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International Labour Unity during the 1980s and 1990s: Perspectives from the WFTU

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Abstract

This article explores the perspectives of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) on international labour unity during the 1980s and 1990s, a subject largely neglected in previous historical studies. With a focus on high-ranking WFTU officials, it investigates the political and ideological motivations behind the communist federation's approach to international cooperation, as well as internal debates regarding rapprochement with its Western-oriented counterpart, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). It also examines the polycentric nature of the WFTU, revealing divergent regional perspectives from Europe, Latin America, and Asia, and the varying degrees of support for East–West engagement. The article argues that competing visions of international labour unity within the WFTU intensified internal divisions after 1989 between European and non-European trade unionists.

Introduction

Previous historical studies of international labour movements have largely been divided along Cold War fault lines, with the Western-oriented International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) only rarely being studied in connection with its communist counterpart, the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). While some scholars have explored the ICFTU's relationship with “communist-controlled organizations” between 1950 and 1975,¹ there has been a general neglect

¹ John Philip Windmuller, “Realignment in the ICFTU: The Impact of Détente”, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 14:3 (1976), pp. 247–260; Anthony Carew, “Towards a Free Trade Union Centre: The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (1949–1972)”, in *idem et al.*, *The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions* (Bern, 2000), pp. 187–340, 328–332; Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick, “Facing New Challenges: The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (1970s–1990s)”, in Carew *et al.*, *International*

of WFTU perspectives, as well as of the interactions between the two organizations. A notable exception is Victor Devinatz's study of the "Cold War thaw in the international working-class movement". Devinatz's work outlines the gradual rapprochement between international labour organizations, characterizing it as a "hesitant and minor thaw" that lasted from the early to late 1970s.² However, his analysis does not extend into the 1980s and 1990s,³ likely reflecting a more traditional interpretive framework for understanding the Cold War. More recently, a diverse array of international scholars have re-evaluated the political, social, and ideological dynamics of the Cold War during the 1980s. James Mark *et al.* have argued that the events commonly subsumed under the concept of "the global 1989" were part of a broader and gradual transition. They suggest that East–West rapprochement in the 1980s was driven by the deradicalization of leftist politicians and movements, coupled with the rise to power of reform-oriented communist elites who stirred up the international relations of Central and Eastern Europe's political, economic, and social institutions – thereby affirming the agency of communist actors.⁴

This article will therefore analyse how the political and ideological shifts in East–West relations described by Mark *et al.* impacted international labour movements during the 1980s and 1990s. Several authors have already elaborated on the encounters between Western European ICFTU affiliates and Central and Eastern European communist trade unions, highlighting the importance and lasting impact of détente among member organizations of both confederations.⁵ The rise of détente saw Western European trade unions detach from the ICFTU's rigid anti-communism during the late 1960s and 1970s. In contrast, far less is known about the WFTU's relations with the ICFTU and its affiliates. One of the only authors to have approached these topics from a WFTU perspective is George Mavrikos, former general secretary of the

Confederation, pp. 341–516, 349–350; Anthony Carew, *American Labour's Cold War Abroad: From Deep Freeze to Détente, 1945–1970* (Edmonton, 2018).

²Victor 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 and Society*, 77:3 (2013), pp. 342–371.

³George Myconos has studied the three international labour organizations over an extended period, all the way up to the establishment of the ITUC in 2006, but without specifically focusing on the interactions between the ICFTU and WFTU. See George Myconos, *The Globalizations of Organized Labour: 1945–2005* (New York, 2005).

⁴James Mark *et al.*, 1989: *A Global History of Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 10–12.

⁵The West German ICFTU affiliate, the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB), maintained friendly relations with many communist unions, in line with Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* (which sought to normalize relations with Eastern Europe), and in the 1980s increasingly cooperated with the Free German Trade Union Confederation (FDGB) in East Germany. For more detail, see Stefan Müller, *Die Ostkontakte der Westdeutschen Gewerkschaften. Entspannungspolitik zwischen Zivilgesellschaft und internationaler Politik 1969 bis 1989* (Bonn, 2020). The Belgian ICFTU affiliate, the General Labour Federation of Belgium (FGTB), frequently welcomed and visited delegations of the Hungarian National Council of Trade Unions (SZOT), and in cooperation with the Bulgarian Central Council of Trade Unions (CCTU) organized cheap family holidays to the Black Sea. For more detail, see 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 and Boston, MA, 2020), pp. 159–182, 173–174.

WFTU (2005–2022). According to Mavrikos, during the 1980s the WFTU increasingly pursued perestroika, but “the false theories about the so-called ‘common house’ led militants of the class-oriented trade union movement to be trapped in reformist illusions and social democratic practices.”⁶ He now regards these historical attempts at international labour unity as incompatible with the communist federation’s militant, class-focused, and vociferously anti-capitalist orientation. While little is actually known about the WFTU’s “perestroika policy”, rapprochement between the international confederations appears to have been a matter of contention with the WFTU’s affiliates in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

This article addresses these issues by analysing international labour unity – that is, ideas, relations, and practices intended to overcome the divides between the ICFTU and the WFTU – from the perspective of the WFTU, with a focus on the 1980s and early 1990s.⁷ International labour unity and the reasons why it developed have predominantly been studied in relation to the establishment of the WFTU in 1945.⁸ Denis MacShane, for instance, has argued that ideological tensions between reformist (ICFTU) and communist (WFTU) unions dating back to the interwar years, rather than the emergence of the East–West conflict, were at the heart of the WFTU’s failure to maintain unity.⁹ Devinatz, by contrast, emphasizes the importance of the Cold War. In his study of international labour unity during the 1970s, he argues that the influence of politicians and political parties prevented the ICFTU from developing any extensive form of rapprochement.

How did WFTU leaders relate to and interpret international labour unity during the 1980s and 1990s? To what extent did high-ranking communist trade unionists aim to develop relations with their colleagues on the opposite side of the Iron Curtain? Where they did so, what was at stake for them? Was there a desire for deradicalization and rapprochement – in other words, a decrease in confrontational policy – among the WFTU’s leaders? What were the motives for rapprochement and what differences existed between members from different regions? Given the WFTU’s polycentric nature, as underscored by Devinatz,¹⁰ which member organizations and trade unionists strove for the normalization of East–West relations within the international labour movement and which did not? Did some even oppose such processes? And

⁶George Mavrikos, *Critical Notes on the History of the World-Trade Union Movement: Issues of Tactics and Strategy* (Athens, 2023), pp. 190–191.

⁷This article examines international labour unity from the perspective of the international confederations. One could also study rapprochement at the national level, where ICFTU and WFTU affiliates attempted to overcome the divides that existed between them, or at the level of the sector federations, where some international trade secretariats cooperated despite ideological constraints. While these perspectives are key to understanding certain developments and will be addressed at some points in the text, the main focus remains the international level and the interactions between the ICFTU’s and WFTU’s leaders.

⁸Victor Silverman, *Imagining Internationalism in British and American Labor* (Chicago, IL, 1999); Patrick Pasture, “Window of Opportunities or Trompe l’Oeil? The Myth of Labor Unity in Western Europe after 1945”, in Gerd-Rainer Horner and Padraic Kenney (eds), *Transnational Moments of Change: 1945, 1968, and 1989* (Lanham, MD, 2004), pp. 27–50.

⁹Denis MacShane, *International Labour and the Origins of the Cold War* (Oxford, 1992).

¹⁰Devinatz, “A Cold War Thaw”, p. 357.

considering the global nature of Cold War tensions and transitions, how was international labour unity perceived by Latin American trade unionists, who were probably more affected by the divisions of the East–West conflict than African or Asian trade unionists?

By centring the perspectives of the WFTU's leaders and drawing on the federation's archives, which are held at the Institut CGT d'histoire sociale (IHS–CGT) in Paris, this article seeks to contribute to debates on international labour relations as well as the global history of the late and post-Cold War period.¹¹ This approach highlights the agency of WFTU officials as they navigated the rapid transformations of this era and oversaw the federation becoming one of the few surviving international organizations with Soviet-era roots to remain active in the twenty-first century. Some scholars have even argued that the WFTU serves as the principal vehicle through which Stalinism has endured.¹² By exploring how WFTU leaders from Europe, Latin America, and Asia positioned themselves within the shifting political and ideological landscape of the late and post-Cold War era, this analysis underscores the contested nature of international labour unity. The article extends MacShane's main argument, critically analysing the role of the East–West conflict and drawing attention to the North–South divide within the WFTU, which had a far greater impact on the partition of international labour that has endured up until the present. Divisions that emerged from the competition between the WFTU and the ICFTU (and its successor, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)) still persist today.¹³

With this approach, the article offers new insights into the international relationships among communist trade unionists across these regions, which have recently attracted scholarly attention in the work of Immanuel Harisch, Eric Burton, and Vanessa Hearman.¹⁴

The article is structured into three parts. The first starts by briefly sketching the history of efforts towards international labour unity up until the late 1970s based on the existing literature. It then shifts to the 1980s to analyse the run-up to and establishment of the WFTU's commission on Europe in 1984 and its subsequent operations until

¹¹Studying the WFTU is a rather complicated affair. Much of the archives of the communist federation are held at its former headquarters in Prague but, according to personal communication with archivists based there, the archives have been contaminated by mould over the years and remain largely inaccessible to this day. Since many CGT leaders took up prominent positions in the WFTU, the CGT archives are an invaluable alternative source of insight into the history of the WFTU. However, historians must be mindful of their highly CGT-centred perspective.

¹²Dan Gallin, "The WFTU – Hydroponic Stalinism", *Global Labour Journal*, 4:1 (2013), pp. 78–87, 81.

¹³The ITUC was established in 2006 as a new organization, incorporating the affiliates of both the ICFTU and WCL. For more detail, see Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick, "The International Trade Union Confederation: From Two (or More?) Identities to One", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 51 (2013), pp. 240–263.

¹⁴Immanuel 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; Vanessa Hearman, "From Travel to Imprisonment: Remembering Cold War Trade Unionism and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) in Adam Soepardjan's Prison Notebooks", *International Review of Social History* (2024), pp. 1–23.

1989. After briefly outlining the WFTU's leaders' entanglements in the East–West conflict, it explores their positioning in relation to the ICFTU, their pursuit of international labour unity, and the efforts at cooperation between the two confederations. Finally, it examines how WFTU officials interpreted the dynamics of late Cold War politics and the role of communist trade unionists in facilitating East–West rapprochement.

The second part shifts the focus to Latin America and explores how the WFTU's Latin American leaders perceived international trade union unity. By investigating the impact of Cold War tensions on the situation for trade unions in Latin America – probably the continent where labour internationalism and the Cold War overlapped most prominently – it reveals the intricate nature of international labour unity.

The third and final part investigates the perspectives of communist trade unionists on international trade unionism after the implosion of the state socialist regimes in November and December 1989. It examines archival sources as well as some self-published institutional histories, and analyses the debates that arose in the transformative years between 1989 and 1995. Ideological discussions concerning the WFTU's future intensified following the exodus of post-communist unions and the disaffiliation of its most prominent Western European member, the French General Confederation of Labour (CGT), in 1995.

International Labour Unity during the Cold War: The WFTU's Commission on Europe

The first cooperation among trade unions from different countries emerged at the dawn of the twentieth century. Encouraged by the parallel rise of social democratic parties and national workers' organizations, Western European trade unionists – primarily from socialist unions – established an international secretariat, which in 1913 became the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU).¹⁵ This was the first official international organization to bring together national trade unions as affiliates. It was soon followed by the founding of the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions (CISC) in 1920 and the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) in 1921. During the first half of the twentieth century, international (which, at this stage, effectively meant European) labour organizations came to be divided into three ideological clusters: social democratic (IFTU), Christian (CISC), and communist (RILU).¹⁶

Prompted by the victory of the Allied forces, former RILU and IFTU affiliates established the WFTU in October 1945. The new organization made international labour unity a hallmark of the post-war order and embraced the unprecedented cooperation between trade union federations, including the British Trades Union Congress (TUC), the US Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and the Soviet all-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (ACCTU). However, within four years, international unity

¹⁵Gumbrell-McCormick, "The International Trade Union Confederation", pp. 243–244.

¹⁶These organizations are essential to understand Cold War history and the divisions of international labour during that period, but they will not be discussed here. The key point is the ideological divisions they created. For more on the IFTU, see Geert Van Goethem, *De Internationale van Amsterdam. De wereld van het Internationaal Vakverbond (IVV), 1913–1945* (Ghent, 2003); for more on the CISC, see Patrick Pasture, *Histoire du syndicalisme chrétien international. La difficile recherche d'une troisième voie* (Paris, 1999); for more on the RILU, see Reinier Tosstorff, *The Red International of Labor Unions, 1921–1937* (Leiden, 2004).

appeared untenable. While the communist unions condemned the Marshall Plan as a form of US imperialism, the British and US unions criticized the influence of the Kremlin, reigniting the divisions that had marked IFTU and RILU relations during the interwar years.¹⁷ In 1949, the TUC, alongside other non-communist unions, took the initiative to form a political alternative: the ICFTU.¹⁸ From that point on, international labour relations became a site of Cold War tensions, marked by the antagonism between the ICFTU and the WFTU, which had evolved into a communist-oriented international. The WFTU had a global membership of national communist centres, including the French CGT, the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL),¹⁹ the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), and the Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC).²⁰

During the early Cold War, the ICFTU condemned any form of cooperation with the WFTU and its member organizations. Its leading members in the US viewed the WFTU as an extension of Soviet foreign policy. However, scholars have shown that despite the ICFTU's virulent anti-communist stance on relations with "communist-controlled organizations" – the term used to describe a wide range of WFTU members – by the mid-1960s, many Western European members of the ICFTU had begun to establish bilateral ties with unions in Central and Eastern Europe, and even the Soviet Union. The WFTU, meanwhile, did not prohibit its member organizations from maintaining relations with unions in the capitalist world and identified common interests such as women's rights and the struggles against apartheid, Cold War militarism, and multinational corporations.²¹ Nonetheless, during this period, the WFTU's general council was also embroiled in debates over the dominance of the Soviet Union, the construction of socialism, and peaceful coexistence, as the Chinese and Albanian member organizations prioritized the struggle against the ICFTU's "imperialism".²² East–West relations divided the executive bodies of both organizations.

Due to the emergence of diplomatic détente and Eurocommunism, the WFTU's condemnation of the Soviet-led invasion of Prague in 1968,²³ the disaffiliation of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL–CIO)

¹⁷ MacShane, *International Labour*.

¹⁸ Peter Weiler, "The United States, International Labor, and Cold War: The Breakup of the World Federation of Trade Unions", *Diplomatic History*, 5:1 (1981), pp. 1–22; see also Carew, "Towards a Free Trade Union Centre".

¹⁹ The CGIL is not discussed in this article because it disaffiliated from the WFTU in 1978. For a detailed analysis, see Andrea Ciampani, "Italian Trade Unionism and the ETUC: In Favour of a European Social Actor", in *idem* and Pierre Tilly (eds), *National Trade Unions and the ETUC: A History of Unity and Diversity* (Brussels, 2020), pp. 67–94.

²⁰ Debkumar Ganguli, *History of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU): Yesterday – Today – Tomorrow, 1945–2000* (New Delhi, 2000), p. 22.

²¹ Myconos, *Globalizations of Organized Labour*, p. 42.

²² Devinatz, "A Cold War Thaw", pp. 352–357.

²³ It was actually predominantly the Western European communists in the WFTU that supported the Czechoslovak reform movement. Many trade unionists from Latin America, Africa, and Asia framed the movement's actions as aligned with the "West" and imperialism. For more on this topic, see Peter Waterman, *From Cold War Communism to the Global Emancipatory Movement: Itinerary of a Long-Distance Internationalist* (Helsinki, 2014), p. 118.

from the ICFTU in 1969,²⁴ and the ACCTU's establishment of an internal international department,²⁵ relations between the two internationals improved during the 1970s. While WFTU officials championed the idea of international working-class unity, the ICFTU opened the door for bilateral relations with "communist-controlled organizations". This shift led to a handful of meetings between European members of the ICFTU, the WFTU, and the World Confederation of Labour (WCL), which was the successor organization of the CISC and likewise Christian-inspired.²⁶ These meetings emerged out of existing relations within the framework of the Geneva-based International Labour Organization (ILO), and focused on creating a joint European trade union organization. Although ICFTU member organizations were allowed to attend the conferences of WFTU affiliates and Pierre Gensous, the WFTU's French general secretary, openly advocated for a unified international labour movement, the division between the ICFTU and WFTU persisted.²⁷ For example, when the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) was established in 1973, it included the European affiliates of the ICFTU and WCL but not those of the WFTU. Nonetheless, by 1976, the WFTU was still expressing a desire to cooperate, especially given the common ground regarding the situations in Chile, South Africa, and Spain,²⁸ and scholars have therefore concluded that there was a minimal, tentative, and inconsequential thaw between the two organizations, which appears to have ended after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.²⁹

The early 1980s drastically rearranged the state of international labour relations. The rise of East–West tensions – traditionally subsumed under the notion of the "Second Cold War" – caused the ICFTU to adopt a more hostile attitude towards the WFTU. As a result, the ICFTU put the yearly talks facilitated by the ILO on the back burner. The stance of the WFTU's leadership likewise changed. A 1983 report by the WFTU's secretariat on the ICFTU's world congress in Oslo revealed how the communist international perceived the state of international trade unionism.³⁰ The previous year, the AFL–CIO had rejoined the ICFTU; according to the report, this had led to inefficiency and a lack of coordinated policy. New divisions had opened up over resolutions on the Middle East and issues of peace, disarmament, and human and trade union rights. Most importantly, the WFTU secretariat highlighted the diverging attitudes

²⁴Formed in 1955 from a merger between the CIO and the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The disaffiliation of the AFL–CIO was the result of discussions with the ICFTU's Western European members over the affiliation of the United Auto Workers (UAW) and tensions over relations with communist-controlled organizations. For more information on the history of the AFL–CIO, see Carew, *American Labour's Cold War Abroad*.

²⁵Blair A. Ruble, *Soviet Trade Unions: Their Developments in the 1970s* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 132.

²⁶The WCL was the third international confederation that existed during the Cold War. It advocated for a third way between the binary poles and brought together a significant group of faith-based trade unions. For more on the WCL in relation to the ICFTU, see Gumbrell-McCormick, "The International Trade Union Confederation", pp. 240–263.

²⁷Devinatz, "A Cold War Thaw", p. 366.

²⁸"FSM–CISL, Vers le dialogue", 1976, IHS–CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 33, pp. 3–17.

²⁹Myconos, *Globalizations of Organized Labour*, pp. 108–109; Devinatz, "A Cold War Thaw"; Carew, *American Labour's Cold War Abroad*.

³⁰"Document interne en vue de la réunion de Berlin, Elaboré par le secrétariat de la FSM, Le 13ème Congrès de la CISL – Analyse", 4 August 1983, IHS–CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 33.

towards labour unity: the return of the AFL–CIO had sparked a new wave of anti-communism and anti-WFTU sentiment, but the British and Dutch delegations had expressed their desire for increased dialogue across the East–West divide.³¹ The report concluded that the WFTU should strengthen its bilateral relations with organizations affiliated to the ICFTU (especially those in Western Europe) and stressed the need for a collaborative conference on peace, disarmament, and East–West relations. It also recommended establishing links with the Australian delegation, who had suggested a world conference on disarmament.³² The somewhat optimistic report illustrates how the WFTU secretariat believed that the changed dynamics within the ICFTU had created an opportunity for increased cooperation.

In line with the report's analysis, a growing number of WFTU leaders urged the need for East–West cooperation. In Europe, where the European affiliates of the WCL and ICFTU increasingly cooperated within the framework of the ETUC, communist unions felt left behind.³³ WFTU affiliates based in Europe, such as the CGT in France, the Free German Trade Union Confederation (FDGB) in East Germany, and the Hungarian National Council of Trade Unions (SZOT), perceived the ETUC as a thorn in their side. Consequently, the WFTU leadership decided it was time to create its own commission on bilateral and multilateral relations in Europe. This internal commission, which was eventually launched in 1984, brought together the WFTU's European affiliates to devise a collective approach to European affairs, including issues such as peace and disarmament, European cooperation, and the economic crisis.³⁴ The WFTU leadership saw this as a solution to the paradoxical fact that its members had wide-ranging bilateral relations with ICFTU and WCL members, while being excluded at the multilateral level.³⁵ The objective of the commission was twofold. On the one hand, it hoped to develop multilateral cooperation among European WFTU members, similar to the operations of the ETUC. On the other, it aimed to renew cooperation with ICFTU affiliates – though not with the ICFTU itself, non-affiliated unions, or the ETUC, from which it had been excluded.³⁶ The commission's first report suggested that this was mainly due to the situation in Poland: the repression of *Solidarność* had

³¹ While the Federation of Dutch Trade Unions (FNV) had remained critical of East–West dialogue at the international level during the 1970s, the WFTU report of the Oslo conference claimed that Freek Thomasson argued: "S'il faut avoir à l'esprit les différences existant entre les organisations affiliées à la CISL et les organisations de travailleurs des pays communistes, le dialogue devrait cependant se poursuivre et s'élargir". ("While it is necessary to keep in mind the differences that exist between organizations affiliated to the ICFTU and communist workers' organizations, the dialogue should nevertheless be continued and broadened".)

³² "Document interne en vue de la réunion de Berlin".

³³ "Caractéristiques des différents régions et la situation syndicale", n.d., IHS–CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 25, p. 6.

³⁴ "Conclusions de la reunion du groupe de travail chargé d'élaborer des propositions pour la conception du travail de la FSM en Europe", 17 February 1983, IHS–CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 26.

³⁵ "Elements for consideration concerning the activities of the WFTU commission for Europe 1984–1985", n.d., IHS–CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 26.

³⁶ As the WFTU's new policy was aimed at the ICFTU's affiliates rather than its executive board or international department (as was the case before the "Second Cold War"), the archives of the ICFTU – held in the International Institute of Social History (IISH), contain little information on the WFTU's efforts towards rapprochement during the second half of the 1980s; this was due to the WFTU's shift towards targeting the ICFTU affiliates rather than the ICFTU itself. However, they do document efforts from before 1982, when the WFTU attempted to find a common ground for the organization of a joint congress, such as the

prompted the executive bodies of both the ICFTU and ETUC to condemn any form of contact with WFTU affiliates. However, the commission believed that the persistence of the economic crisis in both capitalist and socialist countries as well as the omnipresent debates about peace and disarmament had created new opportunities for cooperation.³⁷

The commission's leadership changed every year and was usually jointly held by a CGT and an ACCTU representative. André Nogier and Dimitri Turchaninov were the first two secretaries. The commission's relative importance is illustrated by the interest shown by prominent WFTU figures. Both Pierre Gensous and Henri Krasucki, general secretaries of the CGT in 1969–1978 and 1982–1992 respectively, frequently took part in the commission's meetings. Moreover, the commission directly reported to the WFTU's general secretary, Ibrahim Zakaria, a Sudanese trade unionist and former railway worker.³⁸ Other notable participants were Karel Hoffman, president of the Czechoslovak Revolutionary Trade Union Movement (ROH) and vice-president of the WFTU, and Anton Hofer, president of the communist faction (Gewerkschaftlicher Linksblock) in the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB).³⁹

One of the new commission's first acts was to publish an informative bulletin titled *Contacts syndicaux Européens*. The bulletin contained articles on topical issues such as new technologies, female workers, and European cooperation, but also aimed to inform readers about the commission itself. Although it was initially only published in French, the commission managed to send the magazine to 600 addresses across Eastern and Western Europe.⁴⁰ Initially, the bulletin was published twice a year; it later came out bimonthly for a short period. It was translated into German and English.⁴¹ In 1984, the commission expressed its solidarity with the British miners' strikes, following Margaret Thatcher's decision to shut down several coal pits. Together with the WFTU's solidarity service, the commission collected 200 tonnes of staple goods in Rostock and shipped them to the UK with the help of the Danish Seamen's Union, a left-leaning trade union that had disaffiliated from the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) in 1975.⁴² By engaging in this intra-European solidarity campaign, the commission affirmed its support for European cooperation. Other initiatives focused on coordinating relations

Israeli–Lebanese conflict or the issues of peace and disarmament. ICFTU reports on the WFTU, found in its archives, reveal the rigid antagonism of the ICFTU's executive board.

³⁷“Elements for consideration”.

³⁸“Note concernant la commission Europe de la FSM (à l'attention de cde. I. Zakaria)”, 1984, IHS–CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 24, p. 2.

³⁹As the ÖGB had envisaged a non-partisan approach, communist trade unionists organized in a formalized faction which affiliated to the WFTU, while the ÖGB itself was a member of the ICFTU. For more on the structure of the Austrian labour movement, see ICTUR, *Trade Unions of the World*, 6th edition (London, 2005), p. 19.

⁴⁰“Sur les activités de la commission ‘Europe’ de la FSM (15 juin – 15 septembre 1984)”, 1984, IHS–CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 26.

⁴¹“Compte rendu de la Réunion d'un groupe de travail pour préparer la réunion de la commission pour l'Europe de la FSM”, 1985, IHS–CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 26, p. 3.

⁴²The Danish Seamen's Union is one example of a specific workers' federation that fostered close ties with the WFTU or WFTU affiliates. The Seamen's Union was more left-leaning than the Danish national confederation, the LO, from which it disaffiliated in 1975. For more detail, see Joan Campbell, *European Labor Unions* (London, 1992), p. 95; “Sur les activités de la commission ‘Europe’”, p. 4.

between communist and non-communist organizations. For instance, the commission hoped to develop a new round of congresses for European ICFTU, WFTU, and WCL affiliates as a follow-up to the meetings that had taken place in the 1970s.⁴³

However, it did not achieve the desired results. During the first months of its existence, the Danish, Dutch, Belgian, Norwegian, and Swedish ICFTU affiliates showed little enthusiasm for the WFTU's new commission. Many of these national centres still followed the ICFTU executive board's guidelines on multilateral relations.⁴⁴ The WFTU's European leaders even questioned the point of the commission's existence in April 1985.⁴⁵ While the WFTU's executive bureau supported its affiliates establishing ties with non-communist unions, the ICFTU's leaders reiterated their position that ICFTU affiliates should not maintain friendly relations with the WFTU or attend its congresses.⁴⁶ As a result, the commission decided to focus more on existing bilateral relations and on the ETUC. It reached out to Mathias Hinterscheid, general secretary of the ETUC, and explained that it was not a regional organization but rather a collective and pluralist working group. The letter openly expressed the commission's desire to cooperate with the ETUC at a structural level. But once again, the commission was met with disinterest, as Hinterscheid ignored the attempt at rapprochement.⁴⁷

By 1986, bilateralism appeared to be the only remaining option. In the run-up to the WFTU's eleventh world congress, the commission once again listed all the opportunities that existed for East–West cooperation. In the UK, for instance, there were several unions that had “left-wing leaders and progressive policies” and with which the commission wished to develop links. The commission hoped that building ties with left-wing groups would improve the ICFTU's general perception of the WFTU. Notable names on the list of left-wing leaders were Arthur Scargill of the National Union of Miners (NUM) and Moss Evans of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU).⁴⁸ In Finland, the commission had made contact with the Central Organization of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK), which, according to the report, “had been playing an important positive role in the development of cooperation among trade unions of different orientations”.⁴⁹ Moreover, it intended to create a liaison group in Belgium, where cooperation with the General Labour Federation of Belgium (FGTB) and Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (CSC) was seen as a priority.⁵⁰ This list shows that the commission still managed to find a silver lining despite the difficulties.

⁴³“Note concernant la commission Europe de la FSM”.

⁴⁴“Sur les activités de la commission ‘Europe’”, p. 2.

⁴⁵“Note sur la réunion du bureau de la FSM & de la commission de Europe de la FSM”, 1985, IHS–CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 26, p. 2.

⁴⁶John Vanderveken to all affiliates, Circular 50, 22 August 1986, IISH, ICFTU, Ad2000.

⁴⁷Jean-François Courbe to Mathias Hinterscheid, 1 February 1988, IHS–CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 26; “Conclusions of the 5th session of the WFTU European Commission”, 16 April 1985, IHS–CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 25, p. 1.

⁴⁸“An evaluation of the perspectives and objectives of the WFTU in Europe for the next 4 years”, 1986, IHS–CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 26, p. 22.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 32.

From then on, the commission decided to work with what it had, investing in its existing ties with the British TUC, the Belgian FGTB and CSC, the Finnish SAK, the Spanish Comisiones Obreras (CCOO), and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU).⁵¹ One way to build on these relations was to organize conferences. In cooperation with the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and the FGTB, the commission organized two colloquia on economic exchange between East and West and its impact on the world of work, which took place in Brussels in December 1987 and May 1988. Jacques Nagels, professor in political economy at the ULB, and Jean Claude Vandermeeren, secretary of the FGTB's Brussels branch, organized the events; notably, they were held in a non-communist country without a significant communist trade union.⁵² The commission also co-hosted a "world conference on trade unions and international economic security" in Paris. The conference drew the attention of a wide range of trade unionists from all over the globe, including many from capitalist countries.⁵³ According to the WFTU's European commission, these conferences demonstrated that cooperation between trade unions from both sides of the Iron Curtain was possible.⁵⁴

Spurred on by the success of the conferences, the commission once again reached out to the ETUC. The new secretaries, Jean-François Courbe from the CGT and Yuri Zarembo from the ACCTU – who were now officially backed by Turo Bergman of the SAK – reiterated the commission's willingness to cooperate with the ETUC. The commission hoped to be assigned the status of observer at the upcoming sixth ETUC congress in May 1988.⁵⁵ But these efforts were in vain. In retrospect, Courbe lamented the ETUC's unchanged opinion regarding the WFTU and its commission. At the conference, only one participant, Ron Todd of the British TUC, spoke of the need to develop ties with the unions in socialist countries and with the CGT.⁵⁶

In 1989, Courbe and Zarembo announced a conference on "the common European home and the perspectives of trade unions". This time round, the commission even welcomed the participation of North American trade unionists.⁵⁷ The conference specifically targeted lower-level trade unionists and leaders of workers' federations who had sympathies with leftist organizations or ideologies. The idea was to create a large group of sympathizers that would eventually overturn the ICFTU's and ETUC's decisions against cultivating relations with the WFTU. However, the fall of the Berlin Wall severely hindered the commission's operations; it continued to exist until 1991 but ultimately fell apart in the post-Cold War world.

In the end, the WFTU's commission on Europe did not manage to overcome the barriers imposed by the ICFTU and ETUC. Its most important achievement was to

⁵¹"Perspectives de travail et d'initiatives possibles pour les prochains 18 mois", 20 May 1986, IHS-CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 26, p. 1.

⁵²"Note confidentielle concernant la préparation d'un 'Colloque Européen sur les échanges économiques Est/Ouest et leur impact sur le monde du travail'", 23 April 1987, IHS-CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 24, p. 1.

⁵³"List of participants", 1–3 February 1988, IHS-CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 24, p. 1.

⁵⁴"Nos relations et notre implantation en Europe occidentale", n.d., IHS-CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 25, p. 7.

⁵⁵Jean-François Courbe to Mathias Hinterscheid, 1 February 1988, IHS-CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 26.

⁵⁶"J-F Courbe", n.d., IHS-CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 25, p. 11.

⁵⁷Jean-François Courbe and Youri Zarembo to the secretariat of the ETUC, n.d., IHS-CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 25.

establish enduring bilateral relations, most prominently with the SAK and the FGFB. But for the most part, its work proved to be a Sisyphean labour.

What its story reveals, however, is that during the late 1980s Eastern and Western European communists were pushing for dialogue. By developing ties with ICFTU affiliates and building on strains of leftist sympathies all across Western Europe, they hoped to reignite East–West cooperation.

International Labour Unity in Latin America: A Chilean Perspective

Let us now turn to Latin America. Throughout the Cold War, Latin American labour organizations engaged more closely with national and regional politics than their African and Asian counterparts. From the early 1950s onwards, this attracted the interest of international confederations.⁵⁸ As in Europe, international trade unionism divided Latin America's labour movement for decades. The three international confederations each had their own regional organization, which vied for the support of national centres. The WFTU's Permanent Congress of Trade Union Unity of Latin America (CPUSTAL) was predominantly represented by Cuban, Peruvian, and Chilean trade unionists and, on paper, enjoyed a fair degree of autonomy. The ICFTU's Inter-American Regional Organization of Workers (ORIT) was the largest of the three regional organizations in terms of structure, members, and finances. Due to its inter-American nature, it was long dominated by the AFL–CIO. The Latin American Confederation of Workers (CLAT) represented the interests of the WCL in the region and had the strongest presence in countries where Christian democratic politics had taken hold, such as Venezuela, Chile, and Argentina.⁵⁹ In addition, some Latin American countries (Brazil, Chile, and Bolivia) had large pluralist unions that remained unaffiliated to any of the international confederations.

During the Cold War, trade unions endured severe repression in several Latin American countries. Probably one of the most important examples is the repression of Chilean trade unionists after Augusto Pinochet's military coup in 1973. Paradoxically, the dictatorial grip on trade unionism helped to build international solidarity with the Chilean opposition. In many cases, the solidarity efforts were helmed by labour leaders. Despite the covert support that ORIT provided to the coup in its earliest stages, by the 1980s all three international confederations were emphatically denouncing the Pinochet regime and supporting ideologically aligned organizations in Chile and in exile.⁶⁰ As a result, several Chilean trade unionists ended up taking key positions in the international confederations. One of them was Mario Navarro Castro, a Chilean trade unionist and member of the Communist Party who was imprisoned under the

⁵⁸Think, for instance, of the alignment between the Cuban Communist Party and the CTC after 1959, the Argentinian General Confederation of Labour's (CGT) connections with Peronism, or the Chilean Central Union of Workers' (CUT) links with Salvador Allende's Unidad Popular.

⁵⁹Julio Godio and Achim Wachendorfer, "El sindicalismo internacional en America Latina", *Nueva Sociedad*, 85 (1986), pp. 10–16.

⁶⁰For a detailed history of international solidarity with Chilean trade unionism, see Kim Christiaens, "The Difficult Quest for Chilean Allies: International Labor Solidarity Campaigns for Chile in the 1970s and 1980s", in *idem*, Idesbald Goddeeris, and Magaly Rodríguez García (eds), *European Solidarity with Chile: 1970s and 1980s* (Brussels, 2014), pp. 93–125.

Pinochet regime and eventually fled the country.⁶¹ During the 1970s, Navarro headed the Chilean trade union's external committee in Paris and eventually ended up in Prague, where he worked for the WFTU as secretary for the Americas.⁶²

While ORIT had always been the largest confederation in Latin America, many still perceived the regional organization as a puppet of the AFL–CIO or even of the CIA.⁶³ Navarro was no exception. He believed the AFL–CIO was engaged in a form of labour imperialism, seeking political influence and ideological alignment through financial injections and indoctrination.⁶⁴ His perception of Latin American trade unionism was clearly influenced by the AFL–CIO's support for Pinochet's coup and the WFTU's hard-line criticism of ORIT; from his communist perspective, Navarro regarded ORIT as the primary vehicle through which the US labour movement exerted its influence in Latin America.

By the end of the 1980s, however, Navarro did feel there had been some sort of shift in Latin American trade unionism. In a report to the WFTU secretariat, titled “The new strategy of the ICFTU towards the unitary union”, he explained how the ICFTU had altered its position towards the “unitary unions”: that is, the explicitly pluralist trade unions in Brazil and Chile that presented themselves as the sole trade union confederation in their respective country and refrained from international affiliation to safeguard this positioning. Navarro claimed that the ICFTU's new positioning – epitomized by its support for the Chilean Central Union of Workers (CUT)⁶⁵ – hindered the work of the WFTU and CPUSTAL, which had always enjoyed good relations with the unaffiliated unions due to their pluralist nature.⁶⁶ He called for renewed

⁶¹ Organización Internacional del Trabajo, *La situación sindical en Chile: Informe de la Comisión de Investigación y de Conciliación en Materia Libertad Sindical* (Geneva, 1975), p. 31.

⁶² During the 1970s, it was not uncommon for Chilean exiles to receive support in Central and Eastern European countries. See, for instance, Jadwiga Pieper Mooney, “East Germany: Chilean Exile and the Politics of Solidarity in the Cold War”, in Christiaens, Goddeeris, and Rodríguez García, *European Solidarity with Chile*, pp. 275–299; James Mark and Bálint Tolmár, “Hungary: Connecting the ‘Responsible Roads to Socialism’? The Rise and Fall of a Culture of Chilean Solidarity, 1965–89”, in Christiaens, Goddeeris, and Rodríguez García, *European Solidarity with Chile*, pp. 301–327.

⁶³ The relation between ORIT and the AFL–CIO was much more ambivalent than the way it is often presented. While the AFL–CIO, in some cases backed by the CIA, propagated a staunch policy of anti-communism through a form of political unionism, Latin American trade unionists navigated the Cold War politics inherent to international labour relations at the time, and cooperated with the AFL–CIO in order to gain local or national advantages. Anti-communism was not forced upon Latin American labour leaders. For more detail, see Geert Van Goethem and Robert Anthony Waters Jr, *American Labor's Global Ambassadors: The International History of the AFL–CIO during the Cold War* (New York, 2013).

⁶⁴ “Les nouvelles tactiques de la CISL face aux centrales syndicales unitaires”, 1989, IHS–CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 33, pp. 7–8.

⁶⁵ Navarro was probably influenced by the trade union situation in his native Chile, where socialists, Christian democrats, and communists had established a new unitary and pluralist union in August 1988. The CUT brought together all opposition forces within the labour movement and successfully campaigned for the “No” side in the plebiscite on the extension of Pinochet's presidency. Although the CUT refrained from international affiliation, its establishment was approved by observers from the WFTU, ICFTU, and WCL. Its success accordingly embodied potential for cooperation across divides. For more detail, see Rodrigo Araya Gómez, “La libertad se conquista luchando: El movimiento sindical chileno contra el régimen de Pinochet”, *Historia Unisinos*, 23:3 (2019), pp. 425–436.

⁶⁶ “Les nouvelles tactiques”, p. 1.

solidarity from the WFTU to combat the rise of the ICFTU on the continent.⁶⁷ Above all, the document reveals Navarro's hard-line resentment of ICFTU and AFL–CIO policy. His analysis includes a document describing the networks through which the AFL–CIO's imperialism was supposedly ravishing the Latin American labour movement.

The tenor of Navarro's first report makes that of a second, published just a few months later, all the more striking. The second document was an analysis of ORIT that he submitted to the WFTU's secretariat. To Navarro's surprise, Latin American trade unionism had actually changed.⁶⁸ While repeatedly underscoring the need to remain cautious, he reported that at ORIT's twelfth conference, held in May 1989, the organization had introduced a set of progressive declarations which closely corresponded to the positions of the WFTU and CPUSTAL. Navarro praised ORIT's new stance towards the situation of trade unions in Paraguay, Chile, Colombia, and Haiti. In his view, ORIT had clearly distanced itself from the AFL–CIO's policy.⁶⁹ Moreover, Navarro saw ORIT's conceptualization of socio-political syndicalism as a step towards autonomous trade unionism, which he linked to the traditional communist interpretation of trade unions as societal transmission belts.⁷⁰ Despite having been sceptical just a few months earlier about ORIT's rapprochement with the unitary unions, Navarro now celebrated its engagement with ideological and political pluralism. He attributed this shift in part to the WFTU's policy in the region, which (he claimed) had raised awareness of the devastating impact of imperialism in the preceding decades.⁷¹

In his conclusion, Navarro proposed that the WFTU's secretariat should take a closer look at ORIT's documents and identify possibilities for what he called an "ideological offensive". He believed that cooperation with ORIT harboured major opportunities for the communist federation in the region.⁷² The use of the expression "ideological offensive" indicates Navarro's main objective: to promote the WFTU's interests in Latin America. Rather than being objectives in themselves, rapprochement and cooperation would enable the advancement of the communist federation in the region.

The documents of the WFTU's secretariat show that Navarro was not the only Latin American advocating for a change in policy. During the second half of the 1980s, Luis Turiansky, a Uruguayan political advisor and member of the WFTU secretariat,

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶⁸ In the mid-1980s, ORIT's new leadership presented a form of socio-political unionism in an attempt to disassociate from the Cold War politics it had engaged in during previous decades. In doing so, ORIT became more tolerant of communist organizations in the region and even supported the integration of communists in the establishment of unitary unions, for instance in Chile. For more detail, see Manuel 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), pp. 47–72.

⁶⁹ "Les orientations et les activités de l'ORIT ont-elles changes?", n.d., IHS–CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 28, pp. 6–9.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷² *Ibid.*

repeatedly noted the impact of the ICFTU's changing policy on Latin America.⁷³ In July 1989, Turiansky stressed the need for action due to the global repercussions of the social and political crises in Poland and Hungary (specifically: the rise in anti-WFTU trade unions receiving support from the ICFTU). According to Turiansky, the WFTU needed to completely overhaul its international and national centres to enable a "counter-offensive" in the "Third World". The changes in ORIT noted by "comrade Navarro" highlighted opportunities for the communist international beyond the borders of Europe.⁷⁴ By contrast to their European colleagues in the WFTU, neither Turiansky nor Navarro advocated for international labour unity. They saw rapprochement with ORIT not as an end in itself but a way to help the communist federation get a foothold in Latin America beyond its traditional strongholds in Peru and Cuba.

The Continuation of the Cold War or the Continuation of Internal Divisions? The WFTU after 1989

The previous sections have shown how communist trade unionists held very different perceptions of international labour unity during the final years of the Cold War.⁷⁵ However, before any significant attempts at cooperation could materialize, the collapse of state socialist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe dealt a severe blow to the WFTU. The organization's former affiliates in what was now post-communist Europe were either dissolved or re-formed into unions aligned with the ICFTU.⁷⁶ These geopolitical shifts effectively swept the WFTU out of Europe.

This final section will examine the perspectives of the WFTU's leadership during the turbulent years between 1990 and 1995: how did the communist federation react to these events? What effect did the end of the Cold War have on the WFTU's relationship with the ICFTU? How did the WFTU reorient itself in the post-Cold War period?

While some predicted that the federation would be dissolved, the WFTU leadership remained stoic in the first months of 1990. In open statements, press releases, and communiques, they ignored the implosion of their Central and Eastern European core and pointed to positive developments in the European trade union movement. Many of the WFTU's former members in the region had been re-formed into "model ICFTU affiliates" and repudiated their previous links to the communist organization. Like the captain of a sinking ship, the WFTU secretariat applauded their former affiliates' democratic nature, autonomy, and focus on trade union rights. The leadership appeared to be trying to hold the WFTU together by directing the focus to international labour unity,

⁷³ Evien Erban, Mahendra Sen, Luis Turiansky, and Emilio Perreira, *La Federacion Sindical Mundial, 1945–1985* (Prague, 1985), p. 3.

⁷⁴ "Un nouveau défi idéologique de la CISL", 11 July 1989, IHS–CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 28, p. 2.

⁷⁵ "Notes sur le débat ouvert après la 41ème session du Conseil général – La nécessité d'une nouvelle politique", 21 November 1988, IHS–CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 28.

⁷⁶ Two particularly emblematic examples are the General Union of Romanian Trade Unions (UGSR), which became the National Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Romania (CNSLR), and the Bulgarian CCTU, which became the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria (CITUB). For more detail, see ICTUR, *Trade Unions of the World*, pp. 47–48, 280–281.

which was presented as the only answer to the current state of affairs.⁷⁷ According to General Secretary Zakaria, the fall of the Berlin Wall actually paved the way for the normalization of relations between the large confederations.⁷⁸

The organization's future was also a key topic at the twelfth WFTU World Congress, held in Moscow in November 1990. With crisis increasingly looming over the organization, the congress proposed a vision for a "renewed WFTU". The leadership presented international labour unity as a lifeline for the communist federation. Emphasizing the globalized nature of economic relations, the influence of multinational corporations, and the shared concerns over the dangers of neo-liberalism in Central and Eastern Europe, its delegates called for alignment with the ICFTU. For many European WFTU leaders, this marked a continuation of their rapprochement efforts during the 1980s. They also openly criticized the ICFTU's decision to prohibit its members from maintaining ties with communist organizations.⁷⁹ However, there was an unexpected turn during the conference. In their attempts to align with the ICFTU, the WFTU leadership had not openly criticized the new independent and reformed unions in Central and Eastern Europe, nor had they vociferously denounced the increased presence of the ICFTU in the region. Rather, they had positioned themselves as partners in the transitions to the post-Cold War era. This attitude was criticized by many representatives from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Instead of applauding the end of the Cold War, this latter group asked: "What will be the impact of East-West harmonization on the Third World, on the economies hit by the backlash, on poverty, on hunger, on the precarity of education, on diseases?"⁸⁰ The WFTU's world congress sought to direct the organization towards a world where socialism had not lost its ideological credibility. But that world lay outside of Europe. The implosion of state socialist regimes prompted many Latin American and Asian trade unionists to renew their demands, first voiced in the 1960s, for a more global WFTU. They believed that, rather than international rapprochement, the objective for the 1990s should be to establish an alternative democratic trade unionism tailored to the needs of communist trade unionists in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Immediately after the congress, regional offices were established in Havana, New Delhi, Brazzaville, and Beirut.

From 1990 onwards, the WFTU was both pushed and pulled out of Europe. In line with its Eastern European colleagues, the ACCTU re-formed its organization into the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR) and hoped that the WFTU would join it.⁸¹ That prompted the CGT to question the WFTU's future, too. According to Krasucki, an international without "substance and principles" made no sense, and he criticized the opaque definition of "an alternative democratic international trade

⁷⁷"Déclaration du secrétariat de la FSM sur les développements dans le mouvement syndical des pays socialistes d'Europe", 5 January 1990, IHS-CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 32.

⁷⁸"Respuestas a algunas preguntas", 16 July 1990, IHS-CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 32.

⁷⁹"XIIème congrès syndical mondial, introduction à la discussion", n.d., IHS-CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 29, p. 6.

⁸⁰"Points qui figureront à l'ordre du jour de la 1ère réunion du Conseil de la FSM, le XIIème congrès syndical mondial et les perspectives", 14–15 February 1991, IHS-CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 28, p. 2.

⁸¹Notably, the transformation of the ACCTU into the FNPR predated the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. It took place in the run-up to the WFTU's world congress in 1990, at which former ACCTU delegates advocated for the WFTU to undergo a similar reorganization.

unionism”.⁸² Many CGT members saw labour unity as the only way forward. All over Europe, former partners of the French organization joined the ICFTU and ETUC. The last Western European communist organizations to remain unaffiliated to the ETUC were the Spanish CCOO and the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers (CGTP-IN), until the former joined the ETUC in 1990 and the latter in 1993.⁸³ By 1993, the only remaining European WFTU affiliates were the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (OPZZ) and the Pancyprrian Federation of Labour (PEO).⁸⁴

A major change in the WFTU's leadership occurred in 1992, when Louis Viannet took over from Krasucki as CGT general secretary in France. He served alongside the Russian trade unionist Aleksandr Zharikov, who had helmed the WFTU since 1990. Under the impetus of the new leadership, the WFTU secretariat published a document setting out the organization's new direction. According to the document, the international labour movement was still marked by the divisions of the Cold War. Notably, there was no mention of prospects for international labour unity. Rather, it was claimed, the obstructive positioning of the ICFTU and WCL underscored the need for the WFTU to create a renewed form of internationalism, tailored to the needs of its current affiliates.⁸⁵ For the first time in two decades, the WFTU was not pursuing a policy of rapprochement with the ICFTU or WCL, nor did it express any desire to maintain relations with unaffiliated unions. The WFTU's new internationalism was instead directed at a handful of communist organizations in countries where there had been less of a backlash against socialism.

The WFTU's new orientation was an attempt by Viannet and Zharikov to reconcile with a new militant axis that had developed under the leadership of the Cuban Pedro Ross – a member of the Cuban Communist Party's politburo – and the Indian K.L. Mahendra.⁸⁶ It also received support from George Mavrikos, the general secretary of the Greek United Trade Union Militant Movement (ESAK) and later general secretary of the WFTU.⁸⁷ This grouping, which represented the WFTU's new core, proposed a form of confrontational anti-imperialist internationalism, aligning the unions of “underdeveloped countries” with those of industrialized nations.⁸⁸ They saw the ICFTU as embodying a form of trade union imperialism, and opposed international labour unity at all costs.⁸⁹ This stance contrasted with that of the CGT and its member organizations, which, from 1993 onwards, increasingly aligned with the objectives

⁸² Christian Langeois, *Henri Krasucki, 1924–2003* (Paris, 2012), pp. 318–320.

⁸³ Christophe Degryse and Pierre Tilly, *1973–2013, 40 Years of History of the European Trade Union Confederation* (Brussels, 2013), p. 23.

⁸⁴ “Souvre une nouvelle période où la CGT va poursuivre d'importants efforts pour transformer en profondeur la FSM”, n.d., IHS–CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 32, p. 2.

⁸⁵ “Document d'orientation, adopté par ma 45^{ème} session du Conseil Général de la FSM”, 12–15 October 1993, IHS–CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 28.

⁸⁶ George Mavrikos, “The History of WFTU 1945–2013 Is a History of Struggles”, seminar presented in Port Dickson, Malaysia, 24 October 2013, p. 28.

⁸⁷ Mavrikos, *Critical Notes*, pp. 196–199.

⁸⁸ Pierre Courtaz, Alphonse Véronese, and Jean-Marie Pernot, “La CGT et la FSM”, *Recherches internationales*, 112 (2018), pp. 131–158, 142.

⁸⁹ Luis Miguel Busto Mauleón, “Interview with George Mavrikos, Former WFTU General Secretary”, *Rebelión*, 18 July 2022.

and interests of the ETUC. For example, they collaborated on campaigns on behalf of the war-riven Balkans.⁹⁰ These distinct visions eventually collided at the WFTU's 1994 world congress in Damascus, which was financed by the Syrian president Hafez al-Assad. While the Indian WFTU vice-president, Indrajit Gupta, denounced the CGT's rapprochement with the ETUC,⁹¹ the CGT representatives felt that the conference "confirmed the WFTU's inability to understand the challenges of trade unionism in Europe".⁹² The French delegates were also taken aback by the congress's resolution on political and ideological support for North Korea, which in the CGT's view had nothing to do with trade unionism.⁹³ According to the CGT, the only viable option in the post-Cold War era was to dissolve the WFTU. In the run-up to the Damascus congress, Mavrikos argued that "anybody that is afraid can leave together with the Italians and French. The real fighters will stay here with us. The fight is on".⁹⁴ These internal conflicts eventually resulted in the CGT disaffiliating from the WFTU in 1995.

This brief insight into the WFTU's post-Cold War history has revealed how international labour unity became a major topic of debate. While the organization's French core perceived the WFTU's future as being aligned with the ETUC and ICFTU, a more radical group of trade unionists from countries such as Cuba and India vociferously opposed international labour unity. The implosion of state socialist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe not only dragged the organization out of Europe but also installed a new group of trade unionists at its helm. Today, WFTU leaders portray individuals such as Ross and Mahendra as the unsung heroes who saved the WFTU at its most fragile moment and attribute the attempts at international labour unity that emerged during the second half of the 1980s to "the false theories of the so-called 'common house'".⁹⁵

Conclusion

By focusing on the WFTU's leaders and their perspectives on international labour unity, this article has been able not only to analyse international labour relations during the 1980s and 1990s but also to closely examine a group of high-ranking members of the "communist elite". The presidents and general secretaries of the WFTU and leaders of their national affiliates guided their respective organizations through "late state socialism", the "long détente", and, ultimately, the implosion of state socialism. For years, the leaders of communist trade unions in Eastern and Western Europe, helmed by the CGT and the ACCTU, worked tirelessly to develop a working relationship with

⁹⁰"S'ouvre une nouvelle période où la CGT va poursuivre d'importants efforts pour transformer en profondeur la FSM", n.d., IHS-CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 32, p. 3.

⁹¹"Les points du discours de I. Gupta, Vice-président de la FSM (Inde)", n.d., IHS-CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 29.

⁹²"Compte-rendu de la réunion de la commission Europe de la FSM", 23 November 1994, IHS-CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 29, p. 2.

⁹³"13 Congrès Syndical Mondial Point de presse AFP et presse syrienne Damas, le 26 novembre 1994", 1994, IHS-CGT, FSM, 297 CFD 29.

⁹⁴Extract from a photocopied letter found in Mavrikos, *Critical Notes*, p. 198.

⁹⁵Busto Mauleón, "Interview with George Mavrikos".

the members of the ICFTU and ETUC, despite them often being depicted as fierce rivals.

These trade unionists “were neither simply agents nor recipients of these changes of the late Cold War; they were part of networks and international institutions through which these ideas [liberal democracy, self-determination, and European integration] were created and remade”.⁹⁶ The documents of the WFTU’s commission on Europe show how they sought to contribute to European integration of trade unionism, identifying a common future with non-communist trade unionists, and supported international labour unity even after 1989, which would have entailed the complete dissolution of the communist federation. For many leaders, the widespread reform process that saw former communist trade unions becoming ICFTU or WCL affiliates made sense. To them, the implosion of state socialist regimes heralded the success of their efforts during the 1970s and 1980s, when European integration, democratic principles, and the autonomy of trade unionism had increasingly been adopted by communist organizations and their leaders. These principles facilitated the post-1989 transitions. Some communist unions transitioned more quickly than others: whereas the official trade unions of the Soviet Union, Hungary, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia promptly renamed and reorganized their organizations, the CGT felt it had some sort of responsibility towards the WFTU. On several occasions, French CGT delegates attempted to steer the communist federation into a similar transition. At the CGT’s initiative, prior to Viannet’s takeover in 1993, international labour unity remained a priority for the WFTU. Ultimately, even Viannet’s efforts could not keep the CGT affiliated to the WFTU. The French organization disaffiliated after the Damascus world congress and became a member of the ICFTU in 1999.

But why was the CGT not able to maintain international labour unity as a policy pillar of the WFTU? Why was the WFTU unwilling to make the same transitions as its largest and most prominent affiliates from Central and Eastern Europe? This article has shown that Latin American and Asian trade unionists had a very different take on international labour unity. To trade unionists like Navarro or Turiansky, the ICFTU represented a form of labour imperialism irreconcilable with the work of the WFTU. Only in May 1989 did the changes in ORIT trigger a more nuanced approach towards cooperation across the ideological divides. Nonetheless, Navarro saw cooperation with ORIT as part of a larger strategy or “ideological offensive” by the WFTU. During the final years of the 1980s, both Navarro and Turiansky reported that the situation of trade unions in Europe was negatively affecting the WFTU’s position in Latin America and Asia. These divisions eventually led to the emergence of a militant anti-imperialist axis that took control of the WFTU and obstructed the CGT’s attempts at reform.

With this in mind, future research needs to look in more detail at communist unions in countries such as Cuba, India, and Vietnam during this period. Latin American and Asian communists opposed international labour unity, pursued a form of internationalism that contested the ICFTU, and restructured the WFTU into an international dedicated to the needs of trade unionists in non-European countries. Paradoxical as it may seem, the end of the Cold War, and the subsequent de-Europeanization of the

⁹⁶Mark *et al.*, 1989, p. 13.

communist labour federation, actually deepened the ideological division between the ICFTU and WFTU.

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