to a genuine review of its methods through self-criticism, and towards self-renewal. The struggles of which the broad masses are the protagonists in Italy, France, Belgium, Great Britain, Spain, and West Germany are based on a great heritage of national trade union achievements, on often splendid traditions of the working class which, despite the diversions which plague it, still represents an important factor influencing the evolution of political, economic and social relations.

There is a constantly deepening awareness of the fact that the main social and economic objectives, the goals of democratic development and peace, can be achieved through the effecting of deep changes in employing-class and governmental policies in the course of mass struggle on the national scale, co-ordinated at the European level. This awareness has inspired the close collaboration which has been established between the CGIL and the CGT. We have achieved significant results in succeeding in establishing ourselves with the European Economic Community and the European Trade Union Organisations as a force which can no longer be ignored. The development of these bilateral relations is at present finding a positive outcome in a new type of relations between the European secretariats of the CGT-CGIL, the WCDL and the ICFTU.

This is the first time that the ICFTU’s executive committee has discussed, as it did on October 9 last, the draft of a European trade union program drawn up and put forward by the CGT-CGIL joint committee. Leaving aside the basic position taken up by this body in connection with our propositions, the very fact that the discussion took place represents further progress towards trade union unity on an EEC-wide scale. Under the impetus of the new problems posed for the trade unions by today’s reality, meetings and consultations of unionists at the industry-group level are increasing.
The CGIL's whole effort to establish new relations of trade union agreement on a European scale receives worthwhile support from the policy of united action achieved in Italy. This policy, whose results up to the present may be described as remarkable, is the result of a process of self-criticism which has embraced the whole Italian trade union movement, and therefore some of our own methods of the past. This unification process has not weakened the class struggle in Italy but on the contrary has strengthened it, by enhancing the role of the trade union movement in Italian society.

This unification process already calls for its prolongation at the international level. The joint statement of the secretariats of the three Italian trade union confederations is only a few days old; the three confederations say in this statement that they have decided to make a radical examination of the questions associated with a trade union policy capable of defending the interests of the workers even on an international scale, and especially of the workers of the "European zone", and to "support in the European trade union organisations to which they belong the holding of an open meeting between these organisations, unfettered by the prejudices which exist between them, in order to check up at this level on the possibilities and the difficulties existing for the achievement of desirable agreements."

At this point, it seems to us appropriate that we should ask ourselves to what extent the international trade union bodies have contributed to this unification process and to the quest for a new type of international trade union relations. The Seventh Congress of the CGIL, held in June last, estimated that the international trade union federations have proved unable to make such a contribution because they are still prisoners — although to different degrees and in different ways — of the logic of splits and the logic of blocs. It must be acknowledged that, with some exceptions, the world trade union movement has been unable to offer adequate political responses and consistent behaviour. Too much red tape still prevents the trade union movement as it exists today from fighting in an effective manner for peace, social progress and the emancipation of the working class.

The WFTU has as its principal task to strive for the achievement of new relationships of co-operation, understanding and unity of action, enabling the trade unions to oppose in an effective manner the international power of capitalism and imperialism. In the view of the CGIL, the accomplishment of this task requires of the WFTU a profound self-transformation, a changing of its role, orientation and structures, and the basing of its initiatives on regional activities. In the commission for the revision of the constitution of the WFTU,
expressing our approval of the new text, we reaffirmed the im-
portance of the involvement of the CGIL within the WFTU. The 
WFTU, by accentuating its trade union character, and its autonomy 
in relation to parties and governments, should take on new functions 
favoring the quest for trade union unity and the development of the 
class struggle and united struggles for peace, the re-launching of 
the great themes of trade union internationalism without reference 
to ideologies or States, the formulation of concrete answers to the 
requirements of social transformation, the development of different 
regions of the world, the safeguarding of national independence and 
sovereignty.

This transformation of the WFTU becomes still more urgent if 
one thinks of the events which have lately troubled and still trouble 
international trade union life. The events in Czechoslovakia have 
had big repercussions in the trade union movement of all countries, 
they have given rise to new problems and they have led — even 
within the WFTU itself — to profound divergences of opinion of a 
general, national and international character. We are all aware of 
the fact that the differences on this question are of such scope that 
a debate held here on this matter would lead to the shifting of the 
whole centre of gravity of the work of the Congress. That we do 
not want.

Then again, these diversities of judgment on the Czechoslovak 
events can have an influence, even if indirectly, on a number of 
concrete aspects of our discussion. As far as we are concerned, 
we believe that our judgments, which we consider correct and 
which we here re-affirm, even after the most recent events, are an 
important source of guidelines for our increasingly coherent trade 
union action, for peace, in full respect of the principle of non-
interference, of the independence and national sovereignty of all 
peoples, in the spirit of proletarian internationalism.

We do not believe — and recent events confirm this — that the 
problems of the consolidation of socialism in a given country, or 
its advance in new countries, can be resolved by any other instru-
ments than the direct participation of the masses concerned with 
the building of the new society and with the defence of their power. 
We know that in the trade union movement there are some who 
believe that in a socialist country the trade unions should occupy 
the same position as if they were working in a capitalist society. We 
are against this conception; the trade unions cannot but take account 
of the diversities of structure of the societies in which they are 
called upon to act. Everyone knows that in a socialist society the 
trade unions have particular tasks to perform.

But even as we emphasise this, we also declare that even after 
the ending of exploitation, the trade unions cannot be confused,
through abdication of their role, with the structures of state power. Even in a socialist system, the trade unions must know how to express, and to stimulate, the will and the demands of the masses, even of the non-party masses. Even in a socialist system, a trade union which defends the power of the workers can find itself in disagreement — and this has certainly happened already — on questions of the manner in which technical advances are to be utilised, of wages policy, investments, consumer goods, and so on. There simply is no eternal law for solving these problems, which is valid for all concrete situations. The voice of the trade unions, freely expressed in open discussions, when it finds itself confronted with positions expressing other legitimate interests, can in a more effective manner not only defend the immediate interests of the workers but also make a still greater contribution to the strengthening and development of socialism.

The very character of the WFTU, which embraces trade union movements working in different economic and social systems, demands a diversification of trade union strategies. We appreciate the fact that the reporter has referred to the observations made by us at the General Council meeting in Berlin. On this occasion we remarked that the profound economic, political and social differences between the continents of Asia, Africa and Latin America do not permit us to approach all these different realities by grouping them under the definition of “Third World countries”, or developing countries.

The heroic struggle of the Vietnamese people against American imperialism gives the whole Asian workers’ and people’s movement aspects and characteristics appropriate to this continent. The existence in Africa of two autonomous regional organisations calls for a type of relations and initiatives which must take account of the role of these regional organisations, and of their particular requirements in terms of international connections. In Latin America, the stormy development of mass struggle and of the process of united action which is now under way differs sharply from European experiences.

All this adds to the complexity of the task of analysis of the different realities. Despite the weight of Europe, it must be admitted that the WFTU, as it exists today, has not succeeded in welding politically the liberation movement and the workers’ forces of the industrialised countries of Europe. And why? The broad and even effective solidarity actions led by the WFTU have been insufficient to resolve the question, and the problem still remains.

The essential condition for resolving these great problems is to know how to make one’s starting point the reality as it exists, and not as one imagines it is, using formulas which no longer apply.
It is schematic, for example, to artificially separate economic and political objectives. By doing this, political aims are seen outside their logical trade union context and we do not succeed in organising in Europe that great anti-imperialist movement which the trade union movement carries latent within itself.

The anti-imperialist line of the trade union movement is valid only if it is universal. From this point of view, to go so far as to ignore in an analysis of the world situation national realities such as those of China and Yugoslavia, even if these countries are either absent or present only in the capacity of observers at our Congress, is a mistake. The workers of these countries represent irreplaceable forces in world action against imperialism.

In this unified, global conception, the region which is homogeneous from the economic and social points of view becomes the source of experience. It is at this level that the national trade union centres affiliated to the WFTU, joined in regional co-ordinating organisations, can take timely autonomous initiatives in relation to other trade union organisations. This means that the trade union character of the WFTU must be realised not only through ensuring liberty of initiative to its International Departments — which by their nature are instruments for the development of trade union united action — but also in forming regional organisations grouping the trade union bodies belonging to the WFTU. This work must be done patiently, it could perhaps take a long time, but it is only in this way that results will be achieved. We wish to mobilise new forces for the support of a policy of peace, we wish to broaden the front of the forces working for security in Europe.

Our opinions differ in a number of respects from those expressed in the Report. Account should be taken of this fact. Before leaving, we discussed our participation in this Congress in our Executive Committee and we received a unanimous mandate for the line we have expressed here. We cannot however pass over the fact that the socialist comrades — an important part of the CGIL — decided not to take part in the Congress, saying that they did not believe our points of view could receive any favorable reception here.

It ought to be clear that when we call for a transformation of the WFTU we do it not in order to weaken the organisation but to give to it that capacity for initiative and efficacy of action which would allow it to exercise real leadership over a great mass movement and not merely to express positions on this or that issue. The future of the WFTU — and even more, that of the other international organisations — depends in our view on its capacity to transform itself, to adapt itself to the new reality of a changing world.