

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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

Anti-imperialism in the Confederation of Latin American Workers and the Early WFTU (1938–1953)

Patricio Herrera 

Instituto de Historia, Universidad San Sebastián, Santiago, Chile
Email: colmich2013@gmail.com

Abstract

From its founding in 1938 onwards, the activities of the Confederation of Latin American Workers (CTAL) were rooted in anti-imperialist struggle. Initially, this was in response to the plundering of Latin America in the service of US economic interests, while later anti-imperialist efforts were directed against the hegemony that Europe and the US exerted over markets and territories in Africa and Asia. In the immediate post-war period, the CTAL engaged in a markedly anti-imperialist discourse. The confederation established solidarity alliances and trade union campaigns committed to supporting causes in distant, culturally diverse places, because they were considered part of the same history of dependence, neglect, and exclusion that had to be overcome to build autonomous nations. This article covers meetings between trade union leaders from different continents, as documented in letters, magazine and newspaper articles, conference proceedings, and the records of workers' organizations. Working through the CTAL and the World Federation of Trade Unions, these individuals disseminated their beliefs and sought to achieve widespread mobilization for their union and political struggles, with the goal of eradicating imperialism from the Americas, Africa, and Asia.

Introduction

Although other continental trade union organizations existed before the founding of the Confederation of Latin American Workers (CTAL) in 1938, such as the Pan-American Federation of Labor (COPA) and the Latin American Trade Union Confederation (CSLA), they failed to unify regional workers on a large scale. It was the CTAL that achieved the most solid and enduring example of labour unity in Latin America. The CTAL emerged in a complex period of international politics: Hitler had become German chancellor in January 1933, and Stalin had established a strategy of interclass cooperation that was implemented by Georgi Dimitrov at the Seventh Comintern Congress in Moscow in 1935.

From September 1938 onwards, the CTAL's central committee prioritized detailed study of the economic, social, labour, and political situation of workers in the Americas, as well as initiating a process of strengthening trade union organizations in individual countries. The goal was to form a large confederation in each national context that would bring together all the local unions, as established in the CTAL's statutes. The federation's president, Vicente Lombardo Toledano, and other members of the central committee worked in various countries in the region to consolidate continental labour unity. This reflected their belief in the need for a powerful trade union movement, particularly given the complex economic and political conditions that had triggered World War II.¹ Lombardo Toledano also presented a project based on industrialization of Latin America, which was intended to achieve an economic autonomy that would allow it to shake off imperialism once and for all.²

By the end of 1944, the CTAL had established itself as a continental trade union organization and enjoyed broad support from national confederations, becoming the largest workers' group in the region. It even had alliances with workers' organizations in the US and Canada³ and was linked to the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Comintern.⁴ In this context, under the bipolar world order established in 1945, the CTAL was confronted with numerous attempts to break the continental

¹The following are examples of labour, social, and political studies prepared by the CTAL's central committee or its president, Lombardo Toledano; each contains a detailed description of the issues addressed, updated statistics, and concrete solutions to the problems identified: CTAL, *Primer Congreso Indigenista Interamericano* (Mexico City, 1940); *idem*, *Los salarios en América* (Mexico City, 1941); *idem*, *Los principales problemas de la agricultura y de la economía del continente americano* (Mexico City, 1942); Vicente Lombardo Toledano, *Bolivia Mártir* (Mexico City, 1943); *idem*, *Cuáles son las tareas urgentes de los pueblos de América Latina* (Mexico City, 1944); CTAL, *Balance de la Conferencia Interamericana de Chapultepec* (Mexico City, 1945); *idem*, *El peligro de los monopolios y la manera de combatirlos* (Mexico City, 1946); *idem*, *Amistad y alianza eternas entre México y Guatemala* (Mexico City, 1946); *idem*, *Libro blanco y azul. En defensa del pueblo argentino y en contra del régimen fascista que ha sojuzgado al país hermano del sur* (Mexico City, 1946); *idem*, *Guía política de América Latina* (Mexico City, 1948); Jean Pierret, *América Latina. Condiciones de trabajo y de vida de los trabajadores de la industria del cuero, calzado y peletería* (Paris, 1953).

²At each of its general congresses and central committee meetings, the CTAL expressed a deep commitment, albeit with varying emphases at different times, to fighting for the political and economic emancipation of Latin America, and repeatedly called on workers and political actors not to be intimidated by economic powers and the threats of Italian and German totalitarianism. See CTAL, *En defensa de América y el mundo* (Mexico City, 1942); Vicente Lombardo Toledano, *Prolegómenos para una nueva América* (Mexico City, 1943); *idem*, *Qué queremos para la postguerra* (Mexico City, 1943); *idem*, *La educación política del proletariado* (Mexico City, 1943); CTAL, *¿Qué es la CTAL?* (Mexico City, 1944); Vicente Lombardo Toledano, *Posición de CTAL frente al imperialismo, nazi-fascismo y las huelgas* (Montevideo, 1944); CTAL, *Segundo congreso general de la Confederación de Trabajadores de la América Latina* (Cali, 1944); Vicente Lombardo Toledano, *Cuáles son las tareas urgentes de los pueblos de América Latina* (Mexico City, 1944); CTAL, *Presente y futuro de la América Latina* (Mexico City, 1945); Vicente Lombardo Toledano, *La CTAL ante la guerra y ante la posguerra* (Mexico City, 1945).

³See Moisés Poblete, *El movimiento obrero latinoamericano* (Mexico City, 1946); Harvey Levenstein, *Labor Organization in the United States and Mexico* (Westport, CT, 1971); Jon Kofas, *The Struggle for Legitimacy: Latin American Labor and the United States, 1930–1960* (Tempe, AR, 1992); Luis Álvarez, *Vicente Lombardo Toledano y los sindicatos de México y EE.UU.* (Mexico City, 1995).

⁴Patricio Herrera, "Vicente Lombardo Toledano y el Congreso Obrero Latinoamericano (1935–1938)", *Relaciones. Estudios de historia y sociedad*, 138 (2014), pp. 109–150; *idem*, "La primera conferencia regional del trabajo en América. Su influencia en el movimiento obrero, 1936", in Fabián Herrera León and Patricio

labour unity that had been achieved. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) paid agents to infiltrate the CTAL.⁵ It should be noted that, as a result of the Cold War antagonism that marked this historical context, the histories of the working class – particularly ones relating to Latin America – have been interpreted using dualistic perspectives of dependency–development, centre–periphery, capitalism–communism, which have obscured numerous historical facts and processes.⁶ The CTAL early on developed a discourse and programme of action based on post-colonial or decolonial ideas, anticipating the theories that were later developed by various thinkers in India and Latin America,⁷ as well as the notion of “subaltern internationalism”.⁸

In this article, I therefore seek to provide new perspectives and insights, particularly regarding the CTAL’s contribution to defending the sovereignty of Latin American nations, which were considered semi-colonial due to their economic and political configuration, and its early relations with the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). The post-war period, in which peace was constantly threatened by the spectre of new wars, allowed the CTAL to form new alliances, this time intercontinental ones. Together with the WFTU, it committed itself to establishing a robust global workers’ unity with the same energy it had previously devoted to the emancipation of Latin America. The leaders of the CTAL invited Latin American workers to show solidarity with the workers of Africa, Asia, the Antilles, the Caribbean, Central America, Europe, and the US, because they understood that victory in the war had not eliminated the

Herrera González (eds), *América Latina y La Organización Internacional del Trabajo. Redes, cooperación técnica e institucionalidad social, 1919–1950* (Morelia, 2013).

⁵Patricio Herrera, “Dismantling the Confederation of Latin American Workers during the Cold War (1943–1953)”, *Labor History*, 3 (2021), pp. 254–275.

⁶See Moisés Poblete and Ben Burnett, *The Rise of the Latin American Labor Movement* (New York, 1960); Levenstein, *Labor Organization in the United States and Mexico*; Hobart Spalding Jr., “US and Latin American Labor: The Dynamics of Imperialist control”, *Latin American Perspectives*, 3:1 (1976), pp. 45–69; Leslie Bethell and Ian Roxborough, *Latin America between the Second World War and the Cold War: Crisis and Containment, 1944–1948* (New York, 1992).

⁷The CTAL’s in-depth historical, political, economic, social, and cultural reflections on the colonial and semi-colonial character of Latin America anticipated debates on dependency and post-colonial theory, including the work of authors such as Ciro Cardoso, Enzo Faletto, Celso Furtado, Ranajit Guha, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Walter Mignolo, and Aníbal Quijano. More recent studies in this theoretical tradition have made further advances in reinterpreting historical processes. See, for example, Daniel Brückenhuis, *Policing Transnational Protest: Liberal Imperialism and the Surveillance of Anticolonialists in Europe, 1905–1945* (Oxford, 2017); Emma Hunter, *Political Thought and the Public Sphere in Tanzania* (Cambridge, 2015); Sujit Sivasundaram, *Waves across the South: A New History of Revolution and Empire* (Chicago, IL, 2021); Toby Green, *Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution* (Chicago, IL, 2019); Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism: A History* (London, 2018); Matthew Brown, “The Global History of Latin America”, *Journal of Global History*, 10:3 (2015), pp. 365–386, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022815000182>.

⁸On this subject, see the work of Rachel 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, and “The 1952 Asian-Pacific Peace Conference in Beijing and the Making of the Third World”, *Journal of World History*, 30:1–2 (2019), pp. 21–53. See also Su Lin Lewis, “Decolonising the History of Internationalism: Transnational Activism across the South”, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 2 (2024), pp. 345–369, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440123000233>.

threats, only defeated their leaders; Nazi fascist ideology and imperialist motivations had not been completely suppressed.

This article shows that the CTAL was systematically involved in the global geopolitical events of World War II and the post-war period. Its leaders shared their views in newspaper articles and conference speeches. By contrast with extant labour and political historiography on Latin America,⁹ the findings presented here focus greater attention on the CTAL's anti-imperialist activities and its defence of causes on other continents.

Studies of the CTAL's solidarity with other nations and continents in the anti-imperialist struggle are still in their infancy. Its relationship with the WFTU has not been studied in detail, at least within Latin American historiography, but only mentioned in passing here and there. This article, which focuses on Latin American sources, provides a largely exploratory and descriptive account,¹⁰ zooming in on the anti-imperialist discourses and activities of the CTAL, which sought to promote the autonomy of colonial and semi-colonial nations.¹¹

In the first part, dealing with the pre-1945 period, I examine the links that the CTAL built among the Latin American workers with the fewest freedoms and union rights. The second part then moves on to the post-war reality, focusing primarily on what happened to workers in Palestine, the confrontation between the Kuomintang and Chinese workers, and the growing alliance forged between the CTAL and the WFTU to reach out to other regions, such as Africa and Asia, which were grappling with debates about autonomy and labour rights.

My approach lies at the intersection between description and explanation on a transnational scale. It is undeniable that all the processes mentioned above were influenced by the transnational and transcontinental forces unleashed in the post-war

⁹Robert Alexander, *Labor Movements in Latin America* (London, 1947); *idem*, *Communism in Latin America* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1957); *idem*, *Organized Labor in Latin America* (New York, 1965); *idem*, *International Labor Organizations and Organized Labor in Latin America and the Caribbean: A History* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2009); Víctor Alba, *Historia del Movimiento Obrero en América Latina* (Mexico City, 1964); Lourdes Quintanilla, "La Confederación de Trabajadores de América Latina, 1938–1948 (Ideología y política)", in Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, *Memorias del encuentro sobre historia del movimiento obrero*, vol. II (Puebla, 1980), pp. 169–202; Lourdes Quintanilla, *Lombardismo y sindicatos en América Latina* (Mexico City, 1982); Julio Godio, *Historia del movimiento obrero latinoamericano*, vol. III (San José, 1985); Ricardo Melgar, *El movimiento obrero latinoamericano. Historia de una clase subalterna* (Madrid, 1988); Daniela Spenser, *En combate. La vida de Lombardo Toledano* (Mexico City, 2018).

¹⁰In this regard, see the aforementioned studies by Alexander, Alba, Quintanilla, Melgar, Godio, and Spenser.

¹¹*Colonial, feudal, and semi-colonial* were terms used frequently and often interchangeably by Lombardo Toledano and other regional union leaders in speeches/pamphlets and at conferences. They alluded to economic dependence, primary activities, and mono-exporting. Latin America was considered semi-colonial because it had relative political autonomy, even if that autonomy was sterile in the absence of direct control over its economy, which prevented it from directing its economic, social, and cultural development model. India, China, and African nations, meanwhile, were identified as lacking political autonomy and being under the control of a foreign nation that administered their territories. The latter countries were emphasized in Lombardo Toledano's speeches.

period.¹² Conducting research from a transnational perspective means studying states of readjustment, construction, and constant flux. There can be no mechanical answers about the types of relationships that were established, nor can any pre-established results be anticipated,¹³ especially in the context of global tensions that typified the post-war period and the emerging Cold War.¹⁴

The sources for this research derive from archives such as the Lombardo Toledano Historical Collection (FHLT) at the Universidad Obrera de México, the Vicente Lombardo Toledano Documentary Collection (FDVLT) at the Vicente Lombardo Toledano Centre for Political, Social, and Philosophical Studies in Mexico City, and the ILO Archives in Geneva. In print, the newspapers *El Popular* and *Noticiero de la CTAL*, both published in Mexico, and the magazine *Futuro*, an important Mexican publication that disseminated the contemporary international debate on ideological, political, trade union, and cultural issues, as well as a wide range of brochures, telegrams, correspondence, congress minutes, conference proceedings, and photographs, have helped to reconstruct at different levels how the CTAL united the intercontinental working class.

The CTAL and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Latin America

The CTAL sought to address the drastic changes that resulted from the economic and social crisis of 1929, the rise of totalitarian regimes – whether fascist or communist – and the confrontation between major powers during World War II. All these processes substantially altered the balance of political power in the world during the second half of the twentieth century. It was in this context that the CTAL set itself the goals of achieving unity among the proletariat in Latin America and fighting for the decolonization and economic and political emancipation of Latin American nations. By examining primary sources, such as social studies, political reports, economic statistics, memoranda, resolutions, correspondence, and communications between countries, as well as the travels of Lombardo Toledano and other central committee members throughout Latin America and the CTAL's links with the ILO, the WFTU, and

¹²Sandrine Kott, Eva-Maria Muschik, and Elisabeth Roehrlich, *International Organizations and the Cold War* (London, 2025); Sandrine Kott, *Organiser Le Monde. Une autre histoire de la guerre froide* (Paris, 2021); Pierre Yves-Saunier, *Transnational History* (Basingstoke, 2013); Marcel van der Linden, *Transnational Labour History* (London, 2003); Akira Iriye, *Global and Transnational History* (London, 2013).

¹³See Richard Saull, “El lugar del sur global en la conceptualización de la guerra fría. Desarrollo capitalista, revolución social y conflicto geopolítico”, and Gilbert Joseph, “Lo que sabemos y lo que deberíamos saber. La nueva relevancia de América Latina en los estudios sobre la guerra fría”, in Daniela Spenser (ed.), *Espejos de la guerra fría: México, América Central y el Caribe* (Mexico City, 2004), pp. 31–66 and 67–94; Josep Fontana, *Por el bien del Imperio. Una historia del mundo desde 1945* (Barcelona, 2011).

¹⁴In the last decade, several studies have been published with new theoretical, methodological, and source perspectives, which examine political and trade union situations in America and their connection to the Cold War. See Carlos Huneeus, *La guerra fría chilena* (Santiago, 2009); Tania Harmer, *El gobierno de Allende y la Guerra Fría interamericana* (Santiago, 2013); Tania Harmer and Alfredo Riquelme (eds), *Chile y la Guerra Fría global* (Santiago, 2014); Roberto García and Arturo Taracena (eds), *La Guerra Fría y el anticomunismo en Centroamérica* (Guatemala City, 2017); Patricio Herrera (ed.), *América y la Guerra Fría transnacional* (Valparaíso, 2021).

the Comintern, I was able to identify the impact that the CTAL had on Latin America before World War II and in the run-up to the transnational Cold War.

The formation of the CTAL was preceded by a clash between different political and intellectual perspectives and sensibilities, as well as different approaches to trade union organizing.¹⁵ The Latin American Workers' Congress, held at the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City in early September 1938, brought together leading figures in the labour movement from across the region as well as international trade union organizations. It was deemed essential to strengthen trade union relations with US labour organizations, with the firm intention of achieving unity among the proletariat throughout Latin America. In this regard, Lombardo Toledano said: "You can render incomparable services to the cause of the emancipation of the proletariat. [...] You can also help the semi-colonial nations of Latin America, whose geographical and moral vanguard is my country."¹⁶ While the CIO was represented at the congress by John Lewis as a fraternal delegate, the AFL withdrew, believing the event to be influenced and financed by international communism. Its president, William Green, maintained this position until after the war.

Numerous fraternal delegations were present at the opening of the Latin American Workers' Congress. Representatives included Léon Jouhaux, general secretary of the General Confederation of Labour of France; Ramón González Peña, president of the General Union of Workers of Spain; Eduard Fimmen, president of the International Transport Workers' Federation; Ragnar Casparsson, delegate of the Swedish Confederation of Labour; S. Guruswami, general secretary of the All-India Railwaymen's Federation; and Adolf Staal, delegate of the ILO.¹⁷ Guruswami's address to the congress stood out: he briefly described the "most brutal exploitation" faced by workers in his country and in the British colonies, citing the experience of his comrades "exported" to "Trinidad and Jamaica", and said that he had come to the congress to learn from the workers of Latin America, in order to be able to confront his enemies inside and outside India more "effectively".¹⁸ His participation did not go unnoticed. The CTAL began to concern itself very early on with the emancipation of the continental and global labour movement. Its prime objective was to form national workers' confederations and assess the socio-labour situation of the proletariat. It was a complex task, but one that the CTAL was committed to right from its inception with its slogan: *for the emancipation of Latin America*.¹⁹

The CTAL central committee recognized early on that World War II would have repercussions on the labour movement's international relations. They saw the war as

¹⁵Patricio Herrera, "El pacto por la unidad obrera continental. Sus antecedentes en Chile y México, 1936", *Estudios de Historia Moderna y Contemporánea de México*, 46 (2013), pp. 87–119.

¹⁶Vicente Lombardo Toledano, "Mensaje al proletariado de los Estados Unidos de Norteamérica", *Futuro*, May 1936. My translation.

¹⁷Herrera, "Vicente Lombardo Toledano", pp. 109–150.

¹⁸S. Guruswami, "Quince mil millas de viaje para traer el saludo angustiado y fraternal del proletariado indio que sufre y que lucha", in CTCH, *La CTCH y el proletariado de América Latina* (Santiago, 1939), pp. 23–24.

¹⁹Estatutos de la Confederación de Trabajadores de América Latina, 8 September 1938, Título IX, lema y distintivo, Article 35, FHLT, id. 18868, file 328.

a conflict between two groups of capitalist countries pitted against each other by economic rivalries and a desire for political domination, with the working class suffering the consequences. In their view, the war was more violent and decadent than the war of 1914 had been. While the latter had still been supported by democratic institutions, which made possible “the historical progress of the bourgeoisie”, the war that began in 1939 was disintegrating the liberal socio-political formation, giving rise to regimes based on state-sanctioned violence. The CTAL leaders identified Nazi fascism as an expression of totalitarian politics, while excluding Soviet communism from criticism. At the CTAL’s First General Congress, held in Mexico City in November 1941, its president, Lombardo Toledano, reiterated in his welcome speech the CTAL’s commitment to the struggle for the “complete emancipation” of the nations of Latin America.²⁰ The congress delegates agreed to strongly support President Roosevelt’s “Good Neighbor Policy”, as they considered it a historic opportunity to strengthen “friendly relations” with the US.²¹ This strategy was intended to fulfil one of the CTAL’s key aspirations: productive autonomy and progress towards regional industrialization. Although the US, particularly the Roosevelt administration, did approve some important economic agreements, it was clear that this situation was limited to the context of World War II. Proof of this can be seen in the fact that Truman attempted to exert political and economic domination over Latin America and the Caribbean, neutralizing the plans of the CTAL and giving rise to a policy of infiltration, coordinated with the AFL, that aimed to atomize the confederations affiliated with the CTAL after 1945.

Between 21 August and 1 December 1942, Lombardo Toledano travelled throughout the Americas. He visited the US, Cuba, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, and received first-hand reports from labour leaders about events in Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Brazil, Venezuela, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico, where he was unable to hold meetings due to time constraints or political restrictions. According to Lombardo Toledano, the purpose of the trip was to work towards the construction of a new Americas, spreading a spirit of Americanism and fraternity among nations. Another motivation was to build support for the war against Nazi fascism.

Between 10 and 16 December 1944, the CTAL’s Second General Congress was held in Cali, Colombia. One key topic concerned how to build the “Patria Grande” (“great homeland”) for the working class, given that World War II was coming to an end. The starting point for the discussions was “the achievement of autonomy for Latin American nations”.²² The goal of eliminating the entire system of exploitation – one of the CTAL’s defining objectives – was a common thread throughout the debate. Accordingly, questions about colonialism and “semi-colonialism” were “trenchant”

²⁰On this subject, see CTAL, *Primer Congreso General*, Mexico City, 21–26 November 1941 (Mexico City, 1941). There are journalistic accounts in *El Popular*, 22 July 1941, p. 1, and *Futuro*, January 1942, pp. 39–42; and reports by correspondents in *Revista Internacional del Trabajo*, February 1942, pp. 235–237. See also Patricio Herrera, “La Confederación de Trabajadores de América Latina y la implementación de su proyecto sindical continental (1938–1941)”, *Trashumante: Revista Americana De Historia Social*, 2 (2013), pp. 136–164.

²¹*Futuro*, January 1942, p. 40.

²²Speech by Lombardo Toledano at the opening of the CTAL’s Second General Congress in Cali, Colombia, 10 December 1944, FHLT, id. 36604, file 593.

(*punzantes*) at each meeting, emphasizing the need to “fight against war[s] of aggression or conquest”. The delegates approved a resolution entitled “General bases for the new programme for the progress of Latin America”, which included a commitment to achieve full sovereignty for the nations of the world, particularly those subjected to imperialism.

The CTAL and the Unity of the Global Working Class

At the end of 1944, with the end of World War II seemingly near, Lombardo Toledano and Latin American trade unionism confidently awaited the defeat of Nazi fascism.²³ The World Trade Union Conference, convened by the British Trades Union Congress (TUC), brought together 240 delegates representing thirty-eight countries in London from 6 to 17 February 1945. The conference addressed numerous issues, but attention focused primarily on three questions: (a) what action workers around the world should take to help bring the war to a successful conclusion; (b) how to reorganize the international trade union movement into a single, powerful force; and (c) what demands the global working class should present to the UN Assembly regarding the conditions that would guarantee world peace. Lombardo Toledano played a central role in the attempt to bring together all the trade union tendencies during the conference. The AFL refused to participate and carried out acts of sabotage to prevent the conference from taking place, while the British delegation initially maintained a hesitant attitude.²⁴ In this context, Lombardo Toledano engaged in an intense debate with Walter Citrine, the social democratic general secretary of the TUC, who opposed the inclusion of trade unions from Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Poland. Lombardo Toledano’s argument was unequivocal: international workers’ unity could not be based on ideological or national exclusions.²⁵ The dispute also touched on the very purpose of the conference: while Citrine believed that it should be limited to discussion, Lombardo Toledano argued that, after ten days of debate, it was untenable to conclude the conference without resolutions. His proposal aimed at creating “a new and vigorous organization of the workers of the world, without prejudice” – emphasizing the historic nature of the moment. Faced with the AFL boycott, Lombardo Toledano argued that the formation of the WFTU should not be postponed “to appease” American leaders. He proposed to go ahead and extend a fraternal invitation to the AFL to join later, so that the responsibility for the decision would fall on the AFL but the process of unity would not be slowed down.²⁶ Lombardo Toledano believed that if the historic opportunity to unify the global proletariat were wasted, not only would peace lack a firm foundation, but the post-war period would unfold in a climate of crisis that would affect workers and peoples around the world.²⁷

In his speeches at the London conference, Lombardo Toledano reaffirmed the resolutions of the CTAL’s second general congress of 1944. He pointed out that military

²³Vicente Lombardo Toledano, *Posición de la CTAL frente al imperialismo, al nazi-fascismo y las huelgas* (Montevideo, 1944).

²⁴*El Popular*, 9 February 1945, p. 1.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 1.

²⁶*El Popular*, 13 February 1945, p. 1.

²⁷*El Popular*, 18 February 1945, p. 1.

victory in the war would not guarantee peace if the “political victory of democracy” were not defended. According to him, that meant defeating fascism conclusively. He argued vehemently that a unified and strengthened labour movement should emerge from the conference:

If this magnificent opportunity to achieve the unity of the international working class, which is urgent and cannot be postponed, is lost, not only will peace lack a firm foundation, but the post-war period will be a historical stage full of difficult problems to solve, to the detriment of the proletariat and the peoples of the world.²⁸

Lombardo Toledano and other leading CTAL figures firmly upheld this view at the conference in the face of delegations with opposing positions, arguing that the historical context made it essential to achieve the international unity of the labour movement. The CTAL's central committee supported the inclusion of all workers' organizations without exception. It argued that nations that were experiencing similar conditions of political and economic domination or were in open conflict with imperialist powers should be represented at the upcoming World Trade Union Congress in Paris, where the WFTU was to be founded. The presence of the General Union of Chinese Workers was of particular interest to the CTAL, as China was considered a semi-colonial nation, which “awakened” a mutual interest in presenting the reality in China to the delegates.²⁹ Indeed, Lombardo Toledano openly suggested that the Paris congress should examine the colonial problem, with the objective of developing a common programme to face the new post-war threats. This position aligned with those of delegates from Asia and Africa. The Indian delegate, Shripad A. Dange, argued that fascism must be completely defeated and that the independence of the colonies must be fought for. The delegate from Palestine, M. Jarblum, reaffirmed the importance of defending democracy and peace in the world, which were threatened by instability in the colonial territories of Africa and the East. Brian Goodwin, delegate from Northern Rhodesia, highlighted the importance of fighting for peace, democracy, and the lives of workers in the colonies, whose autonomy and legal rights were restricted.³⁰ Colonial and semi-colonial countries, Lombardo Toledano declared, “have the inalienable right to free themselves from the forces of international imperialism that have hindered their development.”³¹ The CTAL's central committee saw cooperation of workers in “dependent” countries as essential. India's sovereignty and its autonomy negotiations with the British Labour Party were followed with interest by Latin American union leaders, given the historical relations between workers' organizations.³²

²⁸Speech by Lombardo Toledano in London, 17 February 1945. Cited in *El Popular*, 18 February 1945, p. 1.

²⁹“Delegados chinos esperados en el Congreso Mundial”, *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 6 August 1945, p. 1.

³⁰WFTU, *Report of the World Trade Union Conference-Congress*, 25 September–8 October 1945 (Paris, 1945), pp. 23–27, 38–39, 92–93.

³¹“Lombardo pide que el Congreso de Paris estudie el problema colonial”, *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 21 August 1945, p. 1; WFTU, *Report of the World Trade Union Conference-Congress*, pp. 34–36.

³²“La India interesa a América Latina”, *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 21 August 1945, p. 1. See also Johanna Wolf's article in this Special Issue.

The CTAL was represented by sixteen of its eighteen affiliates at the World Trade Union Congress, held in Paris from 25 September to 9 October.³³ It assumed responsibility for presenting the views of colonial and semi-colonial nations in the absence of representatives from China and South Africa.³⁴ The CTAL's activities to support trade union unity were not limited to the regional sphere. Its intervention was decisive in the creation of the WFTU and in defining the political profile the new federation would adopt in the post-war scenario. Right from its foundation, the CTAL defended the idea of a broad and unified world centre, organized under the principle of a united, non-exclusionary front. This was not only an ideological programme, but also a persistent practice deployed in different international spaces.

The Paris congress was the culmination of the efforts of the international labour movement, begun in London, to achieve unity in a powerful global organization capable of defending the interests of the working class and supporting the newly established UN to fulfil the principles intended to create a just and lasting peace. The WFTU was finally founded at the congress, thus consolidating the broadest and most influential trade union organization of the period. The CTAL joined as a Latin American regional trade union body, reaffirming its commitment to the unity of the international proletariat.³⁵

The founding of the WFTU took place during a period marked by the anti-fascist struggle, the Yalta agreements, and the military defeat of the Axis powers. From an ideological standpoint, the project brought together different segments of international trade unionism; social democrats, Marxist-Leninists, and American industrial unionists were grouped together in the CIO. A similar configuration could be observed in the CTAL, which played a prominent role in the WFTU's founding. Two profoundly different trade union traditions coexisted within the Latin American federation, whose circumstantial alliance had been sustained around the anti-fascist coalition. On the one hand, there was the current linked to national democratic parties, which were multi-class and Latin Americanist in character and inclined towards coexistence with the US. On the other hand, there was communist unionism, associated with single-class parties that strictly followed the international strategy of the Soviet Union. This difference was expressed in divergent conceptions of economic and political change in Latin America and foreshadowed conflicts in the post-war period.

The WFTU Founding Congress adopted a set of principles that encapsulated the project of a global labour organization: the unity of workers under conditions of private property ownership, based on the principle of class struggle; international unity regardless of levels of development; a permanent struggle to improve living conditions; support for colonial and semi-colonial peoples in their struggle against imperialism; respect for the right to national self-determination; the peaceful resolution of international conflicts; the struggle against all expressions of fascism; and the organization of workers to prevent a new world war.³⁶

³³“Todas las filiales las eligieron ya, menos 2”, *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 10 September 1945, p. 1.

³⁴“La CTAL hablará por la colonias”, *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 24 September 1945, p. 1.

³⁵WFTU, *Report of the World Trade Union Conference-Congress*, p. 4.

³⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 271–278.

sovereignty.⁴⁰ While in the Philippines the labour unions were reorganizing after the Japanese occupation, in Puerto Rico the labour factions achieved the unification of the General Confederation of Workers, which was mediated by the Cuban sugar workers' leader Faustino Calcines on behalf of the CTAL. Meanwhile, in New York, the Caribbean spokesperson for the AFL, Vito Marcantonio, advocated for Puerto Rico's independence in response to a referendum initiative that was passing through the US Congress to resolve the situation.⁴¹ Of the nine resolutions of the Paris congress, several proposed by the CTAL to the delegates stand out, specifically those calling for (a) self-determination of Puerto Rico; (b) international condemnation of racial discrimination and implementation of corresponding legislation; and (c) the establishment of an Asian trade union congress, to be held in India.⁴² The annual meeting of the ILO was held in Paris in mid-October 1945, taking advantage of the presence of numerous labour delegates who had gathered weeks earlier at the World Trade Union Congress. The meeting was an opportunity for the CTAL and Lombardo Toledano, who called on Edward J. Phelan, director-general of the ILO, to renew the principles of the ILO by promoting favourable conditions for workers around the world, taking account of the post-war reality, the reconstruction of Europe, and the situation of colonial and semi-colonial nations. At the conference, Lombardo Toledano proposed signing regional agreements, in addition to universal ones, to take into account geographical, labour, socio-economic, and cultural realities that would provide a framework of certainty in the implementation of the tripartite agreements promoted by the ILO:

Otherwise, workers in colonial and semi-colonial countries in particular will never be able to benefit from the International Labour Organization [...]. We advocate the existence of regional conventions, because this is the only way to help workers in India, workers in China, workers in Africa, workers in Indochina, workers in Latin America, workers in the West Indies, workers who constitute the majority of the world's workers. A map of the planet shows us, without the need for argument, that the vast majority of countries on earth are not integrated or represented by industrial countries, but by agricultural countries.⁴³

Lombardo Toledano believed that, due to the composition of the ILO's leadership, governing body, and general assembly, its policy and conventions were dictated by the highly industrialized countries, particularly those in Europe. He therefore warned that if the ILO wanted to have universal dominance, it was of utmost importance to orient

⁴⁰"Federación obrera filipina que busca lazos con las de América", *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 8 October 1945, p. 1; "La CTAL impulsa la lucha contra el imperialismo, dice un portorriqueño", *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 15 October 1945, p. 1; "La intervención en Asia suroriental" and "El problema de la guerra civil en China", in CTAL, *Por un mundo mejor. Diario de una organización obrera durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial* (Mexico City, 1948), pp. 1016–1018.

⁴¹"Puerto Rico quiere la Independencia [sic] y debe conseguirla, dice Marcantonio", *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 22 October 1945, p. 1.

⁴²"Cinco sugerencias de la CTAL figuran en las resoluciones finales de París", *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 15 October 1945, p. 1.

⁴³International Labour Office, *Conferencia Internacional del Trabajo. Actas de sesiones* (Geneva, 1946), pp. 57–58.

its actions towards the workers of the Third World.⁴⁴ Months later, this time on Latin American soil, Lombardo Toledano reaffirmed his position that the ILO should change its relationship with workers:

We want an ILO that is more closely linked to our peoples and to the other colonial and semi-colonial peoples of the world; we want an ILO that is interested in the progress of our peasant masses; we want an ILO that contributes to the economic transformation of our semi-feudal and semi-colonial countries.⁴⁵

Anti-Imperialist and Anti-Racist Speeches and Actions by the CTAL

The impact of World War II provided the CTAL with fertile ground for debate and action. The federation sought to show solidarity with the peoples and nations dominated by the advance of Nazi fascism. Early on, the CTAL called for denunciation of “Hitlerian antisemitism” and condemned the abuses against the Jewish people, crimes that symbolized the persecution and oppression suffered by other peoples and “races” in the global war.⁴⁶ In August 1942, Lombardo Toledano proclaimed:

We are neither an inferior race nor a superior race. We are simply members of the human race. We are fighting so that in the future there will be no more massacres of Jews, Aryans, Asians, or Blacks. We are fighting today so that in the future there will be no more wars, massacres, or injustices. We are fighting today to make all the peoples of the world one people. We are fighting today to make all races one race.⁴⁷

The CTAL joined the WFTU in its initial efforts to find concrete solutions regarding Jewish immigration to Palestinian territories. Thousands of survivors of Nazism began occupying territories, creating tension in the Middle East. Lombardo Toledano was commissioned by the WFTU to study the situation and even considered taking a trip to Arab territory in November 1945; however, this did not materialize due to his commitments, which required him to return urgently to the Americas. The WFTU’s original objective was to observe the scale of the migration problem and the relationship between Jews and Palestinians, in order to develop strategies for collaboration between workers and their unions that sought to reconcile interests and resolve potential conflicts.⁴⁸ From the CTAL’s perspective, the participation of its president in studying the “Jewish–Palestinian problem” was intended to reaffirm support for resolution no. 19 of its second general congress, which, in line with the principles of the Atlantic Charter, recognized the right to self-determination and endorsed the cause of

⁴⁴“Lombardo lleva a la OIT la voz de la CTAL”, *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 29 October 1945, p. 1. On WFTU leaders in ILO and UN councils, see also the article by Immanuel R. Harisch and Gédéon N’goran Bangali in this Special Issue

⁴⁵International Labour Office, *Tercera Conferencia del Trabajo de los Estados de América Miembros de la Organización Internacional del Trabajo. Actas de sesiones* (Montreal, 1946), pp. 47–48.

⁴⁶Vicente Lombardo Toledano, *Judíos y mexicanos ¿razas inferiores?* (Santiago, 1942).

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴⁸“Lombardo, a nombre de la Federación Sindical Mundial, buscará un arreglo entre árabes y judíos en Palestina”, *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 22 October 1945, p. 1.

the Jewish people “in their efforts to establish a national home in Palestine, provided that this is the will of that nation”.⁴⁹ In a letter addressed to the British prime minister, Clement Attlee, in July 1946, the CTAL reiterated its support for the self-determination of the Jewish people in Palestine. It urged an end to the British Army’s persecution of Jews in Palestine. In a lengthy letter, Lombardo Toledano reminded Attlee of the commitments made by the TUC, WFTU, and CTAL to enable Jews to establish a homeland in collaboration with Arabs. The Confederation of Jewish Workers in Palestine sent a telegram thanking Latin American workers for their support and urging them to continue showing solidarity with their people, denouncing the imprisonment of 2,000 of its members and calling for their prompt release.⁵⁰

Early on, the CTAL asked the UN to advocate for the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state and a Jewish nation in a territory free from occupation by “imperialist” troops, in which “both nationalities, both peoples, can live peacefully [...]”. It will not be the imperialists who will help [...]. It is the global democratic and progressive movement that must help Jews and Arabs to understand each other.”⁵¹ Lombardo Toledano believed that same movement should push for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Palestinian soil. Antisemitism, Lombardo Toledano declared, like anti-communism, was the banner under which “Hitlerism prepared and provoked the war, plunging the whole world into horror and tragedy”.⁵² At the meeting of the CTAL’s central committee held in San José, Costa Rica, between 8 and 13 December 1946, resolution no. 13 reinforced the federation’s support for Palestine to form a state and cooperate with the establishment of the Jewish population in its territory, forming a “home” and “nation” as determined by the WFTU at the Paris congress in 1945.⁵³

The CTAL continued to support the cause of peace between “Jews and Palestinians”, among many other regional and global demands. In a letter addressed to the Mexican president, Miguel Alemán, it set out the position it believed Mexican delegates should uphold before the UN Assembly when supporting the formation of a Jewish state in Palestine. The CTAL, Lombardo Toledano pointed out, “has always been an enthusiastic ally of the idea of recognizing the Jewish people’s right to establish themselves in a permanent and stable place”.⁵⁴ He explained to Alemán how dishonourable the persecution of the “Jewish people” was for the entire “human race” and that supporting a “home” was a way to “erase” the shame and ensure peace, a goal that had been supported by the WFTU since 1945. At the UN meeting in November 1947, a report was presented suggesting the formation of a state of Palestine and a state of

⁴⁹ FHLT, id. 36604, file 593; resolution no. 19, “Por un hogar nacional Judío en Palestina”, in CTAL, *Segundo Congreso General de la Confederación de Trabajadores de América Latina*, Cali, Colombia, December 1944 (Mexico City, 1945), p. 138.

⁵⁰ “La CTAL da su apoyo a los judíos”, *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 28 July 1946, p. 1.

⁵¹ “Lombardo ofrece ayuda a la causa popular judía”, *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 23 September 1946, p. 1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁵³ CTAL, 1938–1948: *Resoluciones de sus asambleas* (Mexico City, 1948); “Resoluciones de la CTAL en Costa Rica”,

Noticiero de la CTAL (special edition), 20 January 1947, p. 2.

⁵⁴ Letter from Lombardo Toledano to Alemán, 24 October 1947. FHLT, file 729; the letter is reproduced as “Que se apoye la idea del Estado Judío en Palestina”, *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 3 November 1947, p. 1.

Israel. Both the Stalin and Truman administrations categorically supported this solution. The issue was resolved in their favour, despite the Arab community rejecting the partition of Palestine into two states, and on 14 May 1948 the state of Israel was formed, simultaneously ending the British legal mandate in Palestine. A few years later, Lombardo Toledano was confused by the attitude of the Israeli government. In his opinion, the country had gone from being a potential example of a “modern and progressive country” to being dominated by “reactionary forces” that were “disconcerting” supporters inside and outside Palestine with their attitude. The Israeli republic established in Palestine “has two paths before it”, he declared: “either that of dependence on American monopolies as foreign policy, which implies a reactionary domestic policy, or the path of a democratic and progressive domestic policy, which implies an autonomous international policy that looks toward its economic and social development independently of foreign powers”.⁵⁵ Undoubtedly, Lombardo Toledano wanted better coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians, but his message was also directed against the imperialist hegemony of the US, which was rising as a global threat.

In July 1946, the WFTU’s executive committee met in Moscow. It was decided to strongly support the cause of colonial nations, which sparked interest among numerous trade unions in Algeria, Burma, Korea, Indochina, and Indonesia in joining the WFTU. In addition, a resolution mandated the formation of two commissions that would travel throughout Africa and Asia to report on the situation in Japan, China, and other countries. At the Moscow meeting, CIO leader Adolph Germer was appointed head of the WFTU’s Colonial Department, with the mission of convening a conference of the African labour movement, a matter that was reaffirmed at the meeting held in Washington from 20 to 24 September 1946.⁵⁶

Between 10 and 13 April 1947, the Pan-African Trade Union Conference was held in Dakar. The CTAL considered it a first step for the WFTU to intervene in “imperialist” nations with the aim of securing labour rights and eliminating racial discrimination – a goal that was approved and defended by the Latin American workers’ delegates.⁵⁷ At the WFTU’s second general council meeting in Prague in June 1947, resolution no. 8 ratified its support for the Dakar measures. For its part, the CTAL initiated contact with trade unions in Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Belize, Guyana, Barbados, and the West Indies to establish permanent cooperation, given that their respective peoples were likewise colonial subjects (whether of Britain, France, or the Netherlands).

Opposition to imperialism was reinforced in the actions and speeches of the CTAL, as it suffered direct attacks from the Truman administration and its union arm, the AFL-CIO.⁵⁸ According to Lombardo Toledano, the goal of those attacks was to create

⁵⁵“El Estado de Israel salta hacia atrás”, *Siempre!*, 24 October 1953, pp. 39–41.

⁵⁶“El problema de Trieste y el de los obreros de África, fueron estudiados. Lombardo expone los acuerdos de la F.S.M.”, *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 14 October 1946, p. 1.

⁵⁷“Sobre la Conferencia de Dakar”, *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 28 July 1947, p. 2. See also the article by Harisch and Bangali in this Special Issue.

⁵⁸Herrera, “Dismantling the Confederation of Latin American Workers”, pp. 254–275.

division among those who “fight for political autonomy and economic emancipation” and undermine their “right to self-determination”.⁵⁹ The infiltration of the labour movement coordinated by the American National Intelligence Authority (the predecessor to the CIA) and the AFL, particularly through the work of Serafino Romualdi⁶⁰ and former CTAL leaders such as Bernardo Ibáñez of Chile, was accompanied by the formation of the Inter-American Confederation of Labour (CIT) in Lima in early January 1948. This marked the beginning of a frontal assault designed to weaken union influence and the political alliances that the CTAL maintained within the Americas, its links with international organizations, and its intercontinental union alliances. When the CIT was established, it challenged the WFTU’s claim to global representation. The WFTU was identified as an organization with an undefined ideology that was only global “in name”, had a “narrow and sectarian leadership”, and served as a tool for the USSR’s plans for expansion and political colonization.⁶¹ The diagnosis of the CIT leaders (Ibáñez, Luis Monge, Arturo Sabroso, and Arturo Jauregui) was clear: there was an ideological dispute between a trade unionism subordinate to the interests of the USSR and one that sought to be autonomous and democratic. They believed Africa, Asia, and Latin America had a communist trade union influence that had to be challenged and argued that the CTAL had distorted the ideals of freedom, social justice, and democracy. They accused Lombardo Toledano and his organization of being “an instrument of Russian propaganda and espionage” among Latin American workers, serving the global domination of Soviet totalitarianism.⁶² In response to these attacks, the CTAL, in coordination with the WFTU, found in the international anti-colonial cause a way to broaden its defence against internal siege and thus continue to coordinate workers’ actions in Latin America and the Caribbean, albeit with decreasing support.

The political and trade union situation in China increasingly occupied the attention of the CTAL as well. In August 1946, Chu Hsueh-fan, president of the Chinese Workers’ Association and vice-president of the WFTU, sent a telegram to the president of the CTAL denouncing the restrictions on the freedoms of the population, the suppression of trade union rights, and the repression unleashed by the Kuomintang (Figure 2). Lombardo Toledano, on behalf of the CTAL and the WFTU, sent a telegram to General Chiang Kai-shek urging him to restore the freedoms of the Chinese people and release workers from prison. The situation in China, Lombardo Toledano asserted, was very similar to that in “some Latin American countries”, and he therefore hoped Chiang would “restore trade union freedom and form a government of national unity. Otherwise, workers around the world will fight alongside the Chinese people until

⁵⁹“Los que intentar dividir a la CTAL son traidores a la causa de América Latina”, *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 24 March 1947, p. 1.

⁶⁰Serafino Romualdi, *Presidents and Peons: Recollections of a Labor Ambassador in Latin America* (New York, 1967).

⁶¹Conferencia Interamericana de Trabajadores, *Acuerdos y resoluciones*, Lima, 10–13 January 1948 (Santiago, 1948), pp. 31–33.

⁶²Conferencia Interamericana de Trabajadores, *Documentos emitidos por la CIT*, Lima, 10–13 January 1948 (Santiago, 1948), p. 105.



Figure 2. Chinese labour leader Chu Hsueh-fan with Lombardo Toledano at a friendly meeting during the World Trade Union Congress in Paris, October 1945.

Source: Photographic Archive of the Workers' University of Mexico.

these objectives are achieved.”⁶³ US labour organizations also mediated to end coercion in China and asked the Truman administration to take action to establish full democracy there, even if it meant setting aside the arms race.⁶⁴

General George Marshall arrived in China in late 1945 to broker an agreement between the Kuomintang and the opposition forces, led by Mao Zedong and the Communist Party of China, with the aim of forming a coalition government and establishing a multiparty democratic regime.⁶⁵ However, within months, Chiang reneged on the agreement and started a civil war. The Truman administration supported the nationalist government with arms supplies and a loan for military equipment. “The civil war is wanted by reactionaries and foreign imperialists”, Lombardo Toledano said in an editorial, releasing the public letter to General Marshall signed by twenty civil organizations in Shanghai. In the letter, they questioned the US government’s partiality towards the nationalist side, as expressed in providing military supplies and loans that only plunged “China further into the quagmire of civil war”. The signatories called on General Marshall to “give us bread, not cannons” and help build a government of peace and civil rights.⁶⁶ Months later, Chu expressed his gratitude to Lombardo Toledano,

⁶³FHLT, id. 38433, file 621; “Denuncian el terrorismo que ha desatado el Kuomingtang [sic]”, *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 18 August 1946, p. 1; “Los obreros piden paz y libertad para China”, *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 26 August 1946, p. 1. On the relations between China’s organized labour movement and the WFTU, see the article by Sofia Graziani in this Special Issue.

⁶⁴“Los obreros de EE.UU. quieren paz en China”, *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 2 September 1946, p. 1.

⁶⁵“El problema de la guerra civil en China”, *CTAL, For a Better World*, pp. 1046–1048.

⁶⁶“Editorial. Los obreros piden paz y libertad para China”, *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 26 August 1946, p. 1.

the CTAL, and the workers of Latin America for “your sympathy and help [...] we will redouble our efforts to work with greater enthusiasm for the liberation of the working class in our country”.⁶⁷

In March 1949, Lombardo Toledano, in his capacity as president of the CTAL and vice-president of the WFTU, denounced the violation of trade union rights and the persecution of workers in several countries at a meeting of the UN Economic and Social Council in Lake Success, New York. He explained in detail the events in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Central America, and even Greece, and described the various strategies used to weaken the organized working class, such as (a) promoting unions controlled by the state or employers; (b) prohibiting labour protests; (c) controlling workers in union facilities through hypervigilance and intimidation tactics; and (d) preventing people from joining national and continental unions.⁶⁸ The sum of these complaints, the defence of nations under imperialist domination, the intermediation to achieve equivalent labour rights in all nations of the world, and the defence of the political sovereignty of African and Asian colonies were among the disputes that the TUC, CIO, and AFL began to raise at the WFTU's executive committee meetings and congresses. By mid-1949, censorship of the WFTU and the breakdown of global trade union unity were imminent, foreshadowing the confrontations over geopolitical hegemony between the US and the Soviet Union. At the ILO's fourth American Labor Conference, held in Uruguay, Ibáñez, president of the CIT, blamed the “communists” of the CTAL and the WFTU for dividing the labour movement and opposing “the freedom of peoples and the social progress of workers around the world” in the service of the Moscow dictators.⁶⁹ At the same conference, delegates Monge (of Costa Rica), Jauregui (of Peru), and Romualdi (of the AFL) denounced the manoeuvres of totalitarian Stalinism in Latin America through its union arm, the CTAL. “The liberation of workers must be the work of the workers themselves,” Romualdi affirmed.⁷⁰ During the WFTU's second congress, held in Milan in 1949, the CTAL denounced the AFL's attempts to break the unity of Latin American workers. The founding of the CIT and government repression of workers in Brazil, Peru, Venezuela, and Chile were criticized as part of a divisive policy. The CTAL pledged to defend, in alliance with the WFTU, “peace and freedom” in Latin America.⁷¹ In 1949, with the active support of the US government and the backing of the AFL and the CIO, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU)⁷² was founded to contest control of the international labour movement as a direct competitor to the WFTU. Two years later, in January 1951, the CIT was replaced by the Inter-American Regional Organization of Workers

⁶⁷“Los trabajadores chinos expresan su agradecimiento para la CTAL”, *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 9 January 1947, p. 1.

⁶⁸“Lombardo informa sobre la moción de la FSM en la ONU”, *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 21 March 1949, p. 1; “La FSM denuncia la violación de los derechos sindicales en varios países”, *Noticiero de la CTAL*, 28 March 1949, p. 1.

⁶⁹“Fustiga duramente al comunismo el líder chileno el Sr. B. Ibáñez”, *El País*, 7 May 1949, p. 5.

⁷⁰“Los dirigentes gremialistas de América hacen declaraciones”, *El Sol*, 1 May 1949, pp. 4–6.

⁷¹WFTU, *Report of Activity of the World Federation of Trade Unions, October 15, 1945–April 30, 1949*, Second World Trade Union Congress, Milan, 29 June–10 July 1949 (Paris, 1949), pp. 80–81.

⁷²See Magaly Rodríguez García, *Liberal Workers of the World, Unite? The ICFTU and the Defense of Labor Liberalism in Europe and Latin America (1949–1969)* (Bern, 2010).

(ORIT), the American arm of the ICFTU.⁷³ At a meeting of the American Legion, James S. Carey, CIO secretary-treasurer and one of the main ideologues behind the creation of the ICFTU, bluntly stated the aims of the new international union: “in the last war we joined with the communists to fight the fascists; in the new war we will join with the fascists to crush the communists.”⁷⁴

At the meeting of the UN Economic and Social Council in Santiago, the ICFTU accused the communist-dominated WFTU and CTAL of using “red methods” that restricted the freedom of trade unions in satellite countries in Eastern Europe and helped to shape anti-worker policies. The WFTU and the CTAL denied the accusations.⁷⁵ Faced with restrictions on trade union freedoms, imprisonments, and propaganda against the CTAL, Lombardo Toledano redoubled his efforts to ensure the federation’s political and union activities could continue as before. These attacks and the fragmentation suffered by the confederations and unions affiliated with the CTAL did not diminish the struggles that were unfolding. “Today’s individual members and leaders may die, but others will replace us and continue their struggle for the full emancipation of Latin America.”⁷⁶ The dismantling of the CTAL in the region by the forces of AFL unionism in collaboration with the CIO, Truman’s foreign policy towards Latin America, and the resulting internal security measures taken by Latin American rulers undermined the unity of the workers’ confederations.⁷⁷ The CTAL sought causes abroad that would strengthen its ideology in the face of an adverse situation in the region. The Chinese Revolution fuelled the struggle for anti-imperialism.⁷⁸ In May 1951, plans for a first Asian regional conference to be organized by the ICFTU were discussed. The objective would be to establish an Asian secretariat to encourage local unions to cut ties with the USSR and the WFTU.⁷⁹

In the CTAL’s view, the Chinese Revolution represented a “colossal victory”, a direct blow to “imperialism”, that bolstered the struggle of all peoples for “democracy, social welfare, freedom, and peace”.⁸⁰ The central committee made fervent appeals to its

⁷³Vicente Lombardo Toledano, *La Confederación de Trabajadores de América Latina ha concluido su misión histórica* (Mexico City, 1964), p. 16.

⁷⁴Vicente Lombardo Toledano, speech at a rally of the General Union of Workers and Peasants of Mexico (UGOCM), 15 January 1951. FHLT, leg. 820. The rally was held at the Abreu Theatre in Mexico City. There is a newspaper version of the speech and the meeting in *El Popular*, 16 January 1951, p. 1. This speech was not denied by Carey or the CIO. Indeed, Carey’s anti-communism is reaffirmed in the publication *Noticias de Actualidad*, 3:64 (17 May 1951), p. 2.

⁷⁵“CI[O]SL demanda investigación métodos rojos”, *Noticiero Obrero Norteamericano*, 1 March 1951, p. 1.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁷⁷Herrera, “Dismantling the Confederation of Latin American Workers”, pp. 254–275.

⁷⁸Lombardo Toledano travelled to China in November 1949 as part of his duties as vice-president of the WFTU. He participated in the Pan-Asian Trade Union Conference on behalf of the WFTU and CTAL. After his return to Mexico, between 15 and 17 February 1950 he gave three lectures at the Universidad Obrera on the conditions of the Chinese Revolution. Brochures of the lectures were also published. See Vicente Lombardo Toledano, *La Revolución China* (Santiago, 1950). Three thousand copies were published by the Confederation of Workers of Chile (CTCH).

⁷⁹“CIOSL convoca reunión regional en el Asia”, *Noticiero Obrero Norteamericano*, 15 May 1951, p. 1.

⁸⁰“China se ha convertido en una potencia mundial y pondrá toda su influencia al servicio de la paz. Manifiesto de la CTAL”, *El Popular*, 10 January 1950, p. 1.

affiliates to promote public meetings, conferences, and celebrations so people could learn about the new China, which, the CTAL manifesto claimed, would fight alongside the masses of workers in the great “invincible front of peace and freedom” against “imperialism and world reaction”.⁸¹ In opposition to this view, during the second ICFTU general congress, held in Milan from 4 to 14 July 1951, Chinese dissident Wang Chu-chi, an exiled trade unionist, thanked free trade unions, particularly the AFL and the Free Workers’ League of China, based in Formosa, for their collaboration in the “spiritual and material” resistance to Mao’s communism and the “red enemies” of the WFTU.⁸²

During 1952, the ICFTU and ORIT took concrete steps to challenge the WFTU and CTAL’s links with, and defences of, workers’ and trade union organizations in Asia and Africa. J.H. Oldenbroek, representing the ICFTU, and Jauregui and Monge, representing the ORIT, actively communicated and collaborated with unions in Japan, Tunisia, Libya, Lebanon, Brazil, Peru, Venezuela, and Chile, and took part in meetings of leaders from West Africa and the Middle East. These ties were reaffirmed at the Thirty-Fifth International Labour Conference in Geneva and the Fifth American Labor Conference in Petrópolis, Brazil, which advocated for freedom of association, better working conditions, and measures to address social problems.⁸³

As part of the Truman administration’s foreign policy, the AFL-CIO had launched attacks on parts of the trade union movement linked to the CTAL, which was associated with communist militancy. These attacks had clear results: by around 1952, the CTAL’s presence in the Americas had been noticeably weakened. One example of this policy was funding provided to agents who would tour through Latin American countries and spark tensions between union leaders and the rank and file. Internal disputes and the split of the national confederations associated with the CTAL meant that the disputes over coordinating the actions of Latin American trade unionism by the ICFTU, through the ORIT, were resolved without major setbacks. Even Lombardo Toledano’s participation as a presidential candidate in the 1952 Mexican elections opened the door to attacks on his ideological independence. The national and international media echoed slogans such as “Stalin’s delegate” and “Moscow’s man”,⁸⁴ which both discredited him as a candidate and presented him as a leader without political autonomy or a genuine commitment to the CTAL, an issue that undermined his ascendancy over a dwindling continental union platform.⁸⁵

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁸² “Vitorean al portavoz chino”, *Noticiero Obrero Norteamericano*, 15 July 1951, p. 1.

⁸³ *Obrero Textil*, July 1952, p. 2. See International Labour Office, *International Labour Conference: Thirty-Fifth Session, Geneva, 1952* (Geneva, 1952); *idem*, *The Fifth Conference of the American Member States of the International Labour Organisation* (Geneva, 1952).

⁸⁴ Speech by Lombardo Toledano in Colima and Manzanillo during the presidential campaign, 5 and 6 March 1952, in FHLT, leg. 850, reproduced in *El Popular*, 7 March 1952, p. 1, and 8 March 1952, p. 1.

⁸⁵ Patricio Herrera, “Comunismo y Guerra Fría transnacional en el ocaso de la Confederación de Trabajadores de América Latina (1943–1963)”, in Santiago Aránguiz and Patricio Herrera (eds), *Los Comunismos en América Latina. Recepciones y militancias (1948–1991)*, vol. III (Santiago, 2023), pp. 23–54.

At the end of 1952, the Mexican newspapers *El Universal* and *Novedades* published a letter allegedly sent by Lombardo Toledano to President Mao Zedong, which had originally appeared in *The Shanghai News*. The letter set out Lombardo Toledano's views on the social and political situation in Mexico and the opportunities opening up for China in that context.⁸⁶ This was, of course, part of the anti-communist campaign that was here being fought on Mexican soil but extended throughout Latin America. Lombardo Toledano denounced the slander before President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines and the courts. Subsequently, it was proven, with evidence presented in *El Popular*,⁸⁷ that the letter was a forgery, but the strategy to bring down the CTAL bastion was working. Seeds of doubt were taking hold and weakening the CTAL's support. In addition, its leader was increasingly committed to defending himself against the slander, regaining his prominence in Mexico's current politics, and promoting political actions in favour of the WFTU.

The ORIT and the ICFTU, which opposed the CTAL's union and political activities, received invitations to participate in the CTAL's fourth general congress, held between February and March 1953. The ORIT declined the invitation from the "Moscow-based" confederation, pointing out that the ORIT and the ICFTU were united in their uncompromising opposition to the "totalitarians" who "trampled on the sovereignty of peoples and human and trade union rights".⁸⁸

Between 22–29 March 1953, the CTAL's fourth general congress was held in Santiago.⁸⁹ The congress mirrored the decline of the CTAL amid external attacks. There were only ten delegations, all with the minimum number of representatives, from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Guatemala, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela. The federation's members belonged to industrial trade unions, since the national confederations previously affiliated to the CTAL had in the interim been dissolved. Lombardo Toledano acknowledged the changes that the organization had undergone. He knew that the ORIT had the powerful support from the AFL–CIO and that the Association of Latin American Trade Union Workers (ATLAS) was sponsored by Juan Domingo Perón; he regarded them as "transitional agents" of imperialism and enemies of the WFTU's activities.⁹⁰ He also knew that the Mexican Workers' Platform no longer supported him unconditionally, as it had been expelled from the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) in 1947.

Despite this, the CTAL was not completely crushed: it still had the backing of the WFTU and the Soviet Union. But it now faced greater competition for influence in the Latin American and global labour movement.

⁸⁶ "Mensaje del licenciado Lombardo al Gobierno Comunista Chino", *El Universal*, 30 December 1952, p. 6; "Lombardo ofende a México para loar al Comunismo", *Novedades*, 30 December 1952, p. 1.

⁸⁷ "Denuncia del informe falso publicado por diarios de la capital", *El Popular*, 3 January 1953.

⁸⁸ "Fracasó el Congreso Comunista CTAL", *Noticiero Obrero Interamericano*, 3 (May 1953), p. 3.

⁸⁹ CTAL, *Resoluciones del IV Congreso General Ordinario* (Mexico City, 1953); *El Siglo*, 22–30 March 1953; *El Mercurio*, 23–30 March 1953; *SurPacífico*, first half of March, 1953.

⁹⁰ See Spenser, *En Combate*, pp. 389–391; Daniela Spenser, "Vicente Lombardo Toledano envuelto en antagonismos internacionales", *Izquierdas*, 4 (2009), pp. 10–11.

Conclusions

Recent historiography on international trade unionism has shown that the immediate post-war period opened a window of opportunity for regional or international labour movements to organize transnationally. In Latin America, the CTAL emerged as the main driving force behind a regional trade union project, with an unprecedented capacity to coordinate workers' organizations in different countries. However, this dominance was quickly challenged. Between 1945 and 1953, the CTAL faced concerted opposition from North America, Latin American governments, and non-communist regional trade union movements. At the end of World War II, the CTAL played a decisive role in the founding of the WFTU. Its leadership was based on the principle of unity without exclusion and defending a proletarian internationalism directed towards peace and social justice.

This article has highlighted an aspect of trade union history that has been less explored in Latin American labour and political historiography, involving the deployment of intercontinental strategies by the CTAL, in alliance with the WFTU, to unite the global labour movement after the war. "For the emancipation of Latin America" was the slogan that inspired the aims of the labour union and its various leaders. They repeatedly made bold efforts to achieve those aims, through speeches, alliances, tactical manoeuvres, and negotiations, first in Latin America and then, during the post-war period, in all territories that were subject to political, economic, religious, or cultural dependencies.⁹¹

The situation of Jewish, Indian, Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Indochinese, Indonesian, Japanese, African, and Antillean workers, both adults and minors, featured in the CTAL leaders' speeches at their general congresses, at central committee meetings, and later at world trade union congresses and WFTU assemblies. In this context, the CTAL responded to telegrams from workers in China, advocated for a solution to the Jewish–Palestinian conflict, defended the establishment of workers' conferences in Africa and Asia, and promoted international organizations such as the UN and the ILO, under the protection of international law and tripartite dialogues, to ensure rights and safeguards against imperialism and to defend equal political autonomy in all nations and guarantee their sovereignty. However, the bipolarization of the post-war period quickly transformed this situation. The AFL, which had boycotted the founding of the WFTU, reorganized in 1946 as a force promoting openly anti-communist trade unionism on a global scale. The AFL identified the CTAL as an obstacle to US trade union hegemony in the western hemisphere and as a channel of Soviet influence in the region. Its strategies included direct funding of rival unions, anti-Soviet propaganda and anti-communist campaigns targeting the labour movement, and diplomatic pressure on Latin American governments. The goal was to gradually isolate the CTAL and undermine its coordination efforts in Latin America.

This initial overview, focused on Latin American sources, invites further exploration of sources from European and US trade union organizations to establish new

⁹¹Patricio Herrera, *A Transnational History of the Latin American Workers' Confederation, 1938–1963: In Favour of a Workers' Homeland* (London, 2025).

connections and provide greater context for the events described here. However, the intersection of the stories presented undoubtedly offers an opportunity to reread our global history, in past spaces and times laden with political, dogmatic, and cultural meanings that have shaped the historical matrix of the present.

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