

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Special Issue: The WFTU and the Labour Movements of Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America during the Cold War

Locating British Imperialism in Combatting the World Federation of Trade Unions in Iran and Malaya

Rowena Abdul Razak 

School of History, Religions and Philosophies, SOAS University of London, London, UK
Email: rowena.razak@gmail.com

Abstract

In 1949, the British Labour Party had been in power for four years. Domestically, the British government faced post-war reconstruction; internationally, its imperial grip was loosening. Nonetheless, it still ruled over lands in Africa and Asia and controlled resources such as oil in the Middle East. A contradiction emerged between its people-focused internal politics and its condescension in the conduct of foreign and colonial affairs. Concerns around the emerging Cold War infused British imperial policy. Seeing the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) as a communist vehicle, the British government treated it with suspicion, especially in view of its influence over two areas of imperial interest: the Iranian oil industry and the British colony of Malaya. An examination of the situations in both countries reveals the WFTU's influence on trade union movements in those regions and uncovers London's imperial anxieties about its position in the post-war global order.

In the years following the end of World War II, labour movements in Iran and Malaya became more politically aware and increasingly active in industrial organization. Both countries had suffered under military occupation during the war: Iran under the Soviets and the British, and Malaya under the Japanese. Both had active communist movements and trade unions that had become more mobilized and organized during the war, attracting the attention of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). As trade unions in Malaya and Iran developed links with the organization, they also attracted the attention of the British government. Both Iran and Malaya were subject to the British Empire, albeit in different ways. Since the nineteenth century, Malaya had been under direct British colonial rule. Parts of the country were administered as crown colonies, while others retained local rulers who were obliged to listen to their British advisors. Local resources were controlled by British entrepreneurs and were

part of the global imperial trading network.¹ In Iran, petroleum was a wholly British endeavour, with the British government a major shareholder of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). The oil refineries of Abadan became symbolic of British imperial presence in Iran. Every aspect of the industry was under British control, including its labour. During World War II and the occupation of Iran, workers were subjected to wartime conditions and rules, with the suspension of certain freedoms and rights.²

On the surface, it may seem a little arbitrary to place Iran and Malaya together in a study about the WFTU. The two countries had markedly different trajectories and histories and developed distinctive approaches to trade unionism. In both cases, however, we can see how the WFTU attempted to gain influence over local movements in the Global South. The British government regarded communist-controlled unionism as a grave threat in the context of the Cold War. The Iranian and Malayan cases reveal how British governments, both Labour and Conservative, viewed the WFTU with concern and as antithetical to its control over Iranian oil and in its empire in Malaya. This article shows how the British tried to use their influence to counter the WFTU in two areas in which it had imperial interests. It focuses on points of convergence in British conduct in Iran and Malaya, while also offering insight into how the WFTU acted and was regarded in two different environments in the Global South.³ This article highlights connectivities in terms of how the British influenced the trade union movement, thereby adding to a growing interest in labour affairs in non-Western societies.⁴ Following Patrick O'Brien's methodological framework of extending geographical catchment areas,⁵ it adopts a comparative approach that bridges the geographical gap between Iran and Malaya by highlighting parallels in their experiences and interactions with the WFTU and the ways in which their labour affairs were subject to British political interference.

In April 1947, the WFTU sent delegations to Iran and Malaya to assess the trade union situation and to strengthen relations with the movement in the two countries. At this point, the organization was still formally united, but it already had different leaders and factions, which accounts for its varying approaches to Iran and Malaya. These East–West tensions bubbled below the surface and would later come more clearly to the fore.⁶ Fact-finding missions to Iran and Malaya included prominent members such as Mostafa El Aris from Lebanon, a communist labour leader and member of the WFTU executive committee, and Louis Saillant from France, the WFTU's general secretary. The British government, under Labour leader Clement Attlee, viewed this as a

¹ Anthony Reid, *A History of Southeast Asia: Critical Crossroads* (Oxford, 2015), p. 243.

² Rasmus Christian Elling and Rowena Abdul Razak, "Oil, Labour and Empire: Abadan in WWII-Occupied Iran", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 50:1 (July 2021), pp. 6–8.

³ Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka (eds), *Comparative and Transnational History: Central European Approaches and New Perspectives* (Oxford [etc.], 2010), p. 1.

⁴ Stefano Belucci et al., "Introduction: Labour in Transport: Histories from the Global South (Africa, Asia, and Latin America)", *International Review of Social History*, 59:S22 (2014), pp. 2–3.

⁵ Patrick O'Brien, "Historiographical Traditions and Modern Imperatives for the Restoration of Global History", *Journal of Global History*, 1:1 (2006), p. 5.

⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, "The Significance of the World Federation of Trade Unions in the Present Power Conflict", 14 June 1948. Available at: www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000258339.pdf; last accessed 20 July 2024.

potent and potentially dangerous dynamic that could reinforce Soviet influence over trade unions in the two countries and, by extension, in the Persian Gulf and Southeast Asia.⁷ Through the British embassy in Tehran, London was kept abreast of all activities pertaining to the WFTU delegation in Iran – especially their interactions with the Tudeh (“Masses”) Party, which was the main communist party with close ties to the Soviet Union. Through the Foreign Office, the British embassy issued a warning to the colonial government in Malaya and Singapore⁸ that the WFTU delegation in Iran was “more concerned with politics than with trades unions affairs”.⁹ This concern that the WFTU was influencing Asian labour movements and turning them into vehicles of international communism would haunt the British colonial government even after Malaya gained independence a decade later. The Persian Gulf and Southeast Asia thus became important areas of concern for WFTU activities. On one hand, the WFTU competed with the British government for influence over labour movements in both regions; on the other, this revealed the British government’s anxieties regarding their global position vis-à-vis industrial politics in the Cold War.

This article reveals how the British government took an active role in observing and blocking WFTU activities in the Persian Gulf and Southeast Asia. British approaches to the WFTU in both Malaya and Iran were driven by anxieties over possible Soviet influence, even in the absence of any real evidence. The British government saw the WFTU’s involvement in these regions as linked to developments within Britain itself. The Labour Party’s post-war vision for Britain was strongly shaped by the concept of the welfare state, which was symbolized by the establishment of the National Health Service. However, this was also a time of imperial crisis. With the loss of India and Palestine (and their violent partitions into Pakistan and Israel), Britain faced rising nationalist sentiments across its colonies. This end-of-empire mentality permeated the Labour Party while it was in power, impacting its approach to international matters and, as this article will argue, labour politics.

In Iran, these anxieties were highlighted by the activities of the Tudeh Party. Founded in 1941 at the start of the British–Soviet occupation, it grew during the 1940s to wield impressive influence over workers. In 1946, the party openly challenged British control over Iranian oil and even called for its nationalization. Party members led oil workers, who were mostly of Iranian and Indian origin, to negotiate with the AIOC for better terms and for amnesty for those striking.¹⁰ This episode shook the company and led the British Labour government, a majority stakeholder, to monitor the Tudeh closely. Given the party’s overt alignment with the Soviet Union and adherence to Marxism, the threat of communism taking root in Iran appeared increasingly real. The WFTU’s growing international prominence further affected the confidence of the

⁷Foreign Office (Attlee) to Special Commissioner in SE Asia Singapore, 2 April 1947, The National Archives, Richmond, UK [hereafter, TNA], FCO141/17011; Special Commissioner in SE Asia Singapore (Killearn) to Foreign Office, 25 March 1947, TNA, FCO141/17011.

⁸Malaya and Singapore, originally ruled as a single political entity, were separated in 1946 when the peninsula became the Malayan Union (later the Federation of Malaya).

⁹Foreign Office (Attlee) to Special Commissioner in SE Asia Singapore, 2 April 1947, TNA, FCO141/17011.

¹⁰Louise Fawcett, *Iran and the Cold War: The Azerbaijan Crisis of 1946* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 69–70.

British Labour government with regard to its political approach. In the months before and after the WFTU's visit to Iran and Malaya, the British government – in particular Prime Minister Clement Attlee and Minister of Labour and National Service Ernest Bevin – took a keen interest and followed WFTU activities in Iran, seeing the organization's potential to disrupt British imperial interests. As will be shown, the WFTU's links with Iran revealed the importance of the labour front in geopolitics and exposed vulnerabilities in the emerging Cold War.

A similar concern was present in Southeast Asia, where trade union movements were regarded as deeply intertwined with international communism. The British government reduced labour politics in Malaya to a simplified Cold War logic, regarding those involved as either communist, and therefore pro-Soviet, or not. For the most part, Asian trade unions were seen as instruments for Soviet policy and tools of the Cominform. British policymakers regarded the WFTU as the binding force for these pro-communist Asian trade unions. They saw the WFTU's Asian regional conference, held in Beijing in November 1949, as a gathering of communist organizations under the guise of a platform for workers of all ideological bents. In response, the British government encouraged other trade unions to break away from the WFTU, even before the split of 1949, providing space for anti-communist trade unions to gather and drawing on its colonial power to control trade unions within its empire.

This article examines how the British government perceived the WFTU, labour, and the trade union movement in Iran and Malaya during two periods: the second half of the 1940s and the 1950s. The years following the end of World War II were marked by a sense of euphoria on the Left and among labour movements in general, with the rise of left-wing governments and the increase of workers' consciousness in the post-war context. In this period, the British were keen to counter WFTU influence in Iran, opting for repressive and co-optive methods. In the following decade, internal tensions emerged within the Left, especially between those who were inclined to the Soviet Union and those who wanted to forge a more independent path. The WFTU split in 1949 over ideological differences. One faction, which included the British Trade Union Congress, was worried about the pro-Soviet orientation of the WFTU; they left and formed the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). The British government would capitalize on this split and promoted the ICFTU as a safer alternative to the WFTU, especially in Malaya, Singapore, and Borneo.

Against the backdrop of the early Cold War, the international geopolitical environment was tense and saw increasing divisions between East and West and between communism and capitalism. The research presented here stems, in part, from an earlier study of the WFTU's 1947 visit to Iran and the Labour government's response to it.¹¹ However, this article departs from this by placing British concerns towards the WFTU within British imperialism and the Cold War. Another point of departure is the comparative treatment of Iran and Malaya, thus highlighting parallel patterns within British attitudes towards the WFTU in an international context. Drawing on Vanessa Hearman's work on Indonesian trade unionist activism, this work also explores the intertwined relationships between the WFTU, local trade unions, and communism on

¹¹Rowena Abdul Razak, "The British, the Tudeh Party and the 1947 World Federation of Trade Unions' Visit: Battle for Labour Reform in Iran", *Labor History*, 60:2 (2019), pp. 96–109.

one hand, and colonialism and the Cold War on the other.¹² This research expands on Rachel Leow's work on trade union networks in 1950s Asia in the context of the Cold War to explore how these patterns existed in other areas of British imperial interest, specifically Iran.¹³ By examining the differences in the British government's approach to the WFTU in Iran and in Malaya, we can see how London was driven by a Cold War mindset, layered with anxieties over imperial decline. Its policies in Iran informed colonial government in Malaya; local support for the WFTU presence waned through suppression, and the British encouraged the ICTU and British-friendly trade unions in both Iran and Malaya.

Iran: Oil, Labour, and Imperial Control

During World War II, Britain and the Soviet Union revived early-twentieth-century imperial agreements to occupy Iran. Citing the presence of German nationals in the country, British and Soviet troops invaded and swiftly defeated the Iranian army. It soon became clear that London and Moscow were driven by other motivations, namely securing the Trans-Iranian Railway and road networks, unhindered access to oil in southern Iran, and other resources vital to the war. The danger of Iran turning into a fifth column for the Axis powers was relatively low. The occupation of Iran revealed how the British regarded the oil industry as an area of vulnerability. Indeed, the opposition they faced from the Tudeh proved to be a key motivation for the British government to intervene more directly in Iran's labour movement.¹⁴

During the reign of Reza Shah, the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, British influence in Iran had diminished considerably. After ascending to the throne in 1925, Reza Shah took major steps to secure national sovereignty and remove foreign influence from the country. A key component of this effort was the abrogation of concessions granted in the nineteenth century under the Qajar dynasty, alongside the renegotiation of oil agreements with the AIOC.¹⁵ These policies created significant tensions in bilateral ties and restricted British access to oil (logistically and financially) under Reza Shah.¹⁶ With the outbreak of war in Europe, unrestricted control over oil was vital. The vast complex of Abadan held the largest oil reserves available to Britain. Described as "Britain's greatest refinery", it was the world's leading producer of aviation fuel.¹⁷ In addition, Reza Shah had overseen extensive rail and road construction in order to

¹²Vanessa Hearman, "Indonesian Trade Unionists, the World Federation of Trade Unions and Cold War Internationalism, 1947–65", *Labour History*, 111 (2016), pp. 27–44.

¹³Rachel Leow, "Asian Lessons in the Cold War Classroom: Trade Union Networks and the Multidirectional Pedagogies of the Cold War in Asia", *Journal of Social History*, 53:2 (2019), pp. 429–453.

¹⁴Touraj Atabaki, *Toiling for Oil: A Social History of Petroleum in Iran* (Cambridge, 2024).

¹⁵Reza Shah terminated the mission of Arthur C. Millspaugh, the US official who had been tasked with reforming the country's financial policies. He terminated other capitulatory policies and ties with other countries, including Belgium and Russia. Michael Zirinsky, "Riza Shah's Abrogation of Capitulations, 1927–1928", in Stephanie Cronin (ed.), *The Making of Modern Iran: State and Society under Riza Shah, 1921–1941* (London, 2003), pp. 81–98, 84.

¹⁶Chelsi Mueller, "Anglo-Iranian Treaty Negotiations: Reza Shah, Teymurtash and the British Government, 1927–32", *Iranian Studies*, 49:4 (2016), pp. 577–592.

¹⁷David Edgerton, *Britain's War Machine: Weapons, Resources, and Experts in the Second World War* (Oxford, 2011), p. 185.

connect the north of the country to the south, effectively providing a route to transport oil to the Soviet Union.¹⁸ Allied troops demanded the expulsion of all Germans from the country and unconditional access to Iranian railroads and roads.¹⁹ Under pressure to abdicate, the shah acquiesced, on the assurance that he would be succeeded by his son, Mohammad Reza. The shah's forced abdication removed an obstacle to the Allied access to vital resources for the war effort.

The occupation reshaped labour politics in Iran in two ways. Firstly, it suspended workers' rights by placing them under special wartime restrictions. These were formalized by an Order in Council that prevented British and Indian subjects from leaving their jobs without direct permission from Reader Bullard, the British minister (later ambassador) in Tehran.²⁰ Secondly, the occupation facilitated the rise of the Tudeh Party as a leader in trade union affairs, a champion of workers' rights, and an instigator of labour agitation, especially in opposition to Britain's imperial control over oil. While the war had temporarily placed Iranian oil within strategic interests, once the war shifted in favour of the Allies, access to oil became a symbol of British power projection in the Persian Gulf.

The war placed severe strain on the oil workers of Abadan, compounding the hardships faced by the Iranian people under occupation. Food shortages led to widespread protests and there was unrest surrounding high living costs.²¹ AIOC workers were poorly provided for and thousands lived in deplorable conditions, in mud huts with no water or electricity. Disease was widespread, and medical facilities and doctors were scarce. These poor conditions among workers in the south were fertile ground for trade union activities. Under Reza Shah, labour law had been modified to regulate industries, but union activities had been strongly suppressed. The occupation saw a loosening of this, leading to the emergence of two major rival unions: one affiliated with the Tudeh Party, and another led by labour union activists who had been imprisoned by Reza Shah, including Yusuf Eftekhari, Ali Omid, and Rahim Hamdad.²² The Tudeh was formed in the aftermath of Reza Shah's abdication in 1941 at the start of the British–Soviet occupation of Iran. The Allied forces granted an amnesty to political prisoners, releasing a group of imprisoned Marxists known as the Group of 53. Under the leadership of the veteran socialist politician Suleiman Mirza Eskandari, the Tudeh was established. In its early phase, the party supported both occupying forces and ran on a cross-ideological platform; they gained support from various sections of society, including university students and workers. From the mid-1940s, they established themselves in industrial cities such as Isfahan, Mervdasht, and Abadan. They stood in the fourteenth Majlis elections and, despite British interference to stop a “Tudeh bloc”, the party was able to gain a few seats.²³

¹⁸Homa Katouzian, *The Persians: Ancient, Mediaeval, and Modern Iran* (New Haven, CT, 2010), p. 233.

¹⁹Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (New Haven, CT, 2017), pp. 498–499.

²⁰Elling and Abdul Razak, “Oil, Labour and Empire”, p. 8.

²¹Atabaki, *Toiling for Oil*, pp. 124–125.

²²*Ibid.*, pp. 128–129.

²³The British undertook several strategies to block and undermine Tudeh candidates who were standing for elections throughout the country. British Consulate General (Bushire) to British Consulate General (Shiraz), 13 January 1944, PRO, TNA, FO248/1535, 22/23/44.

The Tudeh's political rise was reinforced by its growing dominance over the trade union movement in Iran, rivalling Yusuf Eftekhari's own union network, known as the Ettehadieh-ye Kargaran-e Iran (Trade Union of Iranian Workers, TUI). Bringing together several different workers' organizations, the TUI was active throughout the country and was established in Abadan, Ahwaz, and Kermanshah, in areas where the AIOC were present. The TUI organized strikes by Iranian National Railroad workers, demanding an increase in wages.²⁴ During the occupation, the unions became divided between those who supported the Tudeh and those who wanted more independence from what they perceived to be a Soviet-aligned party. The Tudeh formed their own trade union body known as the Showra-ye Motaheddeh-ye Ettehadieh-ha-ye Kargari-ye Iran (Central Council of Trade Unions of Iran) on 1 May 1944. It was recognized locally and internationally through its affiliation with and recognition by the WFTU in 1946 as the only trade union body in Iran.²⁵ This heightened tensions between the party and the Iranian and British governments over domestic concerns and the associated issue of labour politics and the emerging Cold War.

The Soviets expressed interest in gaining an oil concession in the north of Iran. This sparked the Azerbaijan crisis, which saw Soviet troops, supported by the Tudeh, extending their occupation in the north. The party held some seats in the Iranian Parliament where it acted as a voice of opposition, albeit still too small in numbers to form a substantial parliamentary bloc. Nonetheless, its political influence was significant, and its support of the Soviet Union was considered an important show of local backing. While a concession was initially promised so that the Soviets could gain access to oil, and Soviet troops were withdrawn, the crisis firmly placed the Tudeh Party in the Soviet camp, shaping how the party and its activism were regarded and treated by the British and Iranian governments.²⁶ Although the party lost some credibility as a result of its pro-Soviet stance, it was able to regain authority over the labour movement through its stewardship of the oil workers' strikes in Abadan during the summer of 1946. Industrial action in the south brought oil production to a standstill and placed the Tudeh in direct confrontation with the AIOC and the British government.²⁷ At this point, the Tudeh were prominent union organizers. In response to the party-controlled central trade union, the government established Ettehadieh-ye Sendika-ye Kargaran-e Iran (ESKI, Union of Iranian Workers' Syndicates), an alternative trade union affiliation. It was an initiative of the Ministry of Labour and Propaganda and was designed to monopolize trade unionism in Iran by introducing methods such as requiring state employees to enrol in the union. Another trade union comprising anti-Tudeh workers and peasants formed. It merged with ESKI in 1951 to form the Iran Trade Union

²⁴ Atabaki, *Toiling for Oil*, pp. 129–130.

²⁵ Sepehr Zabih, "The Dynamics of the Communist Movement in Iran, 1920–1962" (Ph.D., University of California, 1963), p. 213; tensions with the Iranian government resulted in Tudeh newspapers being monitored and even seized. Ministry of Post, Telegraph and Telephone, 1322/2/23 (14 May 1943), International Institute of Social History, No.16243/3363, 1B.

²⁶ Fawcett, *Iran and the Cold War*.

²⁷ See Rowena Binti Abdul Razak, "British Policy in Iran, 1941–1946: The Role of the Tudeh Party" (Ph.D., University of Oxford, 2021); Nimrod Zagagi, "An Oasis of Radicalism: The Labor Movement in Abadan in the 1940s", *Iranian Studies*, 53:5–6 (2020), pp. 847–872.

Congress.²⁸ But the Tudeh-controlled union remained important. Party leader Reza Rusta was close to the General Council of the WFTU; until the party was made illegal in Iran in 1949, it was a prominent feature in trade unionism in Iran.

The events and occurrences in Iran during and after the war show a correlation between British strategic and imperial interests and labour politics in Iran. In the years following the war, labour issues in Iran were viewed through lenses that were made opaque by the rift with the Soviet and communist bloc, the disintegration of the British Empire, and the establishment of the welfare state in Britain. In 1947, the WFTU's visit to Iran brought all these issues to light, exposing vulnerabilities in both Iranian and British governmental attitudes towards local and international labour movements.

Malaya: Labour and Imperial Control

Post-war Malaya was caught between growing calls for independence and the emerging Cold War. During World War II, most of Southeast Asia fell to the Japanese, who defeated the British, French, American, and Dutch forces in Malaya, Burma, Indochina, the Philippines, and Indonesia. During the occupation, communist parties emerged as the main armed resistance against the Japanese. In Malaya, the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) allied with the British colonial army to form the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), whose aim was to disrupt the Japanese forces. They cooperated well in the face of a common enemy; however, in the aftermath of the Japanese defeat, this alliance collapsed when the European empires rushed to re-assert their imperial claims over territories in Southeast Asia. Empowered by their armed struggle against the Japanese, local communist parties took the helm of anti-colonial resistance against the returning European powers.²⁹ A wave of decolonization started when the US granted the Philippines independence after the war and Indonesian nationalists clashed with the Dutch. In Indochina, Ho Chi Minh declared independence from the French, making an impassioned speech that drew inspiration from the American Declaration of Independence. These confrontations between the communists and the imperial powers added an extra element to the emerging Cold War between the Soviet Union and its former allies, particularly the British.³⁰ The perceived growing power of the communists in the colonies of Southeast Asia, whether in Indochina or colonial Malaya, fed into concerns about Soviet expansionism.³¹

In the aftermath of the Japanese retreat from Malaya, the British Military Administration was established to restore British control. Despite movements towards decolonization in the region, Britain had no intention of giving up its empire in

²⁸M. Jefroudi, "'If I Deserve It, It Should Be Paid to Me': On the Social History of Labor in the Iranian Oil Industry, 1951–1973" (Ph.D., Leiden University, 2017), pp. 289–291.

²⁹Bradley R. Simpson, "Southeast Asia in the Cold War", in Robert J. McMahon (ed.), *The Cold War in the Third World* (Oxford, 2013), p. 49.

³⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 48–49.

³¹On Soviet strategy, see Ilya V. Gaiduk, "Soviet Cold War Strategy and Prospects of Revolution in South and Southeast Asia", in Christopher E. Goscha and Christian F. Ostermann (eds), *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945–1962* (Stanford, CA, 2009), pp. 123–136; on the impact of the Indochina war on Malaya, see also Danny Wong Tze Ken, "Malaysia and the Cold War: First Indochina War and Malaya, 1948–1957", in Goscha and Ostermann, *Connecting Histories*, pp. 258–274.

Southeast Asia. The MCP initially chose to follow a policy of cooperation. This was a tactic pursued by other communist parties in the region. In India and across Southeast Asia, local communist parties took up united-front tactics to rebuild, end shortages, and potentially gain independence. The decolonization wave continued after the war, with India and Pakistan achieving independence in August 1947, albeit through a violent partition, followed by Burma in January 1948 and Ceylon in February 1948.³² However, in Malaya, independence appeared neither near nor inevitable. The MCP abandoned the united-front line and, from early 1948, pursued armed struggle. It remains debatable whether they were instructed by Moscow or driven by their own motivations. Many historians have cited the Calcutta Youth Conference of February 1948 as evidence that the Soviet Union instructed Southeast Asian communists to start rebellions in Indonesia, Malaya, Burma, and the Philippines.³³ Recent findings from Russian archives do not reveal any such instruction from the Soviet leadership, though they did encourage anti-colonial and anti-imperial propaganda and activity.³⁴ Nonetheless, as will be discussed here, concerns for Soviet influence in Southeast Asia were present even if concrete evidence was absent.

Malaya's industrial workers and labourers began to organize during the 1920s, with guilds formed by Chinese migrants in Malaya who had arrived as indentured workers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and were subjected to poor treatment by their employers.³⁵ Trade unions appeared in the 1930s, some organized by the MCP and others under the influence of the nationalist Chinese movement, the Kuomintang.³⁶ Labour organization in Malaya, including both the mainland and the island of Singapore, was divided along racial lines. The Malayan labour movement was mainly made up of Indian and Chinese workers in the tin-mining and rubber-tapping industries, who were based in urban centres. Malays, on the other hand, were localized in agricultural industries in rural areas.³⁷ Malayan trade unionism was described by a contemporary observer as "an admixture [mix] of two not necessarily compatible traditions" that saw the original Chinese guilds infused with English trade union practices.³⁸ Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Indian workers in the plantations and Chinese labourers went on strike and came under the influence of left-wing unions.³⁹ The movement was not united, however; there were divisions between the various trade

³²Karl Hack, "The Origins of the Asian Cold War: Malaya 1948", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 40:3 (2009), pp. 471–496, 472.

³³Orthodox Cold War historians posit that the conference held in India was an opportune moment for Cominform to send their instructions. However, more revisionist historians such as Ruth McVey and Anthony Short have pointed out that, in the case of Malaya, instructions to pursue armed struggles were unnecessary as there were existing frustrations. Hack, "Origins of the Asian Cold War", pp. 474–475.

³⁴See Larissa Efimova, "Did the Soviet Union Instruct Southeast Asian Communists to Revolt? New Russian Evidence on the Calcutta Youth Conference of February 1948", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 40:3 (2009), pp. 449–469.

³⁵Yeo Kim Wah, "The Communist Challenge in the Malayan Labour Scene, September 1936–March 1937", *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 49:92 (1976), pp. 36–37.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 49.

³⁷Charles Gamba, "Labour and Labour Parties in Malaya", *Pacific Affairs*, 31:2 (1958), pp. 117–118.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 118.

³⁹P. Ramasamy, *Plantation Labour, Unions, Capital and the State in Peninsular Malaysia* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 46–55.

unions that emerged on mainland Malaya and Singapore. Indeed, as Anthony Carew has noted, after the WTFU split in 1949 and the ICFTU formed, there were still some British elements in the ICFTU keen to ensure that British interests remained at the forefront.⁴⁰

Initially, the MCP found a natural political base in the burgeoning labour movement led by the Chinese and Indian communities. After the war, the workers, who had suffered greatly during the Japanese occupation, were further traumatized when European managers returned and reimposed their “old order”. P. Ramasamy has pointed out how their nonchalance infuriated the labourers.⁴¹ In this climate of poor relations between the British and workers, the MCP called for armed struggle, leading the British to declare an emergency. This saw the colonial government effectively waging war against the communists and, by extension, against the MCP-dominated trade union movement. But the labour movement included other organizations, too. The Socialist Front and the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), for instance, sought support from labourers.⁴² In the lead-up to independence in 1957, left-leaning parties in Malaya and Singapore started to organize and many looked to the British Labour Party and British socialist movements for inspiration. From 1946, Singapore was ruled as a separate colony from the rest of Malaya, but there were many overlaps in terms of British rule, and the island was also affected by labour disputes on the mainland, not to mention MCP influence and infiltration.⁴³ One example of this was the People’s Action Party (PAP), which was established in November 1954 by socialist intellectuals, labour supporters, trade unionists, and left-wing entities. Grassroots communalism should not be dismissed and was an important element in labour organization. For instance, the Parti Rakyat (People’s Party), despite reservations about the communal mentality of the Malays, formed an alliance with the Labour Party of Malaya, which was mostly made up of Malays.⁴⁴

It was MCP activities among labour movements that caused the most concern for the British in Malaya. After the war, the party mobilized labour support against the British and founded the Pan Malayan General Labour Union (PMGLU; later renamed the Pan Malayan Federation of Trade Union, PMFTU).⁴⁵ This led the colonial authorities to introduce stronger and more restrictive measures against union organization, particularly in rubber estates. The police fired on strikers and demonstrators, and

⁴⁰ Anthony Carew, “Conflict within the ICFTU: Anti-Communism and Anti-Colonialism in the 1950s”, *International Review of Social History*, 41:2 (1996), pp. 147–181, 153.

⁴¹ Ramasamy, *Plantation Labour, Unions, Capital*, p. 65.

⁴² Gamba, “Labour and Labour Parties in Malaya”, p. 121.

⁴³ The PAP moved towards an anti-communist stance and went on to lead Singapore through independence and later separation from the Federation of Malaya; Gamba, “Labour and Labour Parties in Malaya”, p. 123. Singapore also saw increased trade union activity after the war. By 1948, there were 177 registered trade unions on the island. This was accompanied by increased labour action including strikes and protests. Gareth Curless, “‘The People Need Civil Liberties’: Trade Unions and Contested Decolonisation in Singapore”, *Labor History*, 57:1 (2016), p. 55.

⁴⁴ Gamba, “Labour and Labour Parties in Malaya”, p. 128.

⁴⁵ Leong Yee Fong, “The Impact of the Cold War on the Development of Trade Unionism in Malaya (1948–57)”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 23:1 (1992), pp. 60–73, 60.

union and communist organizers were charged with sedition. These measures eventually led to the Trade Union Ordinance of 31 May 1948, which suppressed and controlled trade unions in Malaya and Singapore as a way to limit communist control, stipulating conditions of union activity such as making sure that union officials had enough experience in trade unionism.⁴⁶ It was around this time that the MCP took a more militant line to achieve its aims, namely to counter British presence in Malaya and to support labour disputes.⁴⁷ During this time, the Labour Party of Malaya also sought to cooperate with workers, peasants, and socialist and cooperative organizations on the peninsula. As noted by Leong Yee Fong, the British colonial government in Malaya pushed for a new trade unionism movement that was designed to combat communism and bring trade union developments into line with British imperial policy. The government used extreme methods in dealing with the PMFTU. After a series of strikes in May 1949, the former president of the PMFTU, S.A. Ganapathy, was arrested and executed.⁴⁸ The MCP, in control of the labour movement in Malaya, retaliated by targeting British-controlled agricultural industries and employed violent tactics against English planters.⁴⁹ It was within this conflict that concerns emerged about the WFTU spreading its influence in Malaya.

Fighting the WFTU in the Twilight of Empire

As established, in Malaya and Iran, unions played an important role in mobilizing workers, raising awareness, and fighting imperialism. While Malaya was a direct colony, Iran's oil industry was symbolic of British imperial presence in the country and, by extension, the region. In both countries, communist parties had established strong links with labour movements and trade unions. For the British governing Malaya and overseeing oil interests in Iran, this posed a substantial threat to their position as communist parties mobilized trade unions against them. Such anxieties were compounded by the move towards decolonization, calls for independence from imperial powers, and the imposition of Cold War conditions on Southeast Asia. Within this picture, the WFTU's presence in Iran and Malaya was seen as a substantial threat to the British position and as a vehicle for Soviet influence on communist parties in the two regions, namely the Tudeh and the MCP. The WFTU was still an important international trade union organization, keen to unite unions and maintain authority over these movements. It was active not only in the Middle East and Asia but also in Europe and Africa. The British used various tactics aimed at countering WFTU influence while lessening and undermining communist control over trade unions.

The WFTU delegation arrived in Iran in April 1947 at a low point of the labour movement there. The Khuzistan strikes the year before had brought oil production to a halt, revealing that British control over its workers was not absolute and, indeed, was subject to emerging demands for better terms. The Tudeh-led industrial action resulted in improvements in working and living conditions for oil workers. It also

⁴⁶ Hack, "Origins of the Asian Cold War", pp. 476–477.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 478.

⁴⁸ Yee Fong, "The Impact of the Cold War", pp. 61–62.

⁴⁹ Curless, "The People Need Civil Liberties", p. 55.

marked the start of a bitter rivalry between the Tudeh and the Iranian government for control over trade unions and workers. The party came under close scrutiny and members were subject to arrests as well as intimidation immediately after the strikes.⁵⁰ At a national level, Iranian Prime Minister Ahmad Qavam aimed to keep the party in check by offering members ministerial positions in his cabinet. This reconciliation proved short-lived and by the time the WFTU delegation arrived, relations between the Tudeh and the government were tense. Qavam established a new party to counter the Tudeh in parliament, which the Tudeh regarded as “a copy” of their own.⁵¹

In the lead-up to the visit, the Iranian government asked the British government for help. The Iranian embassy in London asked the Foreign Office not to support or recommend any applicant seeking a visa to visit Iran on behalf of the WFTU.⁵² At the time, the organization was still a unionized confederation, with members from the British Trades Union Congress (TUC). At this point, TUC presence was considered important by the British Foreign Office as it was believed that they would defend British interests.⁵³ But in Iran, the embassy went on to write a long recommendation to the Foreign Office warning them of the “destructive designs” of the Tudeh. It also wanted the government to inform the WFTU that accusations of the Iranian government’s suppression of the party were false.⁵⁴ The Iranian government was clearly concerned about how the visit could affect its reputation but wanted to maintain that the Tudeh was dangerous and could instigate unrest in the country.

Tudeh monopolization of the trade unions had implications not only for Iranian labour but also for the attitudes and approach of the British Labour government. The party’s perceived lack of independence and overt communist agenda was seen as inviting Soviet interference in the region. This concern placed labour issues within a Cold War framework. At the time, the British were engaged in direct conflict with communist parties in many parts of the world: for instance, in Greece they were fighting the Kommunistiko Komma Ellados (Communist Party of Greece).⁵⁵ A similar situation was unfolding in Malaya with the emerging conflict between the MCP and the British colonial government.⁵⁶ The Labour government saw communist parties as a threat to its international position, which was further compounded by the Soviet Union’s domination in Eastern Europe.⁵⁷ This effectively global confrontation with communism influenced the Labour government’s viewpoint and permeated its approach to

⁵⁰Habib Ladjevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran* (Syracuse, NY, 1985), p. 68; Yusuf Iftikhari, *Khatirat-i Dawran-i Sipari’shudah. Khatirat va Asnad-i Yusuf Iftikhari*, 1299–1326 (Tehran, 1991), pp. 96–97.

⁵¹“The Tudeh Party and Iranian Trade Unions”, Foreign Office Minutes, 6 January 1947, TNA, FO371/61993, E174.

⁵²Foreign Office Minutes (Pyman), 2 January 1947, TNA, FO371/61993, E41.

⁵³Anthony Carew, “The Schism within the World Federation of Trade Unions: Government and Trade-Union Diplomacy”, *International Review of Social History*, 29:3 (1984), pp. 297–335, 300.

⁵⁴Foreign Office Minutes, 3 January 1947, TNA, FO371/16993, E25.

⁵⁵Thanasis D. Sfikas, *The British Labour Government and the Greek Civil War, 1945–1949* (Bodmin, 1994), pp. 66–70.

⁵⁶Cheah Boon Kheng, *Red Star over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict During and after the Japanese Occupation, 1941–1946* (Singapore, [1983] 1987).

⁵⁷Norman Naimark, “The Sovietization of Eastern Europe, 1944–1953”, in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (eds), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, vol. I: Origins* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 175–197.

the WFTU's visit. It was primarily concerned that the Tudeh would use the visit to strengthen its relations with the Soviet and Lebanese communist members of the delegation.⁵⁸

The core WFTU mission was made up of the Lebanese delegate Mostafa El Aris, the Soviet representative Mikhail I Borisov, chairman of the Trade Union of Construction and Building Materials Industry Workers, and the British trade unionist Edgar P. Harries.⁵⁹ It soon became clear that the group was split over support for the Tudeh, with El Aris and Borisov in favour and Harries adopting a more cautious approach. This is unsurprising given Harries's many years with the TUC. The British Foreign Office and the Ministry of Labour and National Service followed the visit and Harries closely. At the time, there were rumblings in the WFTU over closeness to the Soviet Union. The president of the organization, Arthur Deakin, voiced concerns that the WFTU was becoming a platform for Soviet policy.⁶⁰ Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin had previously held the post of Minister of Labour during the war. Now under his purview, the Foreign Office took a keen interest in labour matters abroad, which was tied to colonial and imperial concerns. Through its control of oil, Iran was seen as an extension of Britain's empire. The south of the country served as an enclave for AIOC managers and expatriates. Furthermore, oil was important to Britain's post-war reconstruction and rebuilding. Prime Minister Clement Attlee had made oil a central part of Labour's economic policies. Furthermore, in the months after the war, Britain's coal industry was under pressure, and the home economy had come to rely more extensively on Iranian oil.⁶¹ This placed Abadan at the centre of concerns and proved to be a contentious area for British policymakers.

During the visit, the WFTU delegates made a trip to Abadan accompanied by Tudeh members; this increased concerns about the party's hold over the oil workers and the potential it had to disrupt the AIOC's operations. This concern was further reinforced when the Soviet delegation to the WFTU voiced strong criticism of the AIOC and its treatment of workers, causing additional embarrassment to the British.⁶² The WFTU told the Iranian government that if its recommendations were not implemented, it would refer the matter to the United Nations.⁶³ When Tudeh Party leader Reza Rusta was arrested in April 1947, the WFTU came out strongly against the government and demanded that it accept all recommendations made during the visit, including his release, or at the very least that he be granted fair legal representation. The British government was cautious in its support and was concerned about how it would affect the Iranian government. From the point of view of the Foreign Office, pressure on Tehran

⁵⁸ Foreign Office Minutes, 26 February 1947, TNA, FO371/61994, E1723.

⁵⁹ "Directory of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU)", 15 May 1961, CIA, CIA-RDP78-00915R001300120003-1. Available at: www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp78-00915r001300120003-1; last accessed 24 July 2024.

⁶⁰ Yee Fong, "The Impact of the Cold War", p. 62.

⁶¹ James Bamberg, *The History of the British Petroleum Company, vol. II: The Anglo-Iranian Years, 1928–1954* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 308–334; Anand Toprani, *Oil and the Great Powers: Britain & Germany, 1914–1945* (Oxford, 2019), p. 262.

⁶² Record of a conversation with a member of the World Federation of Trade Unions Delegation, 27 May 1947, TNA, FO371/61994, E4476.

⁶³ British Embassy Tehran to Foreign Office, 12 June 1947, TNA, FO371/61994, E5211.

could lead to the WFTU making more decisions in Iran, especially in trade union elections. The primary concern was that Soviet delegates in the WFTU would dominate the Tudeh-controlled unions, potentially disrupting the position of the AIOC.⁶⁴

Indeed, the Tudeh maintained a prominent position in the south of Iran. This was, however, challenged by government-backed unions such as the Trade Union of Oil Workers, the Council of Persian Workers' Unions, and the Craftsmen's Syndicates in Abadan.⁶⁵ The British embassy in Iran used the WFTU's visit to further counter the Tudeh hold over the trade unions. Tacitly supporting further government crackdowns on the party, Ambassador John Le Rougetel and the Foreign Office aimed to encourage workers' dissatisfaction towards the Tudeh, especially among AIOC workers. The Trade Union of Oil Workers in Abadan was of particular interest for its clear anti-Tudeh orientation.⁶⁶ Moreover, Le Rougetel was advised by both the Iranian Minister of Labour and Propaganda, Ahmad Aramesh, and the AIOC to time the formation of labour councils in factories (for mitigation) carefully, so that they would not be misused during the general election.⁶⁷

The British and Iranian governments used the WFTU's visit to consider other measures to counter the Tudeh's hold on the trade unions in Iran. The Iranian press was also persuaded to point out the schisms within the WFTU delegations, particularly those between El Aris and Borisov on the one hand and Harries on the other.⁶⁸ In addition to the WFTU report, Harries wrote a separate letter to the Iranian Minister of Labour expressing his disagreement with the other members' obvious bias in favour of the Tudeh. El Aris regarded this as an infringement of WFTU rules. Regardless, Harries stood by his concerns that Iran posed "the perfect Marxist text book case for a revolution and unless something were done to improve general conditions, reduce corruption in the administration and lessen the political power of the very rich sooner or later the Russians would be able to engineer a revolution".⁶⁹ This statement captures the Cold War anxiety felt by the British: the WFTU's hold over the Tudeh was regarded as key to such designs. The statement further reveals the growing schism and conflict emerging within the WFTU, as well as British reluctance to be open to other trade union voices.

But it was not only the Cold War front that was of concern. The WFTU's visit to Iran exposed Britain's colonial vulnerabilities. The WFTU, with its far-ranging network, had interests and trade union functionaries from Latin America to East Asia. The British government was certainly disturbed by the potential influence of the WFTU on its empire. After the war, larger questions of Britain's place in the world came to the surface. With the loss of India and nationalist rumblings in every corner of its empire, London's imperial grip was loosening but the "illusions of Great Power status lingered

⁶⁴ Foreign Office Minutes, 22 April 1947, TNA, FO371/61994, E3416.

⁶⁵ Report by the President of the WFTU Delegation in British Embassy Tehran (Le Rougetel) to Foreign Office (Bevin), 24 April 1947, TNA, FO 248/1477, G78/45/47.

⁶⁶ British Embassy Tehran to Foreign Office, 10 February 1947, TNA, FO371/61994, E1509.

⁶⁷ British Embassy Tehran to Foreign Office, 7 January 1947, TNA, FO371/61993, E232.

⁶⁸ British Embassy Tehran to Foreign Office, 24 April 1947, TNA, FO371/61994, E3454.

⁶⁹ Foreign Office (Baxter) to British Embassy Tehran (Le Rougetel), 6 June 1947, TNA, DO248/1477, G78/56/47.

on”.⁷⁰ Conservation of power and empire remained an important part of Labour policy. Towards the late 1940s, empire became entangled with questions of labour and labour autonomy across the imperial world. The Colonial Office expressed concerns about WFTU plans to visit Malaya, the Caribbean, and East Africa. This WFTU “offensive” was seen to target workers and trade unions in those countries, aiming to break colonial grip on local labour.⁷¹

The British government viewed the trade union movement in Asia through a simple Cold War logic. Those associated with the WFTU were seen as aligned with Soviet-led international communism and the rest as independent and therefore friendly to the British. The WFTU’s visit to Iran revealed the growing rift within the organization regarding alignment with the Soviet Union. The split eventually happened in January 1949, when the British TUC and the Congress of Industrial Organizations withdrew and formed the ICFTU.⁷² In November 1949, two competing conferences were held: one in London, made up of the ICFTU’s free trade union movements, and the other a regional Asian conference of the WFTU in Beijing. In the lead-up to the events, the British Labour government and the colonial government of Malaya saw the emergence of new international trade union organizations as an effective way to counter the WFTU in Southeast Asia. The WFTU’s concerns were compounded by the ongoing Malayan Emergency, during which confrontations between British-led forces and the MCP became increasingly violent. Furthermore, it was clear that trade unions in Malaya were effective. On 25 August 1947, a nationwide general strike was called by the All Malayan Rubber Workers Council, bringing European-run estates to a halt. Until its violent suppression by the British, the PMGLU also held several strikes throughout peninsular Malaysia.⁷³ Asian trade unions had been members of the WFTU since its foundation in 1945 and were already engaged in discussions about nationalism and colonialism. The British government had long regarded trade unions and labour organizations in their colonies as entities that needed to be controlled and supervised. The Colonial Labour Advisory Committee, established in 1942, saw the TUC working closely with the Colonial Office to guide local trade union leaders and to shape their activism.⁷⁴

Trade union activity was widespread in the British colonies of Malaya, Singapore, and Hong Kong. By the early 1950s, there were an estimated 675 trade unions in the region.⁷⁵ British measures introduced in 1948 to suppress trade union activity, such as the Trade Union Ordinance, had effectively suppressed strike activity, while trade unions that failed to comply with regulations were quickly deregistered.⁷⁶ However, in Singapore, the mid-1950s saw an increase of labour activities, with the PAP and its allies

⁷⁰Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London, 2017), p. 896.

⁷¹Secretary of State for the Colonies to Foreign Office, 11 March 1949, TNA, CO859/147/3, 98/102.

⁷²Carew, “Schism within the World Federation of Trade Unions”.

⁷³Ramasamy, *Plantation Labour, Unions, Capital*, pp. 78–81.

⁷⁴Leow, “Asian Lessons in the Cold War Classroom”, p. 432; see also Jack Woddis, *The Mask Is Off! An Examination of the Activities of Trade Union Advisers in the British Colonies* (London, 1954).

⁷⁵Report to the Colonial Labour Advisory Committee on Labour Conditions in Malaya, Singapore, and Hong Kong, 1953, TNA, CO1022/120.

⁷⁶Curless, “The People Need Civil Liberties”, p. 55.

targeting workers and trade unionists as part of a campaign to build the party's popularity and relevance.⁷⁷ The road to this revival after 1948 was not an easy one, as labour politics struggled to carve out space amid the constraints of the Malayan Emergency. The MCP's hold over labour was broken, and the colonial government appointed a Trade Union Advisor for Malaya to reconstruct the trade union movement in a form that was more compliant and docile.⁷⁸

From 1950, trade unionism in Malaya was effectively under the control of the British colonial government. Moderate trade unionism was promoted. Where the PMGLU/PMFTU had been dominant, the British made space for anti-left-wing unions. In the rubber industry, for instance, union leaders were chosen carefully. They were usually English-educated and came from middle- or lower-middle-class backgrounds.⁷⁹ British concerns about trade union activity were ever-present, especially given the ongoing confrontation with the MCP and the movement towards granting Malaya independence. The Malayan Trade Union Congress (MTUC) filled an important gap in trade union leadership after the MCP was forced underground and the trade union advisor for Malaya proved unable to organize the movement effectively or convincingly. The MTUC successfully initiated a few strikes in response to reduced wages for rubber workers and started to criticize the British government for their independence blueprints.⁸⁰ This brought back memories of the MCP using trade unions as a vehicle to oppose British authority and wage war against British-owned businesses and industries.

Moreover, the British were wary of the WFTU's growing interest in Asia, particularly in Malaya and the island of Borneo. For British colonial policymakers, the trade union situation in Asia was related to international communism, which, in turn, was supported by the WFTU.⁸¹ After all, the PMFTU still sought support from the WFTU to exert pressure on the colonial government.⁸² According to Britain's binary Cold War thinking, trade unions in Asia faced a choice between the WFTU and the ICFTU – that is, between communism and subservience to Beijing and Moscow and what was considered to be a free and genuine international trade union movement. Trade unions in Asia appeared torn between the two camps. Some sought independence and formed the Asian Federation of Labour (AFL), which included Turkey, Japan, the Philippines, India, Pakistan, Iran, and Indonesia. The Indian National Trade Union Congress played a significant role in organizing the AFL but was considered too aligned with the government for the TUC to participate in their inaugural conference.⁸³ Still, the Secretary of State of the Colonies, Arthur Jones, and the High Commissioner of Malaya, Henry

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁷⁸ Martin Rudner, "Malayan Labor in Transition Labor Policy and Trade Unionism, 1955–63", *Modern Asian Studies*, 7:1 (1973), pp. 21–45, 21. This development followed on from the General Labour Union, which united non-MCP-affiliated trade unions in Singapore and Malaya. Alice W. Shurcliff, "Growth of Democratic Trade-Unions in the Federation of Malaya", *Monthly Labour Review*, 73:3 (1951), pp. 274–276, 274.

⁷⁹ Ramasamy, *Plantation Labour, Unions, Capital*, p. 87.

⁸⁰ Rudner, "Malayan Labor in Transition Labor Policy", p. 22.

⁸¹ Foreign Office Note, 16 September 1949, TNA, CO537/4281, 12254/M/4/49.

⁸² Yee Fong, "The Impact of the Cold War", p. 63.

⁸³ Foreign Office to Colonial Office (Grossmith), 3 May 1949, TNA, CO537/4281.

Gurney, took an interest in its development and potential influence on Malaya to counter WFTU influence.⁸⁴

The WFTU's sway over local labour movements in Malaya was a key factor driving British involvement. The British colonial government pursued various tactics to undermine organizations that could potentially provide a platform for the WFTU or any communist-aligned trade union movements such as the MTUC. Drastic measures had already been taken to control trade unions in Malaya, and now the deliberate spread of misinformation became a key tactic. MTUC leaders were accused of betraying the labour movement by giving into government demands, by leaking information related to trade union actions to the US's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and by allying themselves with government interests.⁸⁵

In October 1953, the WFTU held its Third World Congress in Vienna. It received delegates from all over the world. Iran sent five representatives. Although Malaya was not present, neighbouring Indonesia sent a substantial twenty-seven delegates and Vietnam ten.⁸⁶ By this point, the WFTU was outlawed in Malaya, and, according to British estimates, retained little foothold in Commonwealth countries.⁸⁷ The Third World Congress's resolution to unite against imperialism and to encourage dissent was regarded by the British as an attack against them. The UK Foreign Office described the WFTU as supporting resistance, and their change in tactics of calling for a popular front was seen as having the potential to persuade non-communist trade unions and destabilize trade unions not affiliated to the WFTU.⁸⁸ The Foreign Office in London proceeded to warn their representative in Singapore of the dangers the WFTU posed and of extreme elements within the organization that wanted to woo trade unions in Malaya and the rest of Asia.⁸⁹ When the anti-communist Free World Labour Conference was held, its pamphlet was distributed throughout the British Empire. Malaya received 1,500 copies, a significant number in comparison to other countries. The conference gathered anti-Soviet trade unions with a strong message of discrediting the WFTU and furthering the ICFTU as a truly international, free, and genuine trade union movement.⁹⁰

After Malaya gained independence in 1957, the new government inherited British anxieties surrounding trade union activity, which was widely perceived as susceptible to communism and subversion. As a result, it adopted measures to

⁸⁴ Secretary of State of the Colonies to Federation of Malaya (Gurney), 11 July 1949, TNA, CO537/4281, 12254/M/4/49, and Federation of Malaya (Gurney) to Secretary of the State for the Colonies, 23 June 1949, TNA, CO537/4281, 738.

⁸⁵ Rudner, "Malayan Labor in Transition Labor Policy", p. 24.

⁸⁶ Manifesto, Resolutions and Messages adopted by the Third World Trade Union Congress, 10–21 October 1953, TNA, CO859/423.

⁸⁷ Working paper for conference on WFTU (Foreign Office Paper), undated, TNA, CO859/423, 23.

⁸⁸ Foreign Office Intel: WFTU Congress Vienna, 3 November 1953, TNA, CO859/423.

⁸⁹ Foreign Office to Colonial Office (Grossmith), 3 May 1949, TNA, CO537/4281.

⁹⁰ For example, Kenya received 100 copies, Uganda 500, and Gold Coast (Ghana) 100. Countries of concern such as Jamaica, Nigeria, and Hong Kong received over 1,000 copies. Distribution List for World Free Labour Conference Pamphlets (Colonial Office) in Public Information Officer British Guinea (Hareword) to Colonial Office (Blackburne), 25 April 1950, TNA, CO537/6559, CO/8538/50.

continue suppressing the leadership of the MTUC and to discourage trade unionism.⁹¹ Independence did not, however, mark the end of British involvement: Britain continued its commitment to combating communism and maintained its vigilance towards trade union activities. Jomo Kwame Sundaram, in his work on Malayan trade unions, noted how the independent Malayan government was initially open to the trade union movement but anxiety over the possibility of communism overtaking led to a return to repressive methods.⁹² In his capacity as High Commissioner of Malaya, General Gerald Templar was charged with leading British forces in the Malayan Emergency. After transferring to the Ministry of Defence, he continued to keep an eye on trade union activities in the colonies of the British Empire, particularly in Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria.⁹³ The fight against the labour movement was thus part of a larger concern about the influence it had in other parts of the Commonwealth.

Even after Malaya's independence, the British government continued to champion the ICFTU as its main tactic to counter the WFTU in Commonwealth countries and colonies. The Conservative government, in power from 1951, inherited this strategy from Labour. In March 1956, the WFTU experienced a setback when the Austrian government removed them from their headquarters in Vienna, claiming that their presence would jeopardize the country's foreign relations.⁹⁴ Although the UK Foreign Office initially regarded their removal as "a victory for the West", the WFTU was still seen as intensely bent on promoting militancy and spreading dissent among workers in the British Empire. The British foreign secretary at the time, Selwyn Lloyd, established tactics to back the ICFTU and independent local trade unions.⁹⁵ The Foreign Office sought to influence the organization and to provide logistical support. Firstly, it offered training and scholarships to promising ICFTU members and ensured that their leaders were seen together with senior British cabinet ministers. Secondly, the Foreign Office sourced damaging information about workers and labour organizations in the communist bloc. Thirdly, it encouraged the ICFTU to appoint representatives in areas of most concern, such as Indonesia and Burma.⁹⁶

Of course, strategies to hinder the WFTU were also adopted. The distribution of WFTU publications and written materials was prevented on the grounds that they were not genuine trade union material. The WFTU was barred from entering British colonial countries. In the case of Malaya, WFTU personnel were refused entry on security grounds.⁹⁷ The British Foreign Office portrayed the WFTU as a vehicle for "Soviet imperialism", deliberately choosing language that could conjure up concerns about a new kind of colonialism in countries that had recently gained independence or were in the process of doing so.⁹⁸ To a large extent, these tactics were successful: the WFTU

⁹¹Rudner, "Malayan Labor in Transition Labor Policy", p. 25.

⁹²Jomo Kwame Sundaram and Patricia Todd, *Trade Unions and the State in Peninsular Malaysia* (Oxford, 1994).

⁹³Huijman to Watson, 25 February 1955, TNA, CO537/6559.

⁹⁴John MacCormac, "Austria Ousting Red Labor Front; WFTU is Told Its Actions Endanger Country's Ties with Other Powers", *New York Times*, 5 February 1956.

⁹⁵Foreign Office Circular (Selwyn Lloyd), 10 April 1956, TNA, LAB13/1102, PR161/17.

⁹⁶Working paper for conference on WFTU (Foreign Office Paper), undated, TNA, CO859/423, 23.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*

⁹⁸*Ibid.*

did not appear in any significant way in Malaya either before or after independence. In the cases of both Iran and Malaya, British vulnerabilities and colonial anxieties were very much present. The WFTU revealed a weak spot and prompted concerns about Soviet expansionism into the British Empire and areas of British imperial control.

Conclusion

WFTU interest in Iran and Malaya exposed ongoing anxieties within the British government regarding its global position. It also revealed the approaches adopted by successive Labour and Conservative governments towards international labour politics, intertwined with the emerging conflict with communism and London's loosening imperial grip. This attitude saw Britain take an active role in monitoring the WFTU and characterizing it as a threat, with the Tudeh and the Malayan Communist Party cast as dangerous accomplices. For the Iranian government, the WFTU's visit was an opportunity to redress the Tudeh's hold on the trade union movement in the country. Wrestling for control over labour affairs, the government's arrest of Rusta was meant to provoke the Tudeh and the WFTU but also to expose the schisms within the WFTU delegation.

This article has tied together the different strands surrounding the WFTU's visit to show how London sought to calm its anxieties and strategic concerns in Iran. A similar story emerges in exploring how the WFTU and trade unionism were dealt with in colonial and post-colonial Malaya. As part of the British Empire, the colonial government introduced authoritarian measures such as banning the WFTU outright and strongly limiting trade union activity. As an alternative, governments promoted the ICFTU. However, this was not enough, and the WFTU continued to be an area of concern and vulnerability for the British in Malaya, revealing the importance of the labour question within the wider picture of the Cold War and decolonization.