

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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

Towards Global Communisms? The World Federation of Trade Unions and Labour Internationalism: An Introduction

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Abstract

This introduction reconceptualizes the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) as a pivotal arena of Cold War labour internationalism by narrating its history through the experiences of actors outside the traditional metropolitan core. It offers the first systematic synthesis of a dispersed body of scholarship on the WFTU, integrating work on communist internationalism, decolonization, gender, and trade union education into a coherent analytical framework. Methodologically, the introduction breaks new ground by adopting an actor-centred approach that foregrounds “subaltern labour leaders” from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and traces their trajectories across multiple scales, from workplaces and national centres to WFTU congresses and UN forums. Reconstructing key moments in the federation’s history, it highlights a polyphony of national internationalisms within a shared communist project and shows how struggles over gender, empire, and sovereignty intersected with, but were not reducible to, East–West bloc politics. In doing so, the introduction advances a more nuanced understanding of the WFTU as both an instrument of state socialism and a generative space for alternative visions of global labour solidarity.

Introduction

At the World Federation of Trade Unions’ (WFTU) eightieth anniversary celebrations in Paris in October 2025, Honorary President George Mavrikos¹ reiterated the federation’s self-image by insisting that it had consistently supported anti-colonial

¹Leading member of the Communist Party of Greece and WFTU general secretary between 2005 and 2022.

and anti-apartheid struggles and thus been “on the right side of history”, a reading that threads together the Korean War, the Chinese and Cuban revolutions, the Vietnam War, South African anti-apartheid movements, and the Palestinian cause into a single historical narrative of continuity.² A contrasting interpretation has been offered by Dan Gallin, former general secretary of the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations – historically aligned with the social democratic international trade union federations – who described the WFTU as “hydroponic Stalinism” and argued that it has functioned as the main remaining international vehicle for Stalinist trade union ideology.³ In his view, the organization’s contemporary support base in unions from party states such as Vietnam, Cuba, and North Korea, along with allies in India, Latin America, and Southern Africa, reflects less a living tradition of emancipatory socialism than a legacy of bureaucratic rule, sustained among other things by the geographical and generational distance of many supporters from the realities of “really existing” Stalinism.⁴

As the contrasting testimonies of these contemporary witnesses suggest, interpretations of the WFTU’s historical significance remain highly contested. Labour scholar Victor G. Devinatz has offered a more nuanced interpretation, which demonstrates how relations between the WFTU and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) during the period of détente from the late 1960s into the 1970s were characterized by negotiation, tactical cooperation, and shifting alliances.⁵ Acknowledging that ideological rivalries have continued into the present day, Devinatz emphasizes that, in view of “unions [being] under attack in virtually all corners of the world, it is crucial for labor historians to try to better comprehend the history of the global obstacles to achieving working-class solidarity”.⁶

This Special Issue shares Devinatz’s objective of better understanding these manifold narratives and seeks to write a critical history of the WFTU – one attentive to the complexities of Cold War alignments and ideological rigidity, yet equally alive to the organization’s enduring achievements. By situating the federation within broader histories of anti-colonial struggle, women’s pursuit of equal rights and pay, and the building of trade union movements through education and material support, we aim to reconstruct the WFTU not simply as a vehicle of state socialism, but as a transnational arena in which subaltern labour leaders reshaped the meanings of internationalism. The WFTU’s history offers a vantage point to analyse labour internationalism as a contested, heterogeneous, and generative field of social struggle.

²“WFTU 80 Years Anniversary: Central Commemorative Event”, WFTU. Available at: <https://www.wftucentral.org/wftu-80years-anniversary-central-commemorative-event/>; last accessed 4 March 2026.

³Dan Gallin, “The WFTU: Hydroponic Stalinism”, *Global Labour Journal*, 4:1 (2013), pp. 78–87, 81, <https://doi.org/10.15173/glj.v4i1.1132>.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁵Victor G. Devinatz, “A Cold War Thaw in the International Working Class Movement? The World Federation of Trade Unions and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, 1967–1977”, *Science & Society*, 77:3 (2013), pp. 342–371.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 342.

This Special Issue further seeks to address the WFTU as a vital field in which ideas, solidarities, and alternatives to Western-oriented models of trade unionism were imagined and pursued. The contributions show how unionists navigated the East–West conflict and cooperation, pursued transcontinental labour diplomacy, engaged in anti-colonial struggles, advanced programmes of education and cadre training, and debated the North–South divide and the growing influence of multinational corporations in the capitalist world economy.

Our title, “Towards Global Communisms”, borrows from existing research on communist internationalism, which has shown that communism, as an idea and a political conviction, could lead to various attempts at institutionalization.⁷ David Priestland has identified the core of these communist projects as their “anti-capitalist stance, the overcoming of social inequality, and the conviction in modernity”.⁸ Yet these attempts were diverse not only in form but also in their political manifestations – from Marxism, Leninism, and Trotskyism to state socialist models and Maoist projects.⁹ Building on the work of James Mark, Artemy M. Kalinovsky, and Steffi Marung, one might ask whether they created distinctive globalization projects that responded to growing global interconnectedness with their own visions.¹⁰

We are nevertheless aware that in referring to “global communisms”, we are invoking a concept that requires careful distinction between ideological aspiration and practical implementation. The actors of the communist trade union movement framed their commitments within a shared ideological project that claimed global significance, yet in practice this vision unfolded less as a single transnational movement than as a polyphony of national internationalisms.¹¹ This raises, in very concrete terms, the problem of how to “reconcile socialist internationalism with the emphasis on – or obsession with – national sovereignty (and hence national diversity) and the transnational networks of communist parties”.¹² The WFTU played a central role in this configuration – serving both as a forum for reaffirming ideals of *Völkerfreundschaft* (friendship among peoples, understood as a harmoniously mediating system of different national entities,

⁷Holger Weiss (ed.), *International Communism and Transnational Solidarity: Radical Networks, Mass Movements and Global Politics, 1919–1939* (Leiden, 2017); Brigitte Studer, *Reisende der Weltrevolution. Eine Globalgeschichte der Kommunistischen Internationale* (Berlin, 2020); James Mark and Paul Betts, *Socialism Goes Global: The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the Age of Decolonization. A Collectively Researched and Written Monograph* (Oxford, 2022); Helder Adégar Fonseca, Lena Dallywater, and Chris Saunders (eds), *Communist Actors in African Decolonial Transitions: Comparative Perspectives* (Oldenburg, 2025).

⁸David Priestland, *The Red Flag: A History of Communism* (New York, 2009), p. 571.

⁹Silvio Pons, *The Global Revolution: A History of International Communism, 1917–1991* (Oxford, 2014), p. xi; Harry Verhoeven (ed.), *Marx and Lenin in Africa and Asia: Socialism(s) and Socialist Legacies* (New York, 2022); Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History* (London, 2019).

¹⁰James Mark, Artemy M. Kalinovsky, and Steffi Marung (eds), *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World* (Bloomington, IN, 2020).

¹¹Jessica Reinisch, “Introduction: Agents of Internationalism”, *Contemporary European History*, 25:2 (2016), pp. 195–205, 197; Lisa Hoppel, *Internationalistischer Nationalismus. Lehren aus dem Panafrikanischen Befreiungskampf* (Vienna, 2019).

¹²Steffi Marung, Uwe Müller, and Stefan Troebst, “Monolith or Experiment? The Bloc as a Spatial Format”, in Steffi Marung and Matthias Middell (eds), *Spatial Formats under the Global Condition* (Berlin, 2019), pp. 275–309, 290.

of mutual recognition and peaceful coexistence)¹³ and as a political arena in which solidarity was enacted, negotiated, and sustained through concrete programmes of exchange, education, and mutual support.

This ambiguity applied equally to other communist organizations that pursued similar internationalist projects for colonized people, women, youth, students, and so on, such as the International Union of Students (IUS), the World Federation of Democratic Youth,¹⁴ the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF),¹⁵ and the World Peace Council (WPC).¹⁶ These organizations, and their membership and trajectories, "reflected the protracted relation between pre-war internationalism, rising Cold War tensions, and surging clashes for national liberation and decolonization in the Global South".¹⁷ Scholars have demonstrated that these organizations, which were characterized as "Soviet front organizations" during the Cold War, and their national affiliates drove pioneering policies and political campaigns in some respects.¹⁸

Looking back at the historiography of international trade union federations, many scholars would place its intellectual high point in the early 2000s. At that moment, research seemed to have mapped the contours of the global labour movement of the second half of the twentieth century. Yet in doing so, much of this scholarship turned its

¹³Marcel Bois, Christian Dietrich, and Rhena Stürmer, "Von der Internationale zur 'Völkerfreundschaft': Transnationalität im Kommunismus des 20. Jahrhunderts. Eine Einführung", in Christian Dietrich *et al.* (eds), *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung* 2026 (Berlin, 2026), pp. 1–14, 5.

¹⁴Mikuláš Pešta, *Student Internationalism and the Global Cold War: The International Union of Students in Socialist Prague* (London, 2026); Pia Koivunen, *Performing Peace and Friendship: The World Youth Festivals and Soviet Cultural Diplomacy* (Oldenburg, 2023); Joël Kotek, "Youth Organizations as a Battlefield in the Cold War", *Intelligence and National Security*, 18:2 (2003), pp. 168–191, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684520412331306790>.

¹⁵Francisca de Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organizations: The Case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)", *Women's History Review*, 19:4 (2010), pp. 547–573; Yulia Gradska, "Women's International Democratic Federation, the 'Third World' and the Global Cold War from the Late-1950s to the Mid-1960s", *Women's History Review*, 29:2 (2020), pp. 270–288, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2019.1652440>; Katharine McGregor, "Opposing Colonialism: The Women's International Democratic Federation and Decolonisation Struggles in Vietnam and Algeria 1945–1965", *Women's History Review*, 25:6 (2016), pp. 925–944, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2015.1083246>.

¹⁶Vladimir Dobrenko, "The Stalin Peace Prize and Dilemmas of Soviet Soft Power, 1949–1964", *International History Review* (December 2025), pp. 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2025.2601841>; Günter Wernicke, "The Communist-Led World Peace Council and the Western Peace Movements: The Fetters of Bipolarity and Some Attempts to Break Them in the Fifties and Early Sixties", *Peace & Change*, 23 (1998), pp. 265–266.

¹⁷Marung, Müller, and Troebst, "Monolith or Experiment?", p. 301.

¹⁸Philon Ghirmai, *Globale Neuordnung durch antikoloniale Konferenzen. Ghana und Ägypten als Zentren der afrikanischen Dekolonisation* (Bielefeld, 2019), ch. 6 on the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO); Carolien Stolte, "'The People's Bandung': Local Anti-Imperialists on an Afro-Asian Stage", *Journal of World History*, 30:1–2 (2019), pp. 125–156, touches on the AAPSO and WPC; Yulia Gradska, *The Women's International Democratic Federation, the Global South and the Cold War: Defending the Rights of Women of the "Whole World"?* (London [etc.], 2021); Celia Donert, "Women's Rights and Global Socialism: Gendering Socialist Internationalism during the Cold War", *International Review of Social History*, 67:SI30 (2022), pp. 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859022000050>; Lea Börgerding, "Staging Emancipation and Its Limits: East German Cultural Diplomacy, the German Democratic Women's League, and the 1975 World Congress of Women in East Berlin", *Women's History Review*, 34:1 (2025), pp. 8–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2023.2277484>. See also footnotes 14 to 16.

gaze almost exclusively towards the ICFTU, the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions (IFCTU), or the Western-aligned international trade secretariats, as if they alone embodied the story of international labour.¹⁹ A very different strand of that movement – the WFTU and its affiliates – remained largely in the shadows. We therefore seek to critically investigate the WFTU from an actor-centred perspective, tracing how trade union leaders across Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America shaped, implemented, and contested its agendas through their strategies, mobility, and on-the-ground interventions. We also hope that our empirically grounded historical investigation can productively connect the past to the present and help us better understand the WFTU's current political strategies and campaigns. Examples include the WFTU's strong support for Cuba and Venezuela in the face of US intervention and invasion, and its vocal condemnation of the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank.²⁰ Our approach can also help us to assess historical accuracy, instead of a glorification of the WFTU's historical role by its current leaders.

This introduction is structured as follows. First, we provide a brief overview to familiarize readers with the main events in the history of the WFTU from its foundation in 1945 to the present day. Next, we outline the shared methodological approach of the contributors. This is followed by a survey of the historiography on the WFTU and some of its member unions, and we point to archives and valuable source materials to enable future research. We then examine some actors, trajectories, events, and developments in more detail, after which we highlight some findings from the articles in this Special Issue. The epilogue identifies areas, topics, and actors that merit further exploration in future work.

Brief Overview of the History of the WFTU

The WFTU was founded in Paris in October 1945. It united trade unions with varying ideological persuasions from capitalist and state socialist countries, as well as from colonial territories. At its founding congress, its member unions committed to peace and reconstruction. However, ideological disputes made unity as envisioned by leading forces in the WFTU untenable, and in 1949 the rival ICFTU was established

¹⁹Groundbreaking studies include Anthony Carew *et al.* (eds), *The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions* (Berlin, 2000); Patrick Pasture, *Histoire du syndicalisme chrétien international. La difficile recherche d'une troisième voie* (Paris, 1999); Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten, *Gewerkschaftsinternationalismus und die Herausforderung der Globalisierung. Das Beispiel der Internationalen Transportarbeiterföderation (ITF)* (Frankfurt am Main [etc.], 1999); Victor Silverman, *Imagining Internationalism in American and British Labor, 1939–49* (Urbana, IL, 2000); Bart de Wilde (ed.), *The Past and Future of International Trade Unionism* (Ghent, 2001).

²⁰Cameron Harrison, "WFTU Demands End to Genocide in Gaza", *People's World*, 11 September 2025. Available at: <https://www.peoplesworld.org/article/wftu-demands-end-to-genocide-in-gaza/>; last accessed 4 March 2026. One of the larger events during 2025 was the WFTU's "global solidarity week with the heroic people of Palestine", with events in different locations, e.g. in Larnaca in Cyprus in September 2025. See "Glimpses from the WFTU Global Solidarity Week with the Heroic People of Palestine", WFTU, 23 September 2025. Available at: <https://www.wftucentral.org/glimpses-from-the-wftu-global-solidarity-week-with-the-heroic-people-of-palestine/>; last accessed 10 January 2026.

by social democratic and liberal unions of the Western camp.²¹ Following this split, the WFTU defined itself as an anti-imperialist and class-based federation, with affiliates from both state socialist Eastern Europe and Western communist unions such as France's Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) and Italy's Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL). Prominent member unions in Africa, Asia, and Latin America included the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, the Central All-Indonesian Workers Organization (SOBSI), the Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC), and the South African Congress of Trade Unions. The WFTU's world congresses had a greater global reach than the ICFTU's congresses in terms of the number of trade union delegates participating.²² During the 1960s, the WFTU became a platform for criticism of communist orthodoxy and Moscow's self-assigned leadership role, with Chinese, Romanian, Italian, and Albanian delegates challenging Soviet positions.²³ In 1968, the federation's secretariat condemned the Soviet-led suppression of the Prague Spring.²⁴ Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the large Italian and French member unions repeatedly called for reforms and greater autonomy for the affiliates within the federation, but these efforts largely failed.²⁵ In terms of policy, the WFTU emphasized the role of organized labour as a socialist vanguard and "transmission belt" for socialist and communist parties as well as women workers' rights.²⁶ During the Cold War, the WFTU promoted solidarity with anti-colonial movements and refugees by providing financial support and information

²¹On the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) and the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), see, for example, Geert Van Goethem, *The Amsterdam International: The World of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), 1913–1945* (Aldershot [etc.], 2006); Rainer Tosstorff, *The Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) 1920–1937* (Leiden, 2016); Susan Zimmermann, *Frauenpolitik und Männergewerkschaft. Internationale Geschlechterpolitik, IGB-Gewerkschafterinnen und die Arbeiter- und Frauenbewegungen der Zwischenkriegszeit* (Vienna, 2021); Stefano Bellucci and Holger Weiss (eds), *The Internationalisation of the Labour Question: Ideological Antagonism, Workers' Movements and the ILO since 1919* (Cham, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28235-6>. On the split of the WFTU, see Devinatz, "A Cold War Thaw"; Anthony Carew, *American Labour's Cold War Abroad: From Deep Freeze to Détente, 1945–1970* (Edmonton, 2018).

²²See the contributions by Johanna Wolf, Sofia Graziani, and Immanuel R. Harisch and Gédéon Bangali in this issue. For a comparison of the 1953 WFTU and 1955 ICFTU congresses in Vienna, see Katharina Föger and Eric Burton, "Kleines Land, Großer Dienst. Anti/Kolonialismus, Anti/Rassismus und Entwicklung in Zeitschriften des Österreichischen Gewerkschaftsbundes, 1953–1968", *Zeitgeschichte*, 3:52 (2025), pp. 305–333, 308.

²³William McLaughlin, "WFTU: End of the Affair", 25 October 1965, p. 5, Open Society Archives (OSA), Blinken Foundation, Budapest, Hungary, HU OSA 300-120-3, Box 136.

²⁴Peter Waterman, *From Coldwar Communism to the Global Emancipatory Movement: Itinerary of a Long-Distance Internationalist*, e-book (2014), p. 105. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/9168122/From_Coldwar_Communist_to_the_Global_Emancipatory_Movement_Itinerary_of_a_Long_Distance_Internationalist; last accessed 4 March 2026.

²⁵Devinatz, "A Cold War Thaw", pp. 358–360.

²⁶Johanna Wolf, "Women as Workers: Discussions about Equal Pay in the World Federation of Trade Unions in the Late 1940s", in Selin Çağatay *et al.* (eds), *Through the Prism of Gender and Work: Women's Labour Struggles in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond, 19th and 20th Centuries* (Leiden, 2024), pp. 202–230; Selin Çağatay *et al.* (eds), *Women's Labour Activism in Eastern Europe and Beyond: A New Transnational History* (London, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781800089303>.

materials, as well as diplomatic backing. Tens of thousands of trade unionists were educated by the colleges of the WFTU and its national affiliates.²⁷ After years of intense rivalry, budding rapprochement between the WFTU and ICFTU in the late 1960s and 1970s hinted at a thaw in international labour relations.²⁸ The WFTU survived the collapse of state socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is a rare example of a global organization formed in the aftermath of World War II that was predominantly communist/socialist in its orientation and has survived to this day.²⁹

Shared Methodological Commitment

The articles collected in this Special Issue revisit the WFTU through an actor-centred lens, foregrounding the strategies, itineraries, and interventions of union leaders from across Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. In contrast to accounts that provide an institutional overview of the WFTU and its affiliates, the articles bring to light the strategic agency of unionists who shaped and leveraged Cold War infrastructures – trade union congresses, UN forums, and bilateral missions – and who turned local labour disputes into international campaigns.³⁰

Building on and extending the perspectives developed by Carolien Stolte and colleagues in a *Journal of Social History* special issue, “Trade Union Networks and the Politics of Expertise in an Age of Afro-Asian Solidarity”, this special edition of the *International Review of Social History* emphasizes that these figures moved across multiple organizational and political arenas, activating different parts of their transnational networks according to shifting concerns and goals, rather than simply following the line of a single federation.³¹ It diverges from earlier case studies by demonstrating that many of these protagonists did not merely operate on the fringes of the WFTU but occupied key positions within it: they served on the executive committee, intervened as delegates at the congresses, and shaped policies as WFTU representatives in bodies such as the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

We conceptualize these actors as “subaltern labour leaders”, building on Rachel Leow’s notion of “subaltern internationalism”.³² The contributions in this Special Issue

²⁷Rachel 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, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shz102>; Immanuel R. Harisch, “Great Hopes, False Promises: African Trade Unions in the World of Organized Labor. Institutions, Networks, and Mobilities during the Cold War 1950s and 1960s” (Ph.D., University of Vienna, 2023).

²⁸Devinatz, “A Cold War Thaw”.

²⁹Sandrine Kott, *A World More Equal: An Internationalist Perspective on the Cold War* (New York [etc.], 2024), p. 64, <https://doi.org/10.7312/kott21014>; Mikuláš Pešta, “A Hub of Anti-Colonialism: Prague’s International Organizations in the Transnational Socialist Network and Global Cold War”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 59:3 (2024), pp. 492–513, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220094241234583>.

³⁰For a detailed engagement with the historiography on the WFTU and its member unions, see below.

³¹Carolien Stolte (ed.), “Trade Union Networks and the Politics of Expertise in an Age of Afro-Asian Solidarity”, *Journal of Social History*, 53:2 (2019).

³²Leow, “Asian Lessons in the Cold War Classroom”, p. 430. See also Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Legacies of Bandung: Decolonization and the Politics of Culture”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40:46 (2005), pp. 4812–4818.

show how several labour leaders from Africa, Asia, and Latin America were (re-)elected as WFTU vice-presidents following the split in 1949. This highlights the global representation within the federation's leadership, as well as the role of individuals in mediating between global structures and local struggles. We argue that these trade union officials cannot be fully understood as mere representatives of clearly defined "national" labour movements. Rather, they are structurally ambivalent figures whose positions at the intersection of "from-below" mobilization and "from-above" institutional access illuminate the multiple, often contested, trajectories of twentieth-century labour internationalism. These labour leaders inhabited "multiple roles on different spatial scales";³³ shaping local unions, national federations, and the WFTU alike. Indeed, "no matter how mobile, or how strongly engaged they were in building connections, their activities were usually also embedded in local, national, regional or otherwise bounded contexts"; this builds on the framework of Antje Dietze and Katja Naumann's study on transnational actors.³⁴ The actors we investigate here did not belong to the category of subjects that Desley Deacon *et al.* describe as "resistant and elusive to the nationbound narratives";³⁵ nor were they among the permanent staff of international organizations, who lived cosmopolitan lifestyles.³⁶

In tracing these union leaders' career trajectories, the articles also emphasize their activities in several arenas, as they mediated between workplace struggles, national labour regimes, and emerging architectures of global labour governance.³⁷ The research collected in this issue showcases how the leaders' positions within a globally active trade union federation elevated their social status and gave them access to national and international travel. Geert Van Goethem and Robert Anthony Waters coined the term "global ambassadors of labour" to emphasize the political role and close entanglement of US labour leaders.³⁸ While this notion captures the idea of representation at international forums and close union–government relations, subaltern labour leaders from the colonies did not enjoy "immunity" from colonial governments – on the contrary. Several of the labour leaders discussed in this issue were prevented from participating in activities and had their movements restricted due to political repression and

³³Antje Dietze and Katja Naumann, "Revisiting Transnational Actors from a Spatial Perspective", *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire*, 25:3–4 (2018), pp. 415–430, 416.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 416.

³⁵Desley Deacon, Penny Russell, and Angela Woollacott, "Introduction", in *idem* (eds), *Transnational Lives: Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700–Present* (London, 2010), pp. 1–11, 3.

³⁶Madeleine Herren, "Between Territoriality, Performance, and Transcultural Entanglement (1920–1939): A Typology of Transboundary Lives", *Comparativ*, 23:6 (2013), pp. 100–124.

³⁷Peter France and William St Clair (eds), *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography* (London, 2004); Su Lin Lewis and Carolien Stolte, "Introduction: The Lives of Cold War Afro-Asianism", in *idem* (eds), *The Lives of Cold War Afro-Asianism* (Leiden, 2022), pp. 7–20; Jessica Reinisch, "Introduction: Agents of Internationalism", *Contemporary European History*, 25:2 (2016), pp. 195–205; Stefan Berger and Sean Scalmer, "The Transnational Activist: An Introduction", in *idem* (eds), *The Transnational Activist: Transformations and Comparisons from the Anglo-World since the Nineteenth Century* (Cham, 2018), pp. 1–30.

³⁸Robert Anthony Waters and Geert Van Goethem (eds), *American Labor's Global Ambassadors: The International History of the AFL–CIO during the Cold War* (New York, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137360229>; Serafino Romualdi, *Presidents and Peons: Recollections of a Labor Ambassador in Latin America* (New York, 1967).

imprisonment in their home countries, which in many cases were colonies of imperial powers.

Historiography on the WFTU and Affiliated Unions

Recent years have seen a surge of interest in the WFTU and its member unions among scholars, fuelled by various interconnected research fields such as global communism and the global Cold War, communist international organizations, East–South relations with a focus on decolonization, and global labour history.³⁹

However, the historiography of the WFTU remains strikingly thin compared to the huge political and geographical canvas the federation claimed to organize. Early publications on the WFTU appeared in the late 1940s and 1950s, but these were largely contemporary, programmatic, or polemical accounts. Critics of the WFTU in the “free world” depicted it as a Soviet proxy.⁴⁰ Early overviews of the international trade union movement by authors such as Lewis Lorwin and John P. Windmuller were overwhelmingly Euro-Atlantic in perspective and established the bifurcation between “free” and “communist” labour that would dominate Cold War labour historiography.⁴¹

More nuanced accounts examining the WFTU, its member unions, and those unions’ international connections were produced by area studies specialists. A rich literature emerged on African trade unions and their international relations during the 1960s and 1970s.⁴² Often guided by a nation-by-nation methodology, much of this scholarship includes detailed country studies with separate chapters reflecting on cross-regional developments and/or international contact between unions.⁴³ Methodological nationalism also guided Siegfried Mielke’s major reference work *Internationales Gewerkschaftshandbuch*, which provides useful overviews of the

³⁹George Bodie, “Introduction to Everyday Internationalism: Socialist–South Connections and Mass Culture during the Cold War”, *International Review of Social History*, 69:SI32 (2024), pp. 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000026>; Su Lin Lewis and Nana Osei-Opore (eds), *Socialism, Internationalism, and Development in the Third World: Envisioning Modernity in the Era of Decolonization* (London, 2024); Mark et al., *Alternative Globalization*; Andreas Eckert (ed.), *Global Histories of Work* (Oldenburg, 2016).

⁴⁰For an overview of these debates with a focus on British and US trade unions, see Anthony 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, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002085900000794X>; idem, “A False Dawn: The World Federation of Trade Unions (1945–1949)”, in idem et al., *The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions*, pp. 165–186; idem, *American Labour’s Cold War Abroad*.

⁴¹Lewis L. Lorwin, *The International Labor Movement: History, Politics, Outlook* (New York, 1953); John P. Windmuller, *American Labor and the International Labor Movement, 1940 to 1953* (Ithaca, NY, 1954); Carew, “A False Dawn”.

⁴²Anisse Salah-Bey and Jean Meynaud, *Le syndicalisme africain. Évolution et perspectives* (Paris, 1963), later translated into English as Jean Meynaud and Anisse Salah-Bey, *Trade Unionism in Africa: A Study of Its Growth and Orientation* (Malton, 1967); András November, *L’évolution du mouvement syndical en Afrique occidentale* (Paris, 1965); Immanuel Geiss, *Gewerkschaften in Afrika* (Hannover, 1965); Ioan Davies, *African Trade Unions* (Harmondsworth, 1966); Willard A. Beling, “WFTU and Decolonisation: A Tunisian Case Study”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 2:4 (1964), pp. 551–564.

⁴³David A. Wilson, “Thailand and Marxism”, in Frank N. Trager (ed.), *Marxism in Southeast Asia: A Study of Four Countries* (Stanford, CA, 1960), pp. 58–101; Jeanne S. Mintz, “Marxism in Indonesia”, in Trager, *Marxism in Southeast Asia*, pp. 171–239; Frank N. Trager, “The Impact of Marxism: Historical Overview”,

national labour movements of WFTU affiliates as well as a political-institutional sketch of the WFTU.⁴⁴ In a study adopting a comparative approach that transcends methodological nationalism, Frederick Cooper shows how African unionists in British and French West Africa used international trade union federations and UN forums to advance anti-colonial goals.⁴⁵

One major step towards an archival reconstruction of the early WFTU was Oliver Pohrt's German-language monograph, which traced the federation from its prehistory during World War II to the 1949 schism. Analysing the founding conferences and internal debates, Pohrt highlighted the WFTU's internal conflicts over colonial policy.⁴⁶ His work built on earlier German scholarship by Horst Lademacher and others that had already highlighted the WFTU as an arena of East–West confrontation.⁴⁷ In the Anglophone literature, Anthony Carew reconstructed the 1949 split from the vantage point of British and US government and union archives, stressing the interaction between state policy, Marshall Plan priorities, and trade union diplomacy.⁴⁸ The understanding of the WFTU as a Soviet proxy under “total control of the USSR” has been reiterated by leading union officials such as Gallin.⁴⁹ However, one contemporary observer, the US journalist William McLaughlin, highlighted “a four-five-or-six-way split”,⁵⁰ while from a scholarly perspective Devinatz argues that the WFTU “was not a monolithic, but a polycentric, organization”⁵¹ from at least 1965 onwards.

Since the 2000s, scholars have considerably enriched our understanding of “free trade unionism”. This includes impressive work on the ICFTU's history,⁵² Magaly Rodríguez García's important study of “labour liberalism” in Europe and Latin America,⁵³ and a volume on the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations' (AFL-CIO) global activities.⁵⁴ Marcel van der Linden's key interventions on global labour history, which have underlined the multilayered aspects

in *idem*, *Marxism in Southeast Asia*, pp. 240–300, 272; Geiss, *Gewerkschaften in Afrika*; Ehud Harari, *The Politics of Labor Legislation in Japan: National-International Interaction* (Oakland, CA, 1973).

⁴⁴Otto R. Ließ, “Weltgewerkschaftsbund”, in Siegfried Mielke (ed.), *Internationales Gewerkschaftshandbuch* (Cologne, 1983), pp. 10–20.

⁴⁵Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, 1996).

⁴⁶Oliver Pohrt, *Die Internationale Gewerkschaftsbewegung zwischen Einheitswunsch und Kaltem Krieg. Der Weltgewerkschaftsbund (WGB) von der Gründungsphase bis zu seiner Spaltung (1941–1949)* (Regensburg, 2000).

⁴⁷Horst Lademacher *et al.*, “Der Weltgewerkschaftsbund im Spannungsfeld des Ost-West-Konflikts. Zur Gründung, Tätigkeit und Spaltung der Gewerkschaftsinternationale”, *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 18 (1978), pp. 119–215.

⁴⁸Carew, “The Schism within the World Federation of Trade Unions”.

⁴⁹Gallin, “The WFTU: Hydroponic Stalinism”, p. 79.

⁵⁰McLaughlin, “WFTU: End of the Affair”.

⁵¹Devinatz, “Cold War Thaw”, p. 345.

⁵²Carew *et al.*, *The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions*.

⁵³Magaly Rodríguez García, *Liberal Workers of the World, Unite? The ICFTU and the Defence of Labour Liberalism in Europe and Latin America (1949–1969)* (Oxford [etc.], 2012).

⁵⁴Waters and Goethem, *American Labor's Global Ambassadors*.

of workers' internationalism, added further momentum to developments in labour history.⁵⁵ This approach has guided exciting studies on trade unions and labour in colonial and post-colonial settings at the intersection of the national and the international.⁵⁶

Recent scholarship has begun to bring together the overlapping fields of research on the global histories of communism, decolonization, labour, and international organizations during the Cold War.⁵⁷ Contributions have focused on trade union networks in an era of Afro-Asian solidarity, foregrounding local contexts, internationalist mobilization, and union education on several continents.⁵⁸ Global federations – including the WFTU and ICFTU – provided financial assistance, office supplies, and advisers, but also drew on the insider knowledge and networks of local unions and their leaders.⁵⁹

Important groundwork for this shift was laid by some of the contributors to this Special Issue: Johanna Wolf's research on the WFTU and anti-colonial movements in the 1940s foregrounds colonial delegates' demands within the federation and shows how disagreements over decolonization policy contributed to the split of 1949, underlining the extent to which conflicts within the WFTU were driven by actors from the colonies themselves rather than solely by metropolitan Cold War agendas.⁶⁰ Vanessa Hearman has argued that the internationalism of the SOBSI served three core aims: bolstering the Indonesian state – especially its foreign policy agenda – advancing the domestic Left against political rivals, and educating union members in global working-class politics, foregrounding socialism and communism as relevant political models for Indonesia.⁶¹ Rowena Abdul Razak's research on Iran's Tudeh Party, its WFTU-affiliated trade union federation, and a 1947 WFTU delegation visit uncovered sharp tensions within the mission, which included delegates from Lebanon, the Soviet Union, and the UK. To the displeasure of the British, the mission's report endorsed the Soviet-backed Tudeh Party, while criticizing the Iranian government's failure to improve

⁵⁵ Marcel van der Linden, "Labour History: The Old, the New and the Global", *African Studies*, 66:2–3 (2007), pp. 169–180, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00020180701482636>; *idem*, *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden, 2008); *idem*, "The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History", in Eckert, *Global Histories of Work*, pp. 25–48; David Mayer and Marcel van der Linden, "Labour Internationalism in Context Small and Large", in Bellucci and Weiss, *The Internationalisation of the Labour Question*, pp. 411–420.

⁵⁶ Gareth Curless, "Introduction: Trade Unions in the Global South from Imperialism to the Present", *Labor History*, 57:1 (2016), pp. 1–19; Stefano Bellucci and Andreas Eckert (eds), *General Labour History of Africa: Workers, Employers and Governments, 20th–21st Centuries* (Martlesham, 2019); Duncan Money, *White Mineworkers on Zambia's Copperbelt, 1926–1974* (Leiden [etc.], 2022); Samuel Andreas Admasie, *The Ethiopian Labour Movement: Trade Unions, Collective Action, and Contestation, 1960–2020* (Cham, 2025).

⁵⁷ Kott, *A World More Equal*; Lewis and Osei-Opore, *Socialism, Internationalism, and Development in the Third World*; Sandrine Kott, Eva-Maria Muschik, and Elisabeth Roehrlich (eds), *International Organizations and the Cold War: Competition, Cooperation, and Convergence* (London, 2025); Adegar Fonseca, Dallywater, and Saunders, *Communist Actors in African Decolonial Transition*.

⁵⁸ Carolien Stolte, "Introduction: Trade Union Networks and the Politics of Expertise in an Age of Afro-Asian Solidarity", *Journal of Social History*, 53:2 (2019), pp. 331–347, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shz098>.

⁵⁹ Leow, "Asian Lessons in the Cold War Classroom".

⁶⁰ Johanna Wolf, "Der Weltgewerkschaftsbund und die Antikolonialbewegung während der Nachkriegszeit", *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung* (2026), pp. 83–99.

⁶¹ Vanessa Hearman, "Indonesian Trade Unions, the World Federation of Trade Unions and Cold War Internationalism, 1947–65", *Labor History*, 111 (2016), pp. 27–44.

labour conditions.⁶² Gédéon Bangali has stressed the importance of personal networks and ideological formation for African trade unionists, notably through communist study groups, the French Communist Party, and the CGT.⁶³ He has also examined moments of crisis and friction as experienced by African CGT branches.⁶⁴ Bangali and Immanuel R. Harisch have shown that the Union générale des travailleurs d'Afrique noire's (UGTAN) organizational break with the CGT – and by extension the WFTU – did not end cooperation: visits, exchanges, and collaboration continued.⁶⁵ Several scholars, including Gabriele Siracusano and Harisch, have identified trade union education as a central arena of WFTU engagement. Union colleges, schools, and courses – from Bernau, Budapest, and Conakry to Bamako and Zanzibar – trained thousands of people in practical union work, offered ideological schooling, and enabled access to transnational labour networks that could foster African unionists' career advancement.⁶⁶ Western communist activists were particularly influential as teaching staff and intermediaries, facilitating knowledge circulation and linking African participants to Eastern European officials.⁶⁷ Drawing on personal correspondence, curricula, and exam papers, Harisch has further demonstrated the reciprocal exchange of books, periodicals, newspapers, and “insider” organizational knowledge between

⁶²Rowena 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.

⁶³Gédéon N’goran Bangali, “Méthodes de revendication et gouvernance politique des crises syndicales en Afrique occidentale francophone de 1936 à 1990” (Ph.D., Université Alassane Ouattara, 2013).

⁶⁴*Idem*, “Les répercussions en Afrique occidentale française de la sortie du PCF du gouvernement tripartite métropolitain. Cas de la crise structurelle à la CGT AOF-Togo (1951–1956)”, in Françoise Blum *et al.* (eds), *Les partis communistes occidentaux et l’Afrique. Une histoire mineure?* (Paris, 2021), pp. 203–223.

⁶⁵Gédéon N’goran Bangali and Immanuel R. Harisch, “L’UGTAN. Une expérience de syndicalisme révolutionnaire (1957–1961)”, *Revue ivoirienne d’histoire*, 38 (2021), pp. 32–49.

⁶⁶Françoise Blum, “Une formation syndicale dans la Guinée de Sékou Touré. L’université ouvrière africaine, 1960–1965”, *Revue Historique*, 667:3 (2013), pp. 661–691; Immanuel R. Harisch, “‘Mit Gewerkschaftlichem Gruß!’ Afrikanische GewerkschafterInnen an der FDGB-Gewerkschaftshochschule Fritz Heckert in der DDR”, *Stichproben: Vienna Journal of African Studies*, 18:43 (2018), pp. 77–109; George Bodie, *Global GDR? Sovereignty, Legitimacy and Decolonization in the German Democratic Republic, 1960–1989* (London, 2019), ch. 2; Gabriele Siracusano, “Trade Union Education in Former French Africa (1959–1965): Ideological Transmission and the Role of French and Italian Communists”, *Third World Quarterly*, 42:3 (2021), pp. 483–502, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1815185>; Eric Burton, “Kindred by Choice: Trade Unions as Interface between East Africa and East Germany”, in Kristin Roth-Ey (ed.), *Socialist Internationalism and the Gritty Politics of the Particular: Second-Third World Spaces in the Cold War* (London, 2023), pp. 197–216.

⁶⁷Gabriele Siracusano, “Pronto per La rivoluzione!” *I comunisti italiani e francesi e la decolonizzazione in Africa centro-occidentale (1958–1968)* (Rome, 2022); Immanuel R. Harisch and Eric Burton, “The Missing Link? Western Communists as Mediators between the East German FDGB, the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), and African Trade Unions in the Late 1950s and Early 1960s”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 103 (2023), pp. 292–311, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547922000333>; Gabriele Siracusano, “Construire une nouvelle voie pour le socialisme et l’indépendance. La coopération entre la Confederazione generale italiana del lavoro et les syndicats d’Afrique de l’Ouest et centrale (1958–1969)”, *Revue d’Histoire Contemporaine de l’Afrique*, 6–7 (2024), pp. 135–148, <https://doi.org/10.51185/journals/rhca.2024.060709>.

African graduates and East German college staff.⁶⁸ At the same time, this educational internationalism reproduced severe gender inequalities: women's enrolment remained as low in WFTU-aligned institutions as in the ICFTU's programmes during the 1950s and 1960s.⁶⁹

Recent research with a focus on gender has further revealed the multifaceted dynamics and activities surrounding women workers' struggles at large, which represent another pivotal area of activity for the WFTU and its affiliates. Discussions among WFTU member unions and at WFTU forums regarding the role of women in the world of work, as well as the struggle for wage equality, have recently been highlighted as a complement to the debates at the ICFTU, the UN Women's Committee, and the International Labour Organization (ILO).⁷⁰ Not least through the groundbreaking European Research Council project ZARAH, led by Susan Zimmermann at Central European University, scholarship on women's labour activism in Eastern Europe and across transnational networks has expanded significantly.⁷¹ ZARAH's findings on women trade unionists' multilayered organizing in "real socialist" and other contexts, and on the gendered politics of labour education, social policy, and international representation, are crucial for understanding how women activists used socialist and communist networks – including those linked to the WFTU – to pursue their own agendas rather than merely reproducing male-dominated trade union priorities. Zimmermann and Olga Gnydiuk's article on Eastern European women trade unionists and the figure of the "working mother" revisits the 1956 WFTU World Conference of Women Workers in Budapest and analyses the federation's attempts to shape the ILO's politics of women's work, thereby situating WFTU women's activism at the intersection of socialist internationalism and global norm-setting on gender and labour.⁷²

As these examples showcase, the WFTU and its affiliates were involved in a wide range of activities, including setting up training programmes, running international campaigns, and representing labour at international organizations. The federation was involved in areas such as gender equality, women workers' rights, labour codes, union education, fact-finding missions, and support for liberation movements. Similar to Francisca de Haan's pioneering call to critically engage with ingrained assumptions

⁶⁸Immanuel R. Harisch, "Nkrumahism, East Germany, and the South-East Ties of Ghanaian Trade Unionist J.A. Osei during the Cold War 1960s", *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 54:3 (2021), pp. 309–332.

⁶⁹*Idem*, "Training African Women Trade Unionists in Inter/National Trade Union Movements in the 1950s and 1960s: A History under Constraint", *Revue d'Histoire Contemporaine de l'Afrique*, 6–7 (2024), pp. 57–77, <https://doi.org/10.51185/journals/rhca.2024.060704>.

⁷⁰Susan Zimmermann, "Spurring Women to Action? Communist-Led Women's Trade Unionism between the Hungarian Shop Floor and Top-Level Internationalism, 1947 to 1959", *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 31:2 (2023), pp. 339–362, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2023.2227518>; Wolf, "Women as Workers".

⁷¹Selin Çağatay et al., *Women's Labour Activism in Eastern Europe and Beyond*.

⁷²Susan Zimmermann and Olga Gnydiuk, "Eastern European Women Trade Unionists, Competing Internationalisms, and the Working Mother: Transnational Encounters and Gendered Geopolitics of the 1950s Revisited", in Francesca Piana, Donald Weber, and Susan Zimmermann (eds), *Nested Internationalisms: Transnational Labour Activism in the Twentieth Century* (forthcoming).

in scholarship on the WIDE,⁷³ we hope that this Special Issue will serve as a catalyst for more nuanced and empirically grounded studies on the WFTU, its member unions, and their local, national, and international work in various parts of the globe during the Cold War and beyond.

Sources: Building a Polycentric Archive for Actor-Centred Research

One major reason for the relative lack of research on the WFTU and its member unions compared to that on the ICFTU is certainly the greater difficulty in accessing sources. The “central archive” at the International Institute for Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam houses an incredibly rich collection of ICFTU documents,⁷⁴ which has been used intensively by scholars exploring the history of ICFTU member unions in various regions of the world. Historians studying the period of the united WFTU (1945–1949) have also been able to make use of this collection. However, for the WFTU after the split in 1949, the situation becomes more difficult. Scholars have lamented that there apparently exists no central archive or any “in-depth study of the WFTU.”⁷⁵

One promising way to work around the apparent absence of a WFTU “central” archive is to approach the WFTU via the archives of its member federations. The extensive archive of the East German Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (FDGB) is a treasure trove for reconstructing various aspects of the WFTU’s work: its congresses, committees, education and training programmes, bilateral exchanges between the WFTU and various member unions, women’s conferences and activities, and much more. The archives of national trade union federations serve as a powerful “mirror” archive for those of the international federations, offering us archival gems from the WFTU’s history.⁷⁶ Another key site for research on the WFTU is located in the Institut CGT d’histoire sociale in Paris, where CGT officials have preserved substantial WFTU materials in the Archives départementales de la Seine-Saint-Denis (fonds Fédération Syndicale Mondiale, AD93/FSM), a collection already mined by historians and likewise consulted by several contributors to this Special Issue.⁷⁷ Documents from the Hungarian trade union council Szakszervezetek Országos Tanácsa in the Hungarian National Archives have been utilized by Zimmermann for a fascinating article that

⁷³De Haan, “Continuing Cold War Paradigms”.

⁷⁴IISH, ICFTU/ITUC Archives. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/10622/ARCH00622>; last accessed 10 February 2026.

⁷⁵IISH, WFTU Archives. Available at: <https://search.iisg.amsterdam/Record/ARCH01666>; last accessed 10 February 2026; Mathilde von Bülow, “Beyond the Cold War: American Labor, Algeria’s Independence Struggle, and the Rise of the Third World (1954–62)”, *Journal of Social History*, 53:2 (2019), pp. 454–486, 477.

⁷⁶Harisch, *Great Hopes, False Promises*, pp. 37–43. Regarding the IFTU in the interwar period, which similarly has no central archive, Geert Van Goethem and Susan Zimmermann have made extensive use of British and Swiss archives of national trade unions. Historians of international women’s movements without central archives have employed similar research strategies. See Van Goethem, *The Amsterdam International*; Zimmermann, *Frauenpolitik und Männergewerkschaft*.

⁷⁷Siracusano, “Pronto per la rivoluzione!”; Ana Moledo, “The Quest for the Solidarity of the World’s Working Class: Luso-African Liberation Movements and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) during the 1960s and Early 1970s”, in Chris Saunders *et al.* (eds), *Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and Africa* (Leiden, 2023), pp. 81–102, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110787757-005>.

links together Hungarian women workers and unionists' struggles on different scales, up to the WFTU level.⁷⁸ We still know relatively little about the perspectives of the WFTU member unions in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria, or how the WFTU's activities were shaped and perceived in East Central Europe.

Complementary archives can offer a useful entry point into these discussions. The Blinken Foundation's Open Society Archives in Budapest have a large collection of newspaper clippings as well as regular research and situation reports provided by analysts of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty.⁷⁹ There were several boxes of newspapers and clippings providing extensive coverage of major WFTU events and debates, including material from the Soviet newspaper *Pravda*, the Bulgarian trade union paper *Trud*, Italian and French trade union papers and magazines, and Romanian newspapers.⁸⁰

Personal papers, collections, autobiographical accounts, and oral history interviews provide additional precious sources. A travelogue and oral history interview were central for Eric Burton's reconstruction of the educational journey of Adam Shafi, a Zanzibari novelist, journalist, and trade unionist who studied at the FDGB's trade union college in Bernau.⁸¹ Mikuláš Pešta utilized oral history interviews and memoirs to reconstruct the cosmopolitan communities of foreign officials in Cold War Prague's international organizations.⁸² The British communist Peter Waterman moved to Prague in the 1960s, working first for the IUS and then for the WFTU; his personal papers and later autobiographical reflections, held by the IISH, offer rare insights into everyday working conditions at the WFTU headquarters.⁸³ Another key figure was British Communist Party member and WFTU functionary Jack Woddiss (1914–1980), a former seaman, trade unionist, and autodidact who became a leading WFTU official in the 1950s; the Communist Party of Great Britain collection at Manchester's Labour History Archive and Study Centre holds records on his work.⁸⁴ Overall, these examples demonstrate that Jean Allman's observations on the African post-colonial archive also apply to the WFTU: its archive "does not reside in one place or even two or three". Rather, it is a "global, transnational archive" scattered in many different institutions, holdings, and, possibly, tin trunks.⁸⁵

⁷⁸Zimmermann, "Spurring Women to Action?"

⁷⁹For an insightful discussion of these collections and the methodological challenges they pose, see Ioana Macrea-Toma and Anca Şincan, "Introduction: Methodologies of Working in Cold War Archives", *East Central Europe*, 52:2–3 (2025), pp. 141–158, <https://doi.org/10.30965/18763308-20252001>.

⁸⁰OSA. Available at: <https://archivum.org/>; last accessed 10 February 2026.

⁸¹Eric Burton, "A 1960s Odyssey from Zanzibar to Cairo: Educational Mobility and Anti-Heroic Anticolonialism in Adam Shafi's Travelogue *Mbali Na Nyumbani*", *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 19:1 (2025), pp. 43–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2025.2573611>.

⁸²Pešta, "A Hub of Anti-Colonialism"; Pešta, *Student Internationalism and the Global Cold War*.

⁸³Waterman, *From Cold War Communism*; Peter Waterman Papers, IISH. Available at: <https://search.iisg.amsterdam/Record/ARCH02586>; last accessed 23 February 2026.

⁸⁴The National Archives, "Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB)". Available at: <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/43f766a9-e968-4b82-93dc-8cf11a841d41>; last accessed 4 March 2026.

⁸⁵Jean Allman, "Phantoms of the Archive: Kwame Nkrumah, a Nazi Pilot Named Hanna, and the Contingencies of Postcolonial History-Writing", *American Historical Review*, 118:1 (2013), pp. 104–129.

Overview of the Articles in This Special Issue: Sources Consulted by the Contributors

As this Special Issue shows, the absence of such a central archive compelled scholars to assemble a polycentric archive through national repositories, union archives, semi-official publications, memoirs, newspapers, and oral histories. Patricio Herrera's article on Latin American labour internationalism – centred on the Confederación de Trabajadores de América Latina and Mexican archives – models a transnational approach rooted in memoirs, speeches, and autobiographical accounts as well as trade union records, ILO records, and periodicals. This multi-source strategy, framed within global history debates on decolonization, the Cold War, and transnational networks, demonstrates how cross-regional connections can be reconstructed when central archives are incomplete. In her article, Johanna Wolf triangulates semi-official WFTU publications – conference booklets, speeches, activity reports, and articles from the magazine *Die Weltgewerkschaftsbewegung* (about whose origins and distribution we know very little) – with digitized AITUC materials (Archives of Indian Labour; IISH) and biographical sketches of Indian labour leader Shripad Amrit Dange. Immanuel R. Harisch and Gédéon Bangali combine semi-official WFTU publications with multi-archival research in the IISH archives in Amsterdam and the CGT archives in Paris, online UN documents, and press articles, and situate WFTU debates in other multi-lateral forums (e.g. ECOSOC). Rowena Abdul Razak mobilizes British Foreign Office and embassy files from the British National Archives to reconstruct how intelligence travelled between Tehran and colonial administrations in Malaya and Singapore, and how imperial security logics framed interpretations of WFTU activity in Iran and South-East Asia. The article's comparative method bridges geographies to reveal common repertoires of anti-WFTU governance. The article by Sofia Graziani is based on a diverse multilingual source base, which combines Chinese archival materials, memoirs, and biographies with publications and internal documents of and about the WFTU from the CGIL's National Historical Archives and the archival collections held at the Gramsci Foundation in Rome.⁸⁶ Vannessa Hearman's article draws on a combination of official and autobiographical Indonesian sources, but it is the travelogues of the trade union leader Adam Soepardjan that form the core of the analysis. These first-hand accounts offer an unusually close insight into how one activist perceived and interpreted his journeys through the Cold War world, complicating any view of him as merely following the party line. Gabriele Siracusano draws on the archives of the Italian Communist Party and the CGIL in Rome, the records of the CGT and the French Communist Party, and WFTU materials preserved in the Archives départementales de la Seine-Saint-Denis in Bobigny. The WFTU files – correspondence of the Prague-based general secretariat, with notes, drafts, and training dossiers – enable a reconstruction of Euro-African relations across the 1950s and 1960s. Both Siracusano's article and that by Manuel Herrera Crespo demonstrate how the Institut CGT d'histoire sociale's (IHS-CGT) multilingual collection of French, English, and Russian sources provides a treasure trove for future research on various aspects of the WFTU. While

⁸⁶Shen Zhihua (ed.), *Eluosi jiemi dang'an xuanbian. ZhongSu guanxi* [Selection of Declassified Russian Archives: Sino-Soviet Relations] (Shanghai, 2015).

Siracusano examines the 1950s and 1960s, Herrera Crespo uses documents from the IHS-CGT and the IISH to trace the perspectives and actions of leading WFTU officials regarding international labour unity in the 1980s and 1990s.

A Fragmented History of the WFTU and Some of Its Member Unions, 1945–1980s

Any attempted periodization for an international trade union federation that operated on a global scale yet had a political-ideological bedrock in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe will, of course, reflect regional priorities and biases. Here, we propose three distinct phases. First (and most obviously), the period of the united WFTU from 1945 until 1949; second, the period from the split in 1949 until the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, which was initially fiercely protested by the WFTU leadership, deepened existing rifts, and provoked new quarrels inside the federation; and third, the period from 1968 to 1990, ending with the implosion of the “socialist world system”. We chose to conclude our investigation by examining this period due to the lack of scholarship on the WFTU during the 1970s and 1980s, with Herrera Crespo’s contribution in this Special Issue being an important stimulus.

1945–1949: The united WFTU

The joint war effort of the Allied forces against the fascist German Reich and other Axis powers during World War II contributed to large sections of the international labour movement coming together after the war. With the founding of the WFTU in Paris on 3 October 1945, trade unions from communist, social democratic, and other countries, as well as from the colonies, were united in one body for the first time since 1919. The federation did not emerge in a vacuum but built on earlier, competing experiments in international trade unionism from the interwar period. It was conceived as a more inclusive successor to the “Amsterdam International”, officially the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), which operated from 1919 to 1945 and brought together predominantly social democratic unions. Several of the IFTU’s continental European leaders relocated to London at the outset of World War II, turning the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) into the de facto centre of the international labour movement and reinforcing the prominence of its general secretary, Walter Citrine. Having guided both the TUC and the IFTU through the turbulence of the interwar years and the war itself, Citrine presided over the WFTU’s founding congress in 1945, signalling a strong element of institutional continuity despite the new federation’s broader ambitions.⁸⁷ This continuity was complicated, however, by the fact that, alongside the IFTU, the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) also existed. Founded in 1920 as a Moscow-based rival, the RILU sought to organize revolutionary unions worldwide. Its legacy shaped both the hopes and the suspicions that accompanied communist participation in the WFTU after 1945.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Van Goethem, *The Amsterdam International*; *idem*, “The Guest Who Invited Himself: The International Free Trade Union Movement during and between the Two World Wars”, in Bellucci and Weiss, *The Internationalisation of the Labour Question*, pp. 51–70; Stolte, “Trade Union Networks”, p. 333.

⁸⁸ Tosstorff, *The Red International of Labour Unions*.

Carew describes the hopes placed on the WFTU becoming “part of a new global framework of economic and social institutions that would build a better world and eliminate the causes of the war”.⁸⁹ The founding congress was attended by 272 delegates from 56 nations, officially representing 64 million workers. The WFTU declared that it wanted to fight the causes of war, promote world peace, and curtail the power of the international monopolies; the preparatory founding conference in London in February 1945 had already declared support for the right of the colonies to self-determination, with reference to the Atlantic Charter, and reaffirmed the economic support of the international labour movement for the decolonizing countries.⁹⁰ In 1949, reflecting many of the fault lines of the intensifying Cold War competition, most anti-communist national unions in Western Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa – the latter two still largely under colonial rule – split from the WFTU to form the ICTU. Consequently, the WFTU’s membership and guiding policies differed considerably between the period when it was organizationally united and the post-schism years.

The post-war history of the WFTU and its 1949 split has long been narrated primarily through the lens of Cold War polarization and emerging bloc politics. Recent research, however, has demonstrated that the fault lines within the WFTU also ran through contentious debates on equal pay and the place of women workers.⁹¹ At the same time, questions about the relationship between empires and their colonies or post-colonial states increasingly shaped the federation’s agenda, forcing Western unions in particular to justify their positions on colonial rule, national independence, and economic sovereignty.⁹² Taken together, these intertwined conflicts over gender, empire, and decolonization reveal that the causes of the WFTU’s crisis and fragmentation in 1949 cannot be solely reduced to rivalry between superpowers, but must be understood as part of broader struggles over the social and political horizons of global trade unionism. After 1949, leaders such as Shripad Amrit Dange, Abdoulaye Diallo, Liu Ningyi, Adam Soepardjan, and Vincente Lombardo Toledano, all examined in more detail in the articles collected in this Special Issue, exemplified how actors from Africa and Asia harnessed the WFTU to internationalize decolonization and carve out the role of organized labour in their national contexts. Imperial governments such as Britain’s deployed repressive and co-optative strategies to blunt WFTU influence in places such as Iran and Malaya/Malaysia.

1949–1968: Cold war division, decolonization, and divergent socialisms

The Special Issue places a clear chronological focus on the period between the WFTU’s second world congress, held in Milan in 1949, and the late 1960s. During this period, regionalization was a key concern and challenge for the WFTU. There were constant tensions over how the WFTU’s national affiliates envisioned that internationalism. Explorations of the trade unions and workers’ movements in Africa, Asia, Latin

⁸⁹ Carew, “A False Dawn”, p. 169.

⁹⁰ Ließ, “Weltgewerkschaftsbund”, p. 11.

⁹¹ Wolf, “Women as Workers”.

⁹² Wolf, “Der Weltgewerkschaftsbund und die Antikolonialbewegung während der Nachkriegszeit”.

America, and Western Europe show different strategies and temporal layers in attempts to push the centralized bureaucratic colossus of the WFTU towards more regionalization. As Harisch, Bangali, and Siracusano show in their articles, West African trade union federations' 1957 break with the "orthodox" CGT – which organized workers in both the metropole and French West Africa – was driven largely by ongoing demands for, and the process of, regionalization. In North Africa, unionists and politicians had long opposed an internationalist movement they viewed as Eurocentric and inattentive to local specificities. After first North and then West African federations disaffiliated from the WFTU, the organization was left with few African affiliates by the end of the 1950s.

Education and training became a key component of the WFTU's internationalism and its member unions' international activities. Trade union courses under WFTU guidance took place in Budapest from 1953 onwards, and a central WFTU college was opened there in 1959.⁹³ From 1959 until the early 1960s, several WFTU affiliates in Eastern Europe and the Soviet all-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (ACCTU) opened trade union colleges for Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans. Most of these colleges operated until the late 1980s and together they trained tens of thousands of unionists.⁹⁴ These residential programmes, which were linked through WFTU-organized *Erfahrungsaustausche* (information-sharing meetings, literally "exchanges of experiences") combined Marxist political economy, labour history, and, increasingly, as a result of participants' interventions, practical organizing, while also acclimating participants to the institutional cultures of state socialist unions.⁹⁵ In Africa, UGTAN's African Workers' University in Conakry began courses in February 1960 as a joint venture with the WFTU, and the Union nationale des travailleurs du Mali founded a college in Bamako in 1962, staffed by French and Italian communists.⁹⁶ For Eastern European unionists and WFTU staff, residential courses, teaching exchanges, and opportunities to share their experiences offered key insights into the challenges of union work across African countries and sectors. Feedback from African course participants and correspondence with graduates – the large majority male – also provided valuable material for staff qualifications and prompted curricular adaptations.⁹⁷

The history of the WFTU also needs to be reread through the prism of gender. While the communist-aligned federation repeatedly affirmed the importance of organizing women workers, it initially translated these commitments into concrete action only to a limited degree, as Selin Çağatay and others have shown.⁹⁸ The WFTU increasingly stressed that "to win and defend the demands of women", full efforts were required to unionize women workers and to support their training and promotion to leading

⁹³Leow, "Asian Lessons in the Cold War Classroom"; Harisch, "African Trade Unions in the World of Organized Labor".

⁹⁴Harisch, "African Trade Unions in the World of Organized Labor", p. 279. According to Blair A. Ruble, "more than 15,000 non-Western unionists" attended courses sponsored by the WFTU and ACCTU alone. See Blair A. Ruble, *Soviet Trade Unions: Their Development in the 1970s* (Cambridge, [1981] 2009), p. 131.

⁹⁵Harisch and Burton, "Missing Link".

⁹⁶Siracusano, "Trade Union Education in Former French Africa".

⁹⁷Harisch, "African Trade Unions in the World of Organized Labor", ch. 4; Harisch, "Nkrumahism, East Germany, and the South-East Ties".

⁹⁸Çağatay et al., *Women's Labour Activism*.

bodies. Yet the federation's own leadership structures long lagged behind its ambitions: in 1948 only one woman sat on the WFTU executive committee alongside twenty-three men, and it was not until 1956 that Elena Teodorescu from Romania became the first woman to serve as one of the six key elected functionaries of the WFTU secretariat, followed later by Stana Dragoi.⁹⁹

At the WFTU's sixth World Trade Union Congress in Warsaw in 1965, the federation boasted a self-reported (and thus likely inflated) membership of more than 137 million members,¹⁰⁰ with regional offices, commissions, labour advisers, and educational activities around the globe. The WFTU competed with the ICFTU for "the hearts and minds" of trade unionists worldwide.¹⁰¹

But Siracusano shows in his article that the 1960s saw growing frictions within the federation too. Post-1956, de-Stalinization and Khrushchev's "national paths" allowed a multiplication of socialist models, while China became the USSR's main internal rival before leaving the WFTU in 1966. Divergences in Western communism also shaped the WFTU's work: the CGT, which was aligned to the French Communist Party and struggled to detach itself from a Stalinist vision, adhered to a communist model that was both workerist and "Jacobin", based on an idea of the French working class as a revolutionary vanguard that could "export" communism to newly independent countries. In contrast, the CGIL – balancing communist and socialist factions and influenced by the Italian Communist Party's "Italian road" – favoured staged revolutions that united blue- and white-collar workers as well as peasants, with the primary goal of conquering political and economic self-determination, even before an eventual class struggle. From at least 1961, the CGIL pushed for major reforms to the WFTU more strongly than the CGT.

The "Third Worldist" projects, with their contextualized, locally based socialisms and communisms, created tensions with the dogmatic views of Marxism-Leninism. The August 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops led by the Soviet Union caused a further deterioration in the WFTU's reputation among its members outside the state socialist regimes of Eastern Europe. One week after the invasion, on 28 August 1968, the WFTU secretariat expressed "disapproval of the military intervention which contrasts with the fundamental principles that form the basis of the life of the WFTU and which are freely established by all the national centres affiliated to the WFTU".¹⁰² Subsequent meetings, with significant Soviet influence, largely overturned these early condemnations. The enthusiasm of many member unions had been greatly dampened by the display of Soviet imperialism.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 32, 144, 165, 550, 596. There was no woman in a comparable function in the ICFTU at the time.

¹⁰⁰"VI. Weltgewerkschaftskongress, Protokoll des Kongresses: Warschau, 8.–22. Oktober 1965", quoted in Gewerkschaftshochschule "Fritz Heckert" beim Bundesvorstand des FDGB und Abteilung Internationale Verbindungen beim Bundesvorstand des FDGB (eds), *Der Weltgewerkschaftsbund. Ausgewählte Dokumente 1965–1985* (Berlin, 1986), p. 22.

¹⁰¹Leow, "Asian Lessons in the Cold War Classroom".

¹⁰²Waterman, *From Coldwar Communism*, p. 105.

1969–1990: *Détente, rapprochement, and north–south contestations*

The late 1960s marked a cautious reopening of relations between rival currents of international trade unionism. When the AFL-CIO disaffiliated from the ICFTU in February 1969, Western European affiliates gained greater room to recalibrate their stance towards the WFTU and unions in state socialist countries.¹⁰³ In the immediate aftermath of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, many major ICFTU unions had imposed bans on visits to the invading states, yet by September 1969 the West German Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB)¹⁰⁴ and the British TUC had both lifted restrictions on contact with WFTU-affiliated unions in those countries, and an East–West trade union meeting in Vienna in July 1973 explicitly sought closer cooperation between European unions aligned with either of the two federations.¹⁰⁵

Historians such as Devinatz have shown that this emerging *détente* remained fragile. The ICFTU leadership continued to portray the WFTU as a monolithic instrument of Soviet policy even after the WFTU secretariat itself initially condemned the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia and despite growing internal pluralism within the federation.¹⁰⁶ From the late 1960s through to the end of the Cold War, however, Western European ICFTU affiliates increasingly engaged with their Central and Eastern European counterparts, while the WFTU continued to encourage relations with unions in the capitalist world; shared concerns over apartheid, Cold War militarization, multinational corporations, and women's rights created spaces for practical collaboration despite persistent ideological divides.¹⁰⁷ Within the WFTU, European communist unions experimented with institutional mechanisms to manage this *rapprochement*, culminating in the creation of the WFTU's commission on Europe in 1984, which sought to systematize strategies for engaging with the ICFTU and the European Trade Union Confederation and to imagine a common future for organized labour across the bloc divide, a trajectory that echoes broader reassessments of communist engagement with European integration.¹⁰⁸

Herrera Crespo's article underscores how uneven and contested these shifts were. The French CGT, long a pillar of the WFTU, made repeated attempts in the 1980s to

¹⁰³“West German Unions to Resume Eastern Contacts”, DPA press release, 2 September 1969, HU OSA 300-2-1, Box 25; Kim Christiaens and Jos Claeys, “Forgotten Friends and Allies: Belgian Social Movements and Communist Europe”, in Kim Christiaens, John Nieuwenhuys, and Charel Roemer (eds), *International Solidarity in the Low Countries during the Twentieth Century* (Berlin [etc.], 2020), pp. 159–182.

¹⁰⁴Stefan Müller, *Die Ostkontakte der Westdeutschen Gewerkschaften. Entspannungspolitik zwischen Zivilgesellschaft und internationaler Politik 1969 bis 1989* (Bonn, 2020).

¹⁰⁵“British Trade Unions Agree to Resume Contacts with the East”, 4 September 1969, HU OSA 300-2-1, Box 25; “East–West Union Meeting Ends in Vienna”, 29 July 1973, HU OSA 300-2-1.

¹⁰⁶Devinatz, “A Cold War Thaw”, p. 342. On the WFTU secretariat's reaction to the Soviet-led invasion of Prague in 1968, see the impressive report by Waterman, *From Coldwar Communism*.

¹⁰⁷Manuel Herrera Crespo, “‘Porque no ha cambiado nada.’ The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and the End of the Cold War”, *Labour History Review*, 89:1 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.3828/lhr.2024.3>; George Myconos, *The Globalizations of Organized Labour: 1945–2005* (New York, 2005).

¹⁰⁸See Manuel Herrera Crespo's article in this Special Issue.

reorient the federation towards reform and labour unity, but these were largely unsuccessful.¹⁰⁹ Ultimately, the CGT left the WFTU after the Damascus congress and joined the ICFTU in 1999. By contrast, Latin American and Asian leaders helped consolidate a militant anti-imperialist axis inside the WFTU, insisting that the ICFTU should embody a form of labour imperialism, as well as a framing of limited cooperation as part of a broader ideological struggle in the late Cold War, while warning that European developments threatened the federation's standing in their regions. These divergent regional perspectives also shaped debates over "international labour unity" itself: figures such as Mavrikos, former general secretary of the WFTU (2005–2022) would later criticize perestroika-era openings as capitulation to "common house" illusions and social democratic practices,¹¹⁰ while other leaders briefly considered dissolving the communist international structures after 1989 to overcome the historic split. This reminds us that communist trade unionists were not only objects but also agents of changing ideas about democracy, self-determination, and global labour governance.¹¹¹

Findings: Efforts to Provincialize Europe

The contributions to this Special Issue help to better understand Cold War labour internationalism with a focus on and beyond the WFTU. One key finding of this Special Issue concerns the role played by subaltern labour leaders in the process that led to the WFTU's foundation and consolidation as the main internationally organized alternative to reformist unionism. This "subaltern internationalism" was not unique to the WFTU,¹¹² but what distinguished the federation was its recognition of the need to listen to subalterns' voices in order to remain relevant. Hence, an early commitment to communist and anti-imperialist struggle went hand in hand with concrete efforts to forge a genuine global alliance of workers that would overcome the Eurocentrism of international unionism.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹Claude Rocatti, "Europe and the Divisions of French Trade Unionism: A Growing Awareness", in Andrea Ciampani and Pierre Tilly (eds), *National Trade Unions and the ETUC: A History of Unity and Diversity* (Brussels, 2017), pp. 45–66.

¹¹⁰George Mavrikos, *Critical Notes on the History of the World Trade-Union Movement: Issues of Tactics and Strategy* (Athens, 2023).

¹¹¹Debkumar Ganguli, *History of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU): Yesterday – Today – Tomorrow, 1945–2000* (New Delhi, 2000).

¹¹²Histories of the IFCTU, the ICFTU, and the latter's regional organizations have demonstrated the active and often dissenting role played by African, Asian, and Latin American labour actors. See for example Yvette Richards, "Transnational Links and Constraints: Women's Work, the ILO and the ICFTU in Africa, 1950s–1980", in Eileen Boris, Dorothea Hoethker, and Susan Zimmerman (eds), *Women's ILO: Transnational Networks, Global Labour Standards, and Gender Equity, 1919 to the Present* (Leiden, 2018), pp. 149–175; Magaly Rodríguez García, "Constructing Labour Regionalism in Europe and the Americas, 1920–1970s", *International Review of Social History*, 58:1 (2013), pp. 39–70; Gabriela Scodeller, "Political Training and Social Change in the 1960s and 1970s: Educational Activities of the Latin American Central of Workers (CLAT)", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 90 (2016), pp. 93–110.

¹¹³As Anthony Carew argues in "Conflict within the ICFTU: Anti-Communism and Anti-Colonialism in the 1950s", *International Review of Social History*, 41 (1996), pp. 147–181, 147: "Throughout the inter-war years, the IFTU failed to establish a real presence beyond Europe." See also Van Goethem, *The Amsterdam International*.

Herrera's article begins by describing the intensity of anti-imperialist discourse in Latin America during the interwar years, which explains the ferocity of the anti-communist tactics of both US and Latin American labour leaders after the war.¹¹⁴ The active participation of Lombardo Toledano, one of Mexico's most distinguished twentieth-century labour leaders, in the WFTU's founding congress and subsequent meetings mirrored the efforts of Asian, African, and Middle Eastern subaltern labour leaders whose recent colonial or semi-colonial experience, as in the case of unionists from China and Iran, motivated them to welcome Soviet support. However, as the articles by Wolf, Harisch and Bangali and Graziani demonstrate, the adherence to the communist labour organization was not unconditional, and the understanding of communism itself varied over time and across different regions. In their articles on Indian, West African, and Chinese perspectives on the WFTU, these authors demonstrate that subaltern actors sought to use the international organization as a forum to avoid isolation and to defend local interests.

They also show that international working-class solidarity had its limits and that Eurocentrism as well as the dominance of US trade unionism were as stubborn as subaltern internationalists' refusal to conform to a marginalized position. In the case of West Africa and China, dissenting members decided to abandon the WFTU and to invest their time and energies in building regional networks. Others remained loyal to their internationalist ideals at the cost of harsh anti-communist repression, as was the case in India and Indonesia.

Importantly, as this Special Issue illustrates, relations between the individual unions and the WFTU headquarters in Europe were far from harmonious during the period under investigation. Inspired by the anti-imperialist forces of the "Bandung moment", the non-aligned movement, and the Tricontinental, workers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America began to form their own trade union federations. Invoking various "-isms" (such as Pan-Africanism, Pan-Arabism, and Pan-Americanism), trade union leaders and politicians emphasized a "third option" alongside the ICFTU and the WFTU. These unions and federations collaborated with the WFTU to varying degrees at different times.

For their part, Siracusano and Abdul Razak look at the role played by European trade unions in the strengthening or weakening of WFTU affiliates in West Africa, Iran, and (colonial and post-colonial) Malaya/Malaysia. Siracusano analyses the competing views on internationalism among French and Italian communist labour leaders, while Abdul Razak examines the anxieties that motivated the British Labour and Conservative governments to intervene in the communist-led labour movements in the Persian Gulf and South-East Asia so as not to lose their imperial grip. Here too, subaltern voices were of crucial importance for debates on the different "paths to socialism" and on the complicity of European unions in the perpetuation of Eurocentrism and outright repression of labour leaders. As Herrera Crespo further demonstrates in his analysis of the attempts to achieve international labour unity with the ICFTU by the end of the twentieth century, Latin American and Asian trade unionists had a very different take on rapprochement. Eventually, the "militant

¹¹⁴Van Goethem and Waters, *American Labor's Global Ambassadors*.

anti-imperialist axis” took control of the WFTU and led to the “de-Europeanization” of the communist labour organization.

To gauge the WFTU’s impact, we must move beyond membership figures and ask what kinds of political and organizational leverage these numbers actually expressed.¹¹⁵ Measuring the WFTU’s concrete impact on improving its members’ working conditions would require a sophisticated methodology to locate relevant sources and to analyse the extent to which international socialist solidarity responded to workers’ needs. As the contribution by [Hearman](#) shows, micro-histories provide important insights into the impact of labour internationalism, but without access to certain archival collections our knowledge of the WFTU’s achievements will remain fragmented. We can, however, conclude that while the economic benefits to the WFTU’s rank and file might have been negligible, its pedagogical activities, as well as the intellectual exchanges and emotional bonds among its labour leaders, are tangible results of the organization’s eighty-year history. As Van Goethem has argued with respect to the IFTU, “the immaterial side of internationalism” should not be underestimated.¹¹⁶

Notwithstanding the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist rhetoric in WFTU meetings and publications, the organization’s success did not lie in a radical socio-economic transformation but rather in the pluralization of the narrative. African, Asian, and Latin American subaltern labour leaders unsettled universalist discourses. Their version of what post-colonial thinker Dipesh Chakrabarty has called “provincializing Europe”¹¹⁷ was crucial for the development of the WFTU’s “polycentric nature”¹¹⁸ beyond Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and the Western European communist parties, which allowed it to survive the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

The Way Forward – Areas, Topics, and Actors That Merit Further Exploration

As of 2025, the WFTU claims to have “more than 110 million members in every corner of the planet”.¹¹⁹ The world’s current largest trade union federation is the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), which was created on 1 November 2006 as a merger of the ICFTU and the World Confederation of Labour (WCL). It is headquartered in Brussels and claims to represent 191 million workers of 340 national affiliates in 169 countries as of June 2025.¹²⁰ The merger of the ICFTU and WCL organizationally united two federations that had similar viewpoints on fundamental issues and had also been on the same side of the Cold War.¹²¹ Viewed this way, it would seem that

¹¹⁵ Colin Crouch, “Membership Density and Trade Union Power”, *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*, 23:1 (2017), pp. 47–61.

¹¹⁶ Van Goethem, “The Guest Who Invited Himself”.

¹¹⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2008).

¹¹⁸ Devinatz, “A Cold War Thaw”, p. 357.

¹¹⁹ “WFTU 80 Years Anniversary”.

¹²⁰ ITUC, “List of Affiliated Organisations”. Available at: https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/list_of_affiliates_june_2025_v6.pdf?43182/2ae8dac112b54ef41374ea4bea64aadac64903a75d4614076c857e62e132a6f8; last accessed 4 March 2026.

¹²¹ Gallin, “The WFTU: Hydroponic Stalinism”, p. 79.

the split in the international labour movement that was already manifest in the inter-war period persists until the present day. Despite recent advances, the history of the WFTU remains fragmentary, with particularly pronounced gaps from the late 1960s to the present. Several substantive thematic fields stand out as priorities for further inquiry.

First, more empirical research is needed on the WFTU, its affiliate unions, and their members, including in relation to the various struggles taking place around the world. The anti-apartheid struggle and the fight against institutionalized racism in Southern Africa more broadly remain largely unexplored. While we know that the federation condemned apartheid and supported sanctions, the concrete forms of this support have yet to be systematically mapped. The presence and position of the WFTU in Latin America also demand closer attention. Existing studies of the Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores and ICFTU-backed initiatives in the region could be compared systematically with WFTU activities, especially in countries with strong communist or left-nationalist movements. Particular attention could be paid to labour education. The WFTU's Lázaro Peña trade union college in Cuba, which has trained unionists from around the world since the 1970s, including ones from Marxist-oriented African states such as Angola, offers a promising entry point into South–South cooperation within the WFTU framework. Research in this area would help to present the federation as not only an East–West actor, but also as a node in triangular circuits connecting Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Africa.

Second, examining the WFTU's relations with other international organizations opens up new perspectives on how communist trade union actors positioned themselves within broader architectures of global governance and negotiated influence, alliances, and contestation across ideological and institutional boundaries. Scholarship, including Herrera Crespo's contribution, has illuminated the complex, often hostile entanglements with the ICFTU. Yet the federation also maintained consultative status with UN bodies and interacted with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), ECOSOC, and the ILO. How did it use these forums to pursue its agenda on colonialism, apartheid, migrant labour, and women's rights? In addition, the personal and institutional overlaps with other communist-led organizations – such as the WIDE, the WPC, and specialized bodies like the Federation of Scientific Workers – deserve systematic analysis. Mapping these interlocking directorates would clarify how trade union internationalism intersected with wider communist strategies for courting world public opinion.

Third, gender and women's struggles within and around the WFTU in the post-1960s period require much more attention. Recent work has reconstructed important trajectories of women trade unionists and WFTU women's structures in the 1940s–1960s, but more research is needed on subsequent decades to identify the manifold activities, congresses, and struggles led by women workers and unionists aligned to the WFTU.

Fourth, the Special Issue calls for deeper inquiry into critiques of the WFTU and the internal tensions they generated, as this offers a revealing vantage point on broader fractures within the socialist camp. From the late 1950s, China and Albania – backed by North Korea, Vietnam, and Indonesia – attacked the USSR's doctrine of “peaceful coexistence” in WFTU forums, while Yugoslavia's uneasy position vis-à-vis Moscow

and the federation provoked further conflict; though admitted only as observers, Yugoslav unions were sharply criticized by the Chinese–Albanian bloc. Italy's CGIL and Romania's union centre also pursued distinct lines, advocating respectively more flexible inter-federation cooperation and a less centralized WFTU, and greater autonomy for national affiliates. Disputes over voting, representation, and priorities became key arenas for these struggles, while China's effective withdrawal after the mid-1960s and the destruction of the SOBSI in Indonesia reshaped and diminished the federation's Asian profile; Cuba remained an ambivalent actor that straddled the divide between "South" and "East". Reading these intra-communist debates through the prism of the WFTU allows us to trace how competing socialist projects, hierarchies, and claims to ideological orthodoxy were articulated, contested, and sometimes reconfigured within a shared institutional framework.

Fifth, a better understanding of long-term developments within the WFTU and its members is needed to allow us to reconsider traditional periodizations and rebalance the representation of regions and labour movements. From the 1970s onwards, and particularly after 1991, leadership and initiative shifted increasingly towards the Mediterranean region, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Further research is required to improve our understanding of these periods, including the continuities, shifts in leadership and strategies, and ruptures that occurred.

Finally, the WFTU's history in the Middle East and North Africa, and particularly its position on the Palestinian question – a highly relevant issue amid the ongoing Israeli occupation and starvation in the Gaza Strip – remains almost entirely unwritten. Future research should explore how the federation and its member organizations in the region framed Palestinian claims, how they interacted with Arab regional confederations such as the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU), and how these relationships evolved over time. Recent Italian scholarship on the ICATU suggests that there is considerable untapped archival material, which, read alongside WFTU and national union sources, could illuminate the entanglement of labour, nationalism, and anti-imperialism in the Middle East and North Africa.¹²²

Taken together, recent empirical research suggests that the WFTU's history after 1949 is neither a simple story of Soviet domination nor a marginal appendix to the ICFTU's "free world" narrative. Rather, it offers a rich, still underexplored entry point into the making of multiple, contested "global communisms" and alternative labour internationalisms from the Cold War into the present.

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¹²² Anna Baldinetti and Laura Morreale, "The International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU): Pan-Arabism, Labour Diplomacy, and the Maghreb Countries, 1956–1962", *Afriche e Orientali*, 28:1 (2025), pp. 172–197, <https://doi.org/10.23810/AEOXXVIII202518>; Martina Biondi and Daniele Paolini, "From Unity to Crisis: The International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU) and the Decline of Pan-Arabism, 1963–1979", *Afriche e Orientali*, 28:1 (2025), pp. 198–222, <https://doi.org/10.23810/AEOXXVIII202519>.

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List of Acronyms

AAPSO	Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation
ACCTU	All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
AITUC	All-India Trade Union Congress
CGIL	Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (Italian General Confederation of Labour)
CGT	Confédération Générale du Travail (General Confederation of Labour, France)
CTC	Central de Trabajadores de Cuba (Cuban Workers' Confederation)
DGB	Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (German Trade Union Confederation, West Germany)
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
FDGB	Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (Free German Trade Union Federation, East Germany)
ICATU	International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
IFCTU	International Federation of Christian Trade Unions
IFTU	International Federation of Trade Unions
IISH	International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam)
ILO	International Labour Organization
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
IUS	International Union of Students
RILU	Red International of Labour Unions (Profintern)
SOBSI	Sentral Organisasi Buruh Seluruh Indonesia (Central All-Indonesian Workers Organization)
TUC	Trades Union Congress (United Kingdom)
UGTAN	Union générale des travailleurs d'Afrique noire (General Union of the Workers of Black Africa)
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WCL	World Confederation of Labour
WFTU	World Federation of Trade Unions
WIDF	Women's International Democratic Federation
WPC	World Peace Council

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