IN THE INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

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A NUMBER of significant developments are maturing in the international trade union movement. In summary, these are:

1. Increasing co-operation, and even unification, in previously deeply-divided national trade union movements.


3. Pressures for change in the W.F.T.U.

4. Proposed withdrawal of unions in one country from both the I.C.F.T.U. and the W.F.T.U., and consideration of this in other countries.

5. Substantially-increased trade union contact independent of either the I.C.F.T.U. or the W.F.T.U.

6. A strongly-emphasised trend by Socialist country trade union bodies to promote the image and, in some cases, the practice of autonomous and independent trade union organisation and action within Socialist society.

These major manifestations of the situation exist together in a complex of interacting effects. Basically, they derive, on the one hand, from economic and technological developments since the I.C.F.T.U. was formed as a splitting breakaway from the W.F.T.U. in 1949 and, on the other hand, from the reality of some practices and events that have occurred in Socialist countries.

Enormous growth of productive capacity, uneven development and competition of the advanced capitalist countries, weakened grip of the American dollar on the capitalist world and "export" of U.S. economic problems for all the capitalist world to "share", more and more creates irresistible pressure for capitalist countries to find bridgeheads of trade with the Socialist countries.

Increasing contacts between I.C.F.T.U. unions and unions in Socialist countries have developed accordingly. Many of the unions concerned, still under rightwing reformist leadership, simply reflect the needs of their own capitalist class.

Union officials in a number of countries who still vigorously oppose any form of militant action within their own respective countries, let alone anything that resembles revolutionary activity, have found it a common place to accept invitations to visit Socialist countries closely in association with talks between the capitalist industries they cover and a Socialist country ministry.

The trend took an important political turn when Scandinavian and some other I.C.F.T.U. unions took a stand against the U.S. role in Vietnam.

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The overall trend of this was basic to an ultimatum delivered by the A.F.L.-C.I.O. to the I.C.F.T.U. in 1969, that European affiliates in particular should cease activity — an ultimatum which was sufficiently ignored to make the A.F.L.-C.I.O. walk out of the I.C.F.T.U. in 1970 despite valiant efforts by the British T.U.C. to avoid it happening. The A.F.L.-C.I.O. won no new friends when it was then instrumental in having U.S. funds withheld from the I.L.O. because it couldn't get its own way.

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The walk-out epitomised the weakened ability of U.S. imperialists to dictate terms of trade and contact with the Socialist countries to the rest of the capitalist world. Now the U.S.A. itself is
compelled to get in the trade queue to the Socialist world.

The second major influence is multi-national-monopoly growth that has come in the wake of economic and technological development.

The full advantages of modern technology can only be realised with enormous investments. Previous levels of capital concentration are quite inadequate for the purpose. On the other hand, accumulation in the hands of the largest corporations has reached fantastic proportions. These two factors combined in creating in a few short years a labyrinth of multi-national monopoly growth that virtually dominates the entire capitalist world mostly based in U.S. imperialism, but not exclusively so.

General Motors, operating in 38 countries, have an annual turnover greater than the annual national income of countries such as France. Almost every industry of significance in a modern economy is affected, from mining of raw materials to production of micro-miniature electronic circuits. Competition is intense, takeovers and mergers are a daily occurrence.

More and more workers in similar (and dissimilar) industries across the capitalist world find themselves working for the same company. Unions find their destinies determined at secret board meetings in such a manner and in such remote circumstances that their union officers cannot talk direct to those concerned at all. On the contrary, with modern techniques now available, production in one country is flagrantly used to defeat workers' struggles in another country working for the same company.

The merging of multi-national-monopoly with the State machine in capitalist countries has further sophisticated the social means of exploitation so that, despite higher material living standards for some, there are increasing social problems in each country: Enormous wealth, on the one hand, but inflation and unemployment existing side by side in all capitalist countries, and getting worse; increased taxation of all kinds, yet social services, education and housing get more and more beyond the people.

These pressures have resulted in changes taking place in the outlook, policies and leaderships of unions in some countries; in some cases to much greater united action on immediate issues, such as in Great Britain, whilst in Italy it has gone to a wide acceptance for organisational unification of the union movement on an agreed programme for social change.

Part of the Italian agreement included withdrawal of the uniting unions from both the I.C.F.T.U. and the W.F.T.U. It included agreement for vigorous action against international monopoly in all respects and, at the same time, to enter into debate with the Socialist countries concerning Socialist life and the role of the trade unions.

The events of Czechoslovakia and Gdansk were specified as instances that provided the catalyst for agreement in this direction.

There is considerable activity in Western Europe, and between Europe and Africa now taking place with contacts, delegations and conferences, in relation to the new circumstances, involving unions — sometimes with similar ideological positions, sometimes with widely-divergent ideological positions. Material relating to Italian and French discussions is of particular interest in this regard as the area for common, international action continues to widen.

It was most significant that the I.M.F. (part of the I.C.F.T.U.) refused to accept separate affiliation by a group of Italian rightwing Social Democrats, which was sought at the time the Socialist metal union of Italy disaffiliated as part of the agreement to form the newly-amalgamated metal workers' union in that country.

A further influence in Europe and South America has been a developing radical Catholic attitude pressing for social change. The Italian Catholic-led trade unions have readily participated in the substantial actions of recent years and are part of the unifying process now being carried out in a number of countries.

The pressure for common action in Europe has brought a number of positive developments, including agreement for a West European trade union conference irrespective of affiliation.

A problem in relation to achieving an all-European trade union rapprochement is the non-recognition of the German Democratic Republic. So far, the I.C.F.T.U. affiliates will not be in any conference that includes unions from the G.D.R. and the Socialist countries won't participate without them. The I.C.F.T.U. also still insists that trade unions in the Socialist countries are not independent. Considerable effort has been exerted by the W.F.T.U. to bring about a united conference with the I.C.F.T.U. — both on a world scale and for Europe.

In the light of the developments, the last W.F.T.U. Council meeting in Moscow issued a most forthright call for unity. Many bilateral discussions have taken place to try and establish a basis upon which some united conference for Europe can occur.

The role of the W.F.T.U., encompassing as it does the trade unions from the Socialist countries, is also subjected to pressure for change. There are indications that within the W.F.T.U. there are views which could shift its centre away from Prague. Alongside of this the most recent W.F.T.U. publications display a strongly-emphasised trend to show the role of union "independence" within the Socialist countries.
Recently, a critical examination was made by Italian unions of the Fiat works at Togliattigrad in the Soviet Union. This covered the contract terms with Fiat and the work methods involved which are similar to those of Fiat in Turin. A substantial case was made out to show that only an independently-acting union organisation could meet such circumstances.

Aspects of this examination have been publicised by Santamaria’s News Weekly. But what is carefully avoided by News Weekly is that this same critical examination is part and parcel of the task adopted by the Italian metal workers’ union for the achievement of a Socialist society in Italy and for the destruction of a multi-national-monopoly capital power.

More and more the appeal of Socialism as the alternative to capitalism has to be understood and presented in considerably different terms than those previously used. This is essential if there is to be sufficient unity created to provide the forces capable of achieving Socialism. Particularly is this so in the realm of democracy and the role of the trade unions as the mass organisations of the working class.

Despite the pressures for change, there are also pressures to try and ensure that whatever might emerge alongside of or in place of the W.F.T.U., involves the Soviet trade unions in a central position and possible developments are at least “influenced” and even retarded to try and achieve this result.

These problems remain despite the excellent and very successful conference on social services conducted by the Soviet trade unions in September 1971. This was attended by unionists from 109 countries. It is in this realm that the Socialist countries can really show their achievements. It was a conference on a specific issue that showed the possibilities existing outside of the formal international structures currently available.

In recent years some of the Socialist countries have made more far-reaching changes in the role of the trade unions to the point where the practices, rather than the image or appearances, are quite significant. This is particularly so in Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia.

In the Asian region, which is of vital importance to the movement in Australia, the lack of a national trade union organisation on behalf of China’s working people is the greatest single impediment and any highly-developed international trade union unity in this region without China is highly unlikely.

The A.F.L.-C.I.O. has paid considerable attention to the Asian region, particularly Japan, to ensure that reformist leaderships are not influenced by what is happening in Europe and, at the same time, great sums of money have been expended to inflict defeats on the “Left” in the unions.

Indonesia does not have any effective, independent trade union organisation (what does exist is under Suharto’s military, dictatorial control) and in some areas (viz. New Guinea) there are only the rudimentary beginnings of organisations coming into being.

The situation in India, however, is extremely interesting and new, real steps toward a more effective unity in action are developing.

During April 1972, an all-Asian union conference convened by A.I.T.U.C. took place in New-Delhi, from which an assessment can be made as to future prospects in the Asian area.

There is also an emerging awareness by some unions in Australia to view the significance of international union relations in terms of other than “having a trip” or of it being merely “an appendage to a corner of someone else in the international arena”.

Independent contacts are being made in New Guinea and Fiji where Australia, as an imperialist base, carries great responsibility. This needs extension into Malaysia. Other contacts have been made in New Zealand, Japan, India and the Philippines.


There is need for closer relations, particularly between the union movements of Japan, India and Australia as a base for developing more effective Asian region co-operation.

Not for more than 20 years has the situation in the international trade union movement been more fluid than it is at the present time. It reflects changed circumstances for the world’s working classes. What finally emerges from the currently maturing trends will be of very great importance. The final result might well be neither what is currently the I.C.F.T.U. or the W.F.T.U., but an alternative with a programme for thoroughly independent trade union action directed against monopoly capital and for the achievement of a social transformation as envisaged by the newly-united Italian trade union movement.

The Australian trade unions, long isolated from any real participation in effective international union affairs, have a considerable stake in the outcome, particularly in the Asian region. There is need to study current trends more deeply and to participate in a more cohesive manner in the developments taking place.

(This article does not pretend to be an exhaustive analysis — e.g. it does not attempt any estimate of important developments in Latin America, Africa and the Middle East, or their effect upon the general situation. It simply tries to describe the major manifestations of the general situation, with some reference to European influence and the situation in Asia which directly involves Australian participation.)