

SPECIAL FEATURE

# Strategies or Opportunities. Trade Union's International Quest for Social Justice

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## Abstract

In this short contribution, we look at the trajectory of the largest international trade union organization, today ITUC, from the central questions in this exercise; why labor movements have achieved certain successes?, Why they sometimes failed?, And what major failures we have seen?

**Keywords:** International Labour Organisation (ILO); internationalism; labour legislation; reformism; united nations; decolonization

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*Where there is power there is resistance (Foucault).* The first unions were associations that, in a capital-dominated society, pooled people and resources to organize what they called *resistance*. The first strike funds were therefore sometimes called *resistance funds*. Because that was exactly what the function of these unions was initially. Resistance to the inequality and exploitation that resulted from the capitalist mode of production.

Looking at the long cycle of 200 years, resistance remains one of the central driving forces of unions. When Amazon or Ryanair workers demand the right to organize, this is exactly why. At the same time, unions have developed other functions, as representatives and advocates. They operate in a diverse and multilayered field of institutions and networks, co-developing economic and social policies at different levels up to the international.

The one-dimensional image of a trade union as a channel of class struggle and counterpower has broadened and partly transformed over the past two centuries. This has been partly the result of strategic choices, but equally the result of being subject to choices made by others.

We adopt in this “dissection” of the long cycle, not only a chronological frame, a 200-year cycle, but also a geographical one. Capitalism is global, transnational from the very

beginning. Cross-border resistance, however, proved much more difficult to establish. This is immediately, in my opinion, one of the central questions that arises when looking at the cycle, why has the labor movement so far failed to organize an effective international, let alone global, counterforce. National Internationalism<sup>2</sup> remains the dominant practice. However, international trade union organizations do exist, and have existed for almost 150 years now, and have been successful in their pursuit of greater social justice. In what follows, I will roughly look at some pivotal moments and, without formulating a ready and clear answer, there are probably some lessons to be learned.

## Geneva

When Albert Thomas, the French socialist and first director of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 1923 looked back on the period before World War I, he recalled that “before the war, talks between workers had to take place in inns or in the small premises of some trade union. When I compare this with the meetings of the leaders of the labour movement in Geneva, I see signs of important progress.”<sup>3</sup>

That significant progress had not come overnight. Whereas, in the run-up to World War I, there were still calls in circles of the Socialist International to prevent war through a general international strike, that voice was marginalized fairly soon after the conflict erupted. For the war created opportunities that had not been there before.

When put in a broader perspective, this was about what was called the “Labour Question” in the 19th century. It was also about the relationship between government and the two private components of labor (employers and employees). From the third quarter of the 19th century onward, in a number of more industrialized countries we see the development of research, mainly statistics on wages, housing, and so on, which became the underpinning for policies that reluctantly resulted in the first social legislation, such as the limitation of working hours for minors.

The need for solid data and the exchange of information was also one of the main reasons for national trade union federations to establish the International Secretariat (IS), a first international association of national trade union federations, from the turn of the century. Although this IS, in which the German trade unions were dominant, deliberately kept away from the political discussions for which the Second International remained responsible, the consequence of the availability of this data was indeed also ideological. It helped boost the bureaucratization/technocratization of national trade union confederations away from political voluntarism toward reform.

Not only the labor movement, but also the other components of the world of labor experienced such a development. Particularly national governments, which at the turn of the century left the path of aloofness and started treating Labour as a policy domain in its own right. The importance of the creation in some industrialized countries of a Ministry of Labour<sup>4</sup> cannot be underestimated even for the direction that would later be taken. National experts and academics then found each other in the International Association of Labour Legislation, a direct predecessor of the ILO.

The policy of harsh confrontation between government and social movement was thus largely abandoned, and the sharpest edges of restrictive legislation on trade unions

were dropped. Trade unions became mass organizations with greater autonomy, a professional leadership and their own agenda. And that agenda in most of these mass organizations was reformist, in other words did not fundamentally question the private ownership of means of production, but emphasized the importance of a steering role in the economic domain on the part of the government.

In this way, the outlines of a relationship between the three components of Labour's world came to the fore, with the government bringing representatives of labor and capital together for deliberation from which policies and legislation were then created.

This was the situation in 1914, when the war forced labor movements to make a choice. But was it really a choice? Did an international strike have any chance of success? Didn't the labor movement risk losing everything that had been built up over the previous decades?

In the end, just about all major national trade union confederations made the same choice. They supported their government's war position and played an important role in maximizing war production, irrespective of which camp they belonged to.<sup>5</sup>

But this support did not come without conditions. As early as 1916, a conference of allied trade union organizations in Leeds had already expressed the demand that a future peace conference should include "Industrial Clauses." The demand was formulated by Leon Jouhaux, the leader of the syndicalist French national central *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT). The prospect of achieving a major reform program in exchange for supporting war production also won over one of the last and most important supporters of revolutionary trade unionism.

The expectation that a peace conference after the end of the war would bring about fundamental reforms in the world of Labour was present in all the belligerent camps, including the US where the American Federation of Labor (AFL), one of the pillars of the Wilson administration, actively supported the repressive approach of the leftist, anarchist, and syndicalist anti-war movements such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).<sup>6</sup> Again, there was an exchange, with AFL president Samuel Gompers, after the US joined the Allied camp, touring Europe as a semi-official representative of the US government. In doing so, he pretty much became the first labor diplomat. His presence and influence also reinforced the demand that a forthcoming peace conference should also have a labor agenda.

Was, as is often claimed, the October revolution and the creation of a Soviet Union decisive for the extent to which the demands of the labor movement were answered at the end of the war? Looking at the chronology, I tend to downplay this importance. The realization that there needed to be international agreements to deal with the "Labour Question" had a long preliminary trajectory in 1919, and it was the war that created the opportunity; the October Revolution was no more than a reinforcing factor.

But among the unions, there was little or no expertise with regard to international treaties and the technicality of international diplomatic work. There was, however, a program of demands, adopted at a conference in Berne, prior to Versailles. This program was a summary of the main labor reform demands of the past decades with the introduction of the 8-hour working day as the most prominent point. How this program was to be translated into legislation on the field and what instrument needed to be developed to this end was a discussion on which no agreement had been reached at the start of the conference and which, in principle, could still go either way. In the few

weeks that the Labour Committee of the Peace Conference functioned, decisions were taken that have repercussions to this day and have had a global impact.

Two central points caused the greatest differences of opinion: the relationship between governments and representatives of employers and workers and the legal status of an ILO's legislative work. This was not an anecdotal discussion, but went to the heart of the questions: the extent to which governments should or should not regulate Labour, and the question of whether an international organization can conclude conventions that automatically bind all member countries, i.e. whether international law ranks higher than national legislation. We know the outcome of this discussion. The ILO became a tripartite organization with governments and representatives of employers and workers on an equal footing (2-1-1). This means that representatives of nongovernmental organizations within the ILO have effective voting rights and together have equal weight with governments. Within the United Nations system, as it exists today, this remains unprecedented. A testament also to the strength of the labor movement at the end of World War I.

The question of the status of the ILO's legislative work eventually turned into a solution that severely limited the power of the international over the national level. The ILO was given the right to conclude conventions and make recommendations, but these were not automatically binding. It is the national parliaments that have the final say and may or may not translate the conventions into national legislation or introduce national legislation based on the recommendations.

The first director of the ILO, Albert Thomas, called it a "clumsy system"<sup>7</sup>, but this did not prevent the ILO, during its first decade of existence, from developing into a lever through which national labor movements in mainly industrialized countries were able to force fundamental reforms of social and labor law. That said, it also became clear fairly quickly to the international labor movement that the ILO was impotent when interventions were required in, for example, the international financial system (exchange rates) or in international trade, especially in raw materials.

The social, economic and political calamities resulting from hyperinflation in Germany and speculation in the domain of exchange rates and raw materials were beyond the reach of the ILO. The economic crisis of the 1930s and mass unemployment reinforced the conviction within the ILO that there was a need to "shift our centre of gravity"<sup>8</sup>, from a labor standards setting to the economic domain. The ILO, supported in this by the international trade union movement, then became convinced that there was a need for a stronger international agency with authority over all areas related to labor.

## San Francisco

This objective both the international trade union movement and the ILO's leadership hoped to realize during World War II. For once again the world of Labour was looked to for cooperation and support in maximizing industrial production. Once again, national trade union leaders from the Allied countries would become influential partners of their governments, once again they became unofficial diplomats, and once again efforts to support the war were demanded from workers with the promise of a significant improvement in labor standards and the development of a comprehensive

social security system.<sup>9</sup> The expectation of the labor movement was therefore that their strong national position would once again translate into an international leap forward.

The expected exchange, this time, was a strong expansion of the ILO's competences. The ILO was to become the organizational basis for the Economic and Social aspects of a new world order and to take a central position in global reconstruction. This was even the basis of the so-called American resolution at the 1941 ILO Special Conference in New York.<sup>10</sup> But this time it failed. Under British leadership, the international trade union movement had chosen to try to mirror the war alliance. With the entry of the Soviet Union into this alliance, in this logic, an entry of the Soviet trade union movement was natural. This was rebuffed by the AFL, which even went to war openly against the new World Federation of Trade Unions, which included both socialist and communist organizations.

But the real reason for the failure lay more deeply, and for this we need to look at the new role the United States aspired to on the world stage. What place was there in it for the world of labor? And would they or would they not choose to continue or even expand the ILO system with a tripartite partnership and a strong government presence?

Within the Roosevelt administration, unions had a strong voice. Although divided, AFL and Congress of Industrial Organisations (CIO)—the two major national trade union confederations lived on a war footing—both had access to the main cénacles of power and their interests were duly taken into account.<sup>11</sup> These were generally confined to the national arena; there was not much immediate interest in developing an international system in which Labour would be given a central place.

In contrast, the ILO's top leadership, with support from the international trade union movement as well as US Labour Secretary Frances Perkins, wanted to take a new qualitative step forward, which basically amounted to an internationalization/globalization of the Roosevelt administration's New Deal policy. A strongly government-directed economy, focusing on wealth redistribution and greater ethnic equality.<sup>12</sup> This did not align with the interests of American industrial circles, which, from their position of power within the State Department, determined the architecture for a new political and economic world order. The initiative to create a new international system came in the hands of a small group of technocrats who enjoyed political support within the State Department, but who were certainly also nurtured by private think tanks.<sup>13</sup> It was under the impetus of these circles of power, working largely from the shadows, that the architecture for a new international organization came into being. And with the main aim, as Stephen Wertheim writes: "The United States had to lead the post-war world and the world organisation could make this happen."<sup>14</sup> This initially led to the political-military domain (security) becoming central to the new world organization. But it also had implications for the economic and social domain, and certainly Labour, for which there was still only a secondary role. It was the ambition of the US "to become the international trade and financial centre of the world while making the dollar the world currency."<sup>15</sup> This presupposed new international institutions such as a World Bank and an international monetary system (Bretton Woods), but these had to be able to operate autonomously, independently of any higher or competing authority.

During the short period of barely 3 years, between the spring of 1942 and the founding of the United Nations in the spring of 1945, fundamental choices were thus

once again made that continue to exert their influence to this day and that also determined the place of the World of Labour in the international system. For the vision of the American planners was not exactly favorable to the ILO and its supporters. The ILO, backed in this by the international trade union movement, saw for itself a leading role in the social and economic domain, but this was beyond the experts at the State Department, who did not like the “professional devotees of economic planning,”<sup>16</sup> i.e. the New Deal adherents. As a result, there was no longer any question of a strong ILO; on the contrary, the planners were determined “to keep the ILO at a low level.”<sup>17</sup> It went even further as plans were circulating “to scrap all the Geneva organisations and to reconstruct the international organisation for the future on completely new foundations.”<sup>18</sup>

A first alarm had sounded when the ILO was not involved in the First International Food Conference in Hot Springs in 1943. From then on, the international trade union movement tried to put pressure on the Allied governments, but had little success in doing so. It was a first sign of the marginalization of Labour as a policy domain within the new international system and the reduction of the influence of its representatives, and in particular the ILO and trade unions. In this fight, did this international trade union movement make choices that could have changed the course of history?

To answer that question, we need to look at the British labor movement (unions and party) in addition to the American one. Was an internationalization of the New Deal, an expansion of the scope of the ILO, both geographically and substantively, in Britain’s interest? The answer was unequivocally no. There was little enthusiasm within the British government and particularly among Ernest Bevin, the chief Labour minister, to see the ILO develop into a broadly mandated and globally operating organization. Not least because it was feared that this might lead to problems in the British colonies. Plans for a more wide-ranging mandate consequently had to be shelved and Bevin also confirmed that: “The ILO will stand or fall by what it does in its own proper sphere” which was “labour and industry.”<sup>19</sup> The priority for British Labour was also that of national interest, rebuilding Britain and improving welfare of the British working class. The broad reform program designed within the ILO was rejected outright by the British government and, in particular, by the Socialist Labour minister Ernest Bevin.

This program, contained in ILO Director Phelan’s report *on the future policy, programme and status of the ILO*, which had been transmitted to the participating governments in preparation for the ILO Philadelphia conference, was indeed ambitious: “Full employment at fair pay, better nutrition, better housing, better medical services, fuller equality of educational opportunity, adequate family allowances, more ample provision for old age, disability, and widow and orphans, proper recreational facilities for all classes in the community and especially for the young, higher standards of health, safety, welfare and leisure in industry, more assured prosperity and higher level of enmities in agriculture.”<sup>20</sup> All this the ILO wanted to achieve as an international organization, independent, both structurally and financially, of any other authority. Both the British and US governments saw things differently, however, and the British delegation was instructed not to vote in Philadelphia on items that “commit anyone to action”<sup>21</sup> and the US government let it be known that it was not prepared “to see an unlimited expansion of the functions of the ILO in the economic field.”<sup>22</sup>

How did the international trade union movement respond? Here we see that sometimes coincidences and personal issues at crucial moments can determine the direction of history. It was clear that the trade union movement was dissatisfied with the way the ILO was run during the war. Several calls to action were made and pressure was put on the ILO leadership to take a more active role. Weak leadership and inadequate expertise and competences in the financial and economic fields, precisely where great ambition lay, helped to cause the ILO's waning influence. At the same time, there was no such expertise in the trade unions either. Many European national organizations had sought refuge in the UK and were cut off from their apparatus and base, while the international trade union movement itself had also had to lay off most of its staff. Technical and substantive support from the Ministries of Labour and the various committees preparing the postwar could have partly absorbed this, but there was hardly any. In the US, the Department of Labour worked in parallel with the State Department, and in the UK the person of Walter Citrine, both president of the Trades Unions Congress (TUC) and of the international trade union movement, was strongly criticized in both foreign affairs and labor circles. Relations with Ernst Bevin in particular were very strained.

Citrine made a number of strategic mistakes that also caused the international labor movement to fight the wrong battle. Namely, it was assumed that at the end of the war a new peace conference would follow at which the contours of a new world order would be drawn. It was Citrine's ambition to represent Labour's voice at this conference and help ensure that new and important reforms would be implemented internationally. He was thus betting on a Versailles bis. This was the reason behind the accelerated creation of a World Federation of Trade Unions that immediately claimed the right of representation in the forthcoming peace conference. But this initiative had led to an open war with the AFL within the international trade union movement. Within international diplomacy, Labour became a "toxic" issue<sup>23</sup> and the loss of influence was immense. Even with the British government, which ignored a demand by Citrine for union representatives to be included in the national delegation.

San-Francisco became the opposite of Versailles. Even the ILO did not receive a formal invitation and there was resistance from the Soviet delegation to the mention of the ILO in the UN charter. It had not been forgotten in Moscow that they had been shown the door in Geneva in 1938 in a not too diplomatic manner.

Essential to this story, however, is that the central architects of the new world order, the British and American governments, each had their own reasons for restricting the ambition of trade unions and ILO. With the British, it was mainly about not tolerating interference from an international organization in the colonies and mandate territories, where labor standards had to remain at a lower level than in the mother country, and with the US, it was about keeping the role of government in the economy as limited as possible. One could even say that what we today call neoliberalism was in the starting blocks here.

That it did not get out of the starting blocks for the time being was because of the Cold War. A conflict that created a global tension between two politico-social models and would, to a large extent, sharpen antagonisms in the nonindustrialized colonized South. Labour thus returned to a central position and, from the rebound, the pariah of San-Francisco once again became a valued partner. But the world had taken a new turn and the chances for a stronger ILO were lost.

## Labour and decolonization

Trade unions, along with other social movements and nongovernmental organizations, played a role in the transition in many countries from colonial rule to independence. This process took place largely during the Cold War period, when Labour was one of the front lines of East–West conflict. This meant that not only colonial powers, but also the United States and the Soviet Union were involved. The “Western” camp was promoter of a stable system of industrial relations as it existed in the Western capitalist world. A Ministry of Labour and collective bargaining between employers and workers were essential components in this model<sup>24</sup> that was supposed to result in a stable social climate within which the local economy could develop. This should lead to more prosperity, which in turn was the best guarantee against communist-inspired revolutionary movements. In this way, industrial workers would play a key role and be a constructive participant in the democratic polity. This doctrine, which had proved successful in Europe at the time of the Marshall Plan, was used as a model for other countries. The international trade union movement that had collaborated on the Marshall Plan in continental Europe had experienced the enormous progress that could be made in terms of purchasing power and welfare and also assumed that it was universally applicable. In other words, Western trade unions opted for a model of consumerism, with high wages and solid social protection, and actively cooperated in promoting this model worldwide. In doing so, they became allies of the political forces fighting communism worldwide. The ultimate goal was to keep the decolonized countries in the Western camp. Trade unions thus primarily played a political role in this.

The international perspective is not the most useful for looking at decolonization. Indeed, local specificities and circumstances often play a determining role. Nevertheless, through the international lens, one can see some very general trends that are illustrative of the way regimes and organizations tried to promote their interests. This process took little account of local conditions, the local economy (usually still largely agricultural) and gave little space to the agency of local actors.

To guide the transition to independence, several instruments were developed in the field of labor. On the one hand, there was the ILO, which offered “technical” assistance; in addition, there were diplomatic channels and lab(o)r attachés were appointed worldwide in embassies of both the US and UK, whose explicit mission was to win local labor leaders to the Western model<sup>25</sup>; and finally, there were trade unions, both national, industrial and international organizations that carried out a wide range of interventions.

The bargain consisted in trade unions becoming endowed with huge resources, far beyond their own capabilities, giving them opportunities to establish themselves globally, including in countries with predominantly agricultural economies, something they had not succeeded in doing on their own until then. In return, the trade union movement had to accept a subsidiary function, mostly in training and labor education—without a role and strategy of their own.<sup>26</sup> Looking at what was happening on the ground, we again see a central role for the US trade union movement AFL (after the merger AFL-CIO), along with other national actors, such as the British TUC, a number of International Trade Secretariats and the umbrella organization International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). Until World War II, the



influence of these Western organizations in the “South” was extremely limited, but the labor movement was one of the few forums where indigenous cadres were given opportunities. The further formation of these cadres became one of the central tasks of the international trade union movement. There was a particular focus on Africa and there was good reason for it. African nationalism had developed strongly with Pan-Africanism, and many of these Pan-African leaders had trade union backgrounds. Moreover, it was precisely the communist World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) that began to show a keen interest in Africa, making the continent one of the main theatres of conflict in the Cold War from the mid-1950s onward.<sup>27</sup> Between 1956 and 1968, the ICFTU, with the US trade union movement as its main donor, spent about \$17 million on “development assistance” through its International Solidarity Fund (ISF). In Africa, ISF funds were mainly used to finance the Labour college in Kampala. That Labour college’s main mission was to form a future leadership elite that was expected to lead national trade unions, which in some cases did not even exist yet. In total, between 1958 and 1968, 564 trainees from 22 African countries would attend the program, which consisted mainly of learning about both values and practices of the *free, democratic* trade union movement.

It is interesting to note that not only the Western camp but also the communist one pursued identical policies. The actors here were both the communist World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), which included a number of communist national trade union federations from Western countries (France and Italy) and the East German trade union movement Freier Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund (FDGB), German Democratic Republic (GDR). The GDR even had a trade union school (the Fritz Heckert institute in Bernau) where African cadres were trained, and in Africa there was the African Workers University in Conakry which was run by the WFTU in cooperation with the Ugandan trade union federation UGTAN.<sup>28</sup>

It is not the place here to discuss these initiatives in detail, but they are illustrative of the extent to which Labour as a policy domain and trade unions as central players within it were considered important by both the Western and Communist blocs in the transition to independence.

As during both world wars, participation by (international) trade unions was paramount. But this came to an end when the usefulness of trade unions was no longer widely accepted and the large amount of funds governments spent on development work through trade unions came under fire.

In the early 1970s, there was growing criticism in US policy circles about the spending of development money and questions were raised about the effectiveness of working through unions. At the same time, scandals rained down because of the role played in these by the CIA and by AFL-CIO actions in Latin America and Asia. In the US, trade unions came under pressure and from the early 1980s; the paradigm of a development strategy in which Labour played a central role was coming to an end. In many decolonized countries, nationalist movements were in power, suppressing their own local labor movement, while the non-alliance movement provided space for important regional power players such as India and Egypt to form an alternative bloc. The end of the Cold War meant the end of the political role played by (international) trade unions in promoting the Western model. This model, incidentally, was also under pressure due to the globalization of the economy. In a post-1989 world order,

the postwar balance of power with an intervening government and strong trade unions was broken. What followed was a massive attack on all fronts (social, political, ideological, and cultural) of the labor movement and on its values.<sup>29</sup> With national trade union movements facing massive loss of members and influence in almost all industrial countries, the international trade union movement has been unable to launch an adequate countermovement until today.

## Conclusion

The labor movement is a bottom-up movement, which is its strength and at the same time its weakness. Trade unions have until today failed to translate the economic and political power that comes from organizing a large group of workers from below into a real international counterpower. The successes that did occur were largely achieved within the national framework. A pooling of strong national forces made it possible to take a quantum leap internationally after the end of World War I. That a second leap was not possible after World War II had to do with a new political climate and a new world power, the USA. Yet at that time, the attempt to liquidate the ILO and with the ILO the achievements of Versailles could be prevented, which in itself was a success. The political usefulness of national and international trade unions during the Cold War period and decolonization put them once again in a position where, especially in the industrialized West, significant strides were made in combating inequality, both in income, welfare and education. However, the same progress was not there in the global South. After the end of the Cold War, economic and political forces eroded the influence and also the achievements of workers' movements on a global scale. Now, with the climate changes, we are at the beginning of a new global crisis that will only be overcome by means of an authority with global powers. The social dimension of the policy that needs to be developed is one of the central challenges facing international trade union organizations.

## Notes

1. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) is a merger of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (mainly social democratic) and the Christian World Confederation of Labour (WCL). The ITUC represents 207 million workers in 163 countries. Together with its predecessors it is historically the most influential trade union organization. In the context of this contribution it is not possible to discuss the various other international confederations.
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10. International Labour Organisation, *Conference of the International Labour Organisation 1941*, New York, Washington DC. *Proceedings* (Montreal: International Labour Office), 163.
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12. Nelson Lichtenstein, "Class politics and the state during World War Two," *International Labor and Working Class History* 58 (2000): 261–74.
13. US Foreign policy was strongly influenced by private foundations, such as the Rockefeller Foundation, which financially supported the stay of the financial and economic section of the League of Nations in the USA.
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16. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Leo Pasvolsky papers, Box2, memo 'Miscellaneous Observations on "Post-War Planning"'.  
17. Columbia University, Carter Goordrich Papers, Box 27, Memorandum of Conversation between Sr. Smith Simpson and Mr. Gambs, 11 Oktober 1944.
18. ILO Archives, Winant and Phelan Files, 7 14/1/2.
19. The National Archives of the UK (TNA), FO 371/34508, Bevin to Eden, 3 July 1943.
20. International Labour Conference, *Future Policy*, 2-3.
21. TNA FO 371/40486, Memo Roberts (FO), 27 March 1944.
22. Library of Congress, Leo Pasvolsky Papers, Box4, Memo "Official Statements and Views Pertaining to Permanent International Organization", 31 July 1944, p. 97.
23. Kott, *Organizing World Peace*, 305.
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