

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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

Decolonizing Labour Internationalism: Shripad Amrit Dange and the World Federation of Trade Unions, 1945–1957

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Abstract

This article examines how the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) functioned as a contested arena where divergent projects of labour internationalism and decolonization intersected in the mid-twentieth century, with a focus on the Indian communist trade union leader Shripad Amrit Dange (1899–1991). Drawing on the concept of subaltern internationalism, it analyses how Dange, as WFTU vice-president and executive committee member, sought to appropriate the federation as a vehicle for anti-colonial projects, and how his scope for action was shaped by colonial and post-colonial repression, structural inequalities, and Cold War ideological conflicts. Using materials from the WFTU and All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) collections, along with contemporary journals, the article reconstructs three key phases: the 1945 founding conferences; the contested development of a WFTU Colonial Department and a Pan-Asian initiative; and the post-1949 period, when the federation reoriented itself towards a more explicit anti-colonial programme after the split. Methodologically, the article employs a biographical lens to trace how Dange's reflections on colonial capitalism and the social composition of the Indian working class fed into debates on decolonization within the WFTU, challenged dominant Western notions, and articulated a vision of post-colonial labour internationalism that linked workplace struggles “from below” to institutional measures “from above”, culminating in his interventions at the fourth world congress in Leipzig in 1957.

Introduction

In the aftermath of World War II, many labour activists believed that the unprecedented devastation of the war could become the starting point for a peaceful and just world order based on new forms of international cooperation. Victor Silverman has argued that, for a brief moment in the mid-1940s, this vision appeared almost within

reach as trade unionists and political leaders sought to rebuild international structures on an anti-fascist and broadly democratic foundation.¹ The creation of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) in 1945 seemed to embody this hope. Bringing together labour movements from across the ideological spectrum, the WFTU became a key arena in which projects of global solidarity, social equality, and decolonization could be articulated side by side. From the outset, however, the federation was shaped by competing understandings of what decolonization should mean and how far international trade unions ought to go in challenging imperial structures. Questions about the organization's attitude towards both communism and decolonization undermined attempts to turn the WFTU into a genuinely inclusive body and would eventually contribute to the major schism that occurred in 1949.

The post-war "international enthusiasm"² that surrounded the new federation drew attention to constituencies that had long been marginalized in international labour politics, especially workers from colonial and semi-colonial societies. Their presence within the WFTU was not simply the result of invitations from Western or Soviet actors. It reflected a conscious effort by colonial labour leaders to use international platforms to assert their own priorities and reshape the terms of global labour debates.³ At the same time, powerful affiliates in Europe and North America were reluctant to endorse far-reaching anti-colonial demands that might clash with their governments' foreign policies or undermine their own influence. This tension produced a characteristic pattern: while the WFTU issued declarations in support of colonial workers and sent solidarity missions, proposals for more robust institutional engagement – such as building an effective Colonial Department or convening a Pan-Asian conference – were repeatedly delayed, diluted, or blocked.

Research on international trade union federations has shown that these organizations played an important role in structuring local labour movements during the era of political decolonization.⁴ At the same time, recent studies emphasize that unions in colonial contexts were deeply embedded in imperial structures, yet developed their own trajectories by crafting forms of "subaltern internationalism"⁵ that did not map

¹Victor Silverman, *Imagining Internationalism in American and British Labor, 1939–49: The Working Class in American History* (Urbana, IL [etc.], 2000), p. 1.

²Carolien Stolte, "Introduction: Trade Union Networks and the Politics of Expertise in an Age of Afro-Asian Solidarity", *Journal of Social History*, 53 (2019), pp. 331–347, 331.

³See also the arguments for this international engagement in Ana Moledo, "The Quest for the Solidarity of the World's Working Class: Luso-African Liberation Movements and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) during the 1960s and early 1970s", in Chris Saunders, Helder Adegas Fonseca, and Lena Dallywater (eds), *Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and Africa: New Perspectives on the Era of Decolonization, 1950s to 1990s* (Oldenburg, 2023), pp. 81–101.

⁴Andrew Carew, "Towards a Free Trade Union Centre: The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (1949–1972)", in *idem et al.* (eds), *The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions* (Berlin [etc.], 2000), pp. 188–235. For international organizations and decolonization more generally, see Eva-Maria Muschik, "Special Issue Introduction: Towards a Global History of International Organizations and Decolonization", *Journal of Global History*, 17 (2022), pp. 173–190.

⁵Rachel 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 (2019), pp. 429–453.

neatly onto Cold War alignments.⁶ Within the WFTU, these divergent projects clashed: some affiliates envisaged an internationalism centred on social reforms within existing frameworks, whereas others sought to link trade union unity explicitly to the dismantling of colonial rule and foreign economic domination. The split of 1949 made these fault lines visible. When anti-communist unions, such as the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the American Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), withdrew from the WFTU to found the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), they accused the federation of having fallen under communist control. But the first WFTU congress after the rift, held in Milan in 1949, responded not simply by closing ranks politically but by reformulating its objectives with decolonization at the centre; contributing to ending colonial and dependent regimes and supporting the right to self-determination were proclaimed as prime goals. The schism thus also marked a turning point in policy: freed from the need to accommodate reluctant Western partners, the WFTU embraced a more explicit anti-colonial programme. The ICFTU, whose membership now included the American Federation of Labor (AFL), came to embody a reformist, strongly anti-communist current within the international trade union movement.

Against this background, the WFTU became a contested field in which divergent projects of labour internationalism and decolonization intersected.⁷ This article contributes to that debate by shifting the focus from institutional histories to the perspective of a single individual whose career bridged local workplace struggles, national party politics, and international trade union diplomacy: the Indian communist and trade union leader Shripad Amrit Dange (1899–1991). It asks how Dange, as one of the vice-presidents and member of the executive committee, appropriated the WFTU as a vehicle for pursuing anti-colonial projects, and how the limits and possibilities of this engagement were shaped by repression, structural inequalities, and global ideological conflicts.

Born in Nasik (in the north of present-day Maharashtra) in 1899, Dange emerged as one of India's most significant labour leaders.⁸ He became politically active at an early age through student politics and social relief work, which brought him into close contact with Bombay's industrial working class during the influenza epidemic of 1918. The Bolshevik Revolution and Marxist thought profoundly shaped his outlook, and by 1922 he had launched *The Socialist*, the first communist journal in India, which advocated the formation of a workers' party grounded in Marxism–Leninism. Arrested in the Kanpur Bolshevik Conspiracy Case in 1924 and again in the Meerut Conspiracy Case in 1929, he used these trials as platforms to present his vision of a transition from colonial capitalism to a global communist order. As a trade unionist, he played a central role in the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and led the massive 1928 Bombay

⁶Gareth Curless, "Introduction: Trade Unions in the Global South from Imperialism to the Present Day", *Labor History*, 57 (2016), pp. 1–19.

⁷Carolien Stolte and Su Lin Lewis, "Trade Union Networks and the Politics of Expertise in an Age of Afro-Asian Solidarity", *Journal of Social History*, 53 (2019), pp. 331–347.

⁸There are several biographies of Dange, but no scholarly analyses; most of the biographies are commemorative accounts written by contemporaries or comrades. See Gopal Banerjee (ed.), *S.A. Dange: A Fruitful Life* (Kolkata, 2002); Lok Sabha Secretariat (ed.), *Comrade Shripad Amrit Dange* (New Delhi, 2004).

textile strike, linking industrial labour mobilization to the wider anti-colonial struggle. Although he remained committed to Marxist principles, his interpretations were shaped by Indian social and cultural realities. He consistently emphasized national unity and inter-communal solidarity, and he treated nationalism and communism as mutually reinforcing paths towards social emancipation rather than as antagonistic ideologies.

The development of the Indian labour movement formed the crucial context of Dange's political work. The intensification of strikes in the 1920s produced sectoral trade unions that were coordinated from 1920 onwards under the umbrella of the AITUC, which aimed to strengthen the political, social, and economic interests of Indian workers.⁹ The founding of the AITUC was driven not only by domestic dynamics but also by the need for international representation. When the International Labour Organization (ILO) was established in 1919, India joined despite being a British colony, thereby demonstrating to Indian trade unionists the importance of developing autonomous representative structures. From its inception, then, the AITUC's agenda combined national labour organizing with an outward-looking orientation towards international bodies.¹⁰ Dange was deeply involved in this dual project.

The international orientation of Indian anti-colonial politics, into which Dange's activities were woven, rested on transnational trajectories that had taken shape during the nineteenth century. Labour migration, pilgrimage, educational travel, and political exile linked India to multiple regions, generating overlapping circuits of mobility that opened extra-territorial spaces of political engagement. These connections provided the infrastructure for later socialist and anti-imperialist solidarities that crystallized in the 1920s. Within this *longue durée* framework, Kris Manjappa has suggested that the trans-colonial ecumene of interwar communism should be understood less as a rupture and more as a reconfiguration of pre-existing global solidarities.¹¹ Dange can be seen as a nodal point within this evolving landscape: a figure in whom local labour conflicts, national party strategies, and international organizational projects converged.

This article approaches Dange as a mobile actor in a broad sense.¹² While he travelled extensively when circumstances allowed, his engagement in international networks served above all to advance India's struggle for independence and to elaborate a

⁹S. Venkatanarayanan, "Struggle or Struggling to Unite: Growth and Diversification of the Indian Labour Movement", in Stefano Bellucci and Holger Weiss (eds), *The Internationalisation of the Labour Question, Ideological Antagonism, Workers' Movements and the ILO since 1919* (London, 2020), pp. 301–327.

¹⁰Prem Sagar Gupta, *A Short History of All-India Trade Union Congress* (New Delhi, 1980); on the role of India within the ILO, see the ongoing dissertation by Fabiana Kutsche, to whom I would like to express my sincere thanks for providing access to her unpublished work: Fabiana Kutsche, "Between Global Standards and Unequal Treatment: The International Labour Organization and Racialised Labour, 1920s–1950s" (Ph.D., unpublished).

¹¹Kris Manjappa, "Communist Internationalism and Transcolonial Recognition", in Sugata Bose and Kris Manjappa (eds), *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 159–177.

¹²Antje Dietze and Katja Naumann, "Revisiting Transnational Actors from a Spatial Perspective", *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'histoire*, 25:3–4 (2018), pp. 415–430. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2018.1439892>; last accessed 27 January 2026.

specific vision of post-colonial development. Moreover, his scope for physical mobility was repeatedly curtailed by long periods of imprisonment and political repression. Overall, he was in prison for seventeen years. These constraints did not end his international interventions; rather, they redirected them into other channels. The article therefore suggests that Dange's internationalism is best understood in terms not only of his movements across borders, but also the circulation of his ideas, speeches, and political concepts. It examines how his activities as trade unionist and political leader, under conditions of colonial and post-colonial travel restrictions, functioned as a distinctive form of mobility that enabled him to forge international solidarities without necessarily having to actually cross borders.

Three interrelated sets of questions guide the analysis. First, how did Dange's conceptualization of decolonization and colonial capitalism feed into debates within the WFTU on anti-colonial movements and on the appropriate role of international trade union forums? This raises the question of whether these forums should be seen primarily as Western *carrefours*, radiating policies outward, or rather as contested arenas in which actors like Dange actively reshaped the global labour agenda. Second, to what extent did Dange's reflections on specific labour relations in India challenge established Western notions of the industrial proletariat? Here, particular attention is paid to his efforts to reposition plantation and agrarian workers within a broader understanding of the working class, thereby complicating sharp distinctions between "industrial" and "rural" labour that dominated much European thinking. Third, how did phases of illegality and repression structure Dange's room for manoeuvre within the international trade union field, both limiting his ability to act and forcing strategic reorientation?

Concentrating on Dange as a primary lens resonates with methodological work that uses biographical or micro-historical perspectives to investigate how individual actors navigate and mediate between local struggles and transnational arenas.¹³ The article adopts Rachel Leow's notion of subaltern internationalism as its main methodological framework and uses it to conceptualize Dange as a key figure in a network of workers and unions operating across local, national, and international scales.¹⁴ Situating Dange within this framework highlights the structural ambivalence of his position. On the one hand, his high-caste Brahmin background and his access to organizational authority, parliamentary politics, and international conferences placed him in relatively privileged positions where he could exert influence "from above". On the other hand, his active participation in workplace struggles and strike leadership, as well as his repeated confrontations with colonial and post-colonial repression, grounded his politics in experiences "from below". Read through Leow's lens, Dange appears neither as a straightforward representative of the subaltern classes nor as a merely reformist figure. Rather, he emerges as a structurally ambivalent subaltern labour leader who translated working-class grievances into institutional and ideological forms while circulating ideas globally.

¹³Peter France and William St Clair (eds), *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography* (London, 2004); Christian G. De Vito, "History without Scale: The Micro-Spatial Perspective", *Past & Present*, 242 (2019), pp. 348–372. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtz048>; last accessed 27 January 2026.

¹⁴Leow, "Asian Lessons in the Cold War Classroom", p. 430.

The analysis is based primarily on source material from the WFTU collection at the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam.¹⁵ The corpus includes records of executive bureau and executive committee meetings, documents from the London and Paris conferences of 1945, and material from later WFTU congresses. Records of the daily work of the departments, especially the Colonial Department, are largely missing, which is itself significant for assessing the limits of the organization's anti-colonial policies. To complement the archival material, the article draws on grey literature and pamphlets containing major speeches by WFTU presidents and chairmen, articles from *Die Weltgewerkschaftsbewegung* (published monthly after the WFTU split), and reports in contemporary newspapers.¹⁶ The WFTU also produced numerous activity reports for submission to its conferences. These semi-official publications were used for internal communication and, especially, for external representation. They were formulated in a particular tone designed to highlight the organization's achievements and to project the movement as a global player, and they passed through multiple editorial stages, sometimes being reworded where this was deemed necessary, before being printed and translated. Although little is known about the editorial process, the scale and multilingual character of these publications suggest a sizeable editorial apparatus.¹⁷ To counterbalance this internal perspective and recover an Indian viewpoint, the article also employs documents from the AITUC collection, which have been digitized by the Archives of Indian Labour and the IISH.

The article is divided into three main sections, each corresponding to a distinct phase in the WFTU's early history and Dange's interventions within it. The first section examines the "world-historical opening"¹⁸ of the mid-1940s and reconstructs the two conferences of 1945 that paved the way for the WFTU's establishment. It analyses debates over the federation's constitution, representative principles, and anti-colonial commitments and shows how delegates from colonial territories, including Dange, used these forums to argue for a conception of trade union unity that was inseparable from the struggle against colonialism. The second section turns to the contested foundation and limited development of a Colonial Department within the WFTU. Here, the focus lies on staffing controversies, debates over the federation's programme, and the (ultimately unrealized) plans for a Pan-Asian conference in Calcutta, which Dange sought to transform into a concrete regional initiative that would position Asia at the

¹⁵I would like to thank the IISH's research director Karin Hofmeester and all members of the library staff for supporting my research visit to the institute during the difficult period of the pandemic, especially Marien van der Heijden and colleagues, who provided me with the AITUC source material before publication. I would also like to thank the German Research Foundation, which made the research visit financially possible.

¹⁶The journal was published in many languages and distributed to most member countries. I analysed the German edition. The *Österreichische Zeitung* reported extensively on the WFTU; see the Austrian National Library's digital newspaper archive. Available at: <https://anno.onb.ac.at/>; last accessed 17 January 2026. Many thanks to Immanuel R. Harisch for bringing this to my attention.

¹⁷Carew mentions that the Western unions complained that the editorial board was led by a Russian who reviewed the material before publication and "prepared" it accordingly: "There was effective Communist control of the publicity department in the WFTU secretariat, and the administration of the secretariat generally". Anthony Carew, "The Schism within the World Federation of Trade Unions: Government and Trade-Union Diplomacy", *International Review of Social History*, 29 (1984), pp. 297–335, 300.

¹⁸Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC, 2015), p. 1.

centre of anti-colonial labour internationalism. The third section analyses the period after the WFTU split and the creation of rival international trade union federations. It explores how Dange, operating under conditions of repression and restricted mobility, rearticulated his anti-colonial and developmental agenda within the reconfigured federation. This culminated in his interventions in the mid-1950s, especially his 1957 Leipzig speech at the fourth world congress, where he sketched a vision of post-colonial labour internationalism.

The article offers a reassessment of the WFTU by examining how a subaltern labour leader employed the federation as a vehicle for anti-colonial solidarity, even as his scope for action remained limited by the geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War and by state repression. By foregrounding Dange's trajectory, it contends that mid-twentieth-century labour internationalism was not solely determined by institutional models emanating from the metropole, but was also actively reshaped from within through the agency of actors deeply situated in colonial and post-colonial social struggles.

The World-Historical Opening and the 1945 Conferences

The idea of a unified international trade union movement gained momentum during World War II. In 1941, the British TUC and the Soviet all-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (ACCTU) renewed contact, encouraged by the wartime alliance and a shared need to coordinate labour support for the anti-fascist struggle.¹⁹ These initiatives were embedded in broader political contexts: demands for peace and social reconstruction grew not only in the Allied countries but also among populations subjected to fascist occupation and colonial rule. For many trade unionists, the collapse of the pre-war international labour movement, combined with the urgency of wartime mobilization, rendered a compromise between social democrats and communists both necessary and conceivable.²⁰ At the same time, there was agreement that any new federation had to be more inclusive than the "Amsterdam International", officially the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU, 1919–1945). As Carolien Stolte has noted, however, the election of the staunchly anti-communist British union leader Walter Citrine, who had formerly been at the helm of the IFTU, as WFTU president already sent a problematic signal regarding the likely limits of this inclusivity.²¹

The WFTU secretariat did seek to move beyond the IFTU's narrow base.²² The IFTU had long been criticized for its weak global representation, with only a handful of Afro-Asian unions joining in the 1930s.²³ This absence did not stem from a lack of contact with these unions but from the perception, among decolonizing actors, that the IFTU

¹⁹Anthony Carew, "A False Dawn: The World Federation of Trade Unions (1945–1949)", in *idem et al.*, *The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions*, pp. 165–186, 167.

²⁰Walter Schevenels, *Forty-Five Years International Federation of Trade Unions: 1901–1945. A Historical Precip* (Brussels, 1956), pp. 303–304.

²¹Stolte, "Introduction: Trade Union Networks", p. 333.

²²Oliver Pohrt, *Die internationale Gewerkschaftsbewegung zwischen Einheitswunsch und Kaltem Krieg. Der Weltgewerkschaftsbund (WGB) von der Gründungsphase bis zu seiner Spaltung (1941–1949)* (Regensburg, 2000), p. 254.

²³Stolte, "Introduction: Trade Union Networks", p. 333.

was not a credible body to turn to with their concerns.²⁴ In contrast, the Profintern had explicitly supported anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles and helped to establish initiatives such as the League Against Imperialism and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers.²⁵ But with Joseph Stalin's consolidation of power and the seventh Comintern Congress of 1935, the Comintern abandoned its earlier anti-colonial emphasis. Prominent intellectuals from colonial countries, including the Indian Marxist M.N. Roy and the Pan-Africanist George Padmore, distanced themselves from Soviet socialism and sought alternative frameworks for anti-imperialist internationalism.²⁶ These interwar experiences left a lasting imprint on the generation of activists who, in the mid-1940s, returned to the international stage and saw in the plans for a united trade union federation a renewed chance to push their agendas.

The 1945 conferences of the WFTU thus unfolded at a moment that may be described as a "world-historical opening."²⁷ Delegates from across the globe, including many who had been active in interwar networks, converged to debate the structure and orientation of a new federation. The London conference in February 1945 brought together 135 delegates and thirty observers representing around forty national trade unions and some sixty million workers, alongside representatives of international bodies and observers from neutral countries. Newly represented countries included Brazil, British Guiana, Ceylon, China, Colombia, Cuba, Cyprus, Gambia, the Gold Coast, Guatemala, India, Iran, Jamaica and Barbados, Lebanon, Mexico, Nigeria, Northern Rhodesia, Palestine, Panama, Puerto Rico, Sierra Leone, Syria, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uruguay.²⁸ The fragmentation of the Indian labour movement was reproduced at this level: in addition to the AITUC delegation, which included Dange, R.A. Khedgikar, and K. Boomla, the Indian Federation of Labour was represented by A.K. Mukerji, Tyab Shaikh, and I. Ramsingh.²⁹ It is striking that no delegates from Portuguese or Belgian

²⁴*Ibid.* See also Rainer Tossdorff, "Moscow versus Amsterdam: Reflections on the History of the Profintern", *Labour History Review*, 68 (2003), pp. 79–97, 82; Geert Van Goethem, *The Amsterdam International: The World of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), 1913–1945* (Ashgate, 2006).

²⁵Su Lin Lewis and Nana Osei-Opare, "Introduction: Development Dreams from the Socialist South", in *idem* (eds), *Socialism, Internationalism, and Development in the Third World: Envisioning Modernity in the Era of Decolonization* (London, 2024), pp. 1–10, 1; Holger Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic: African American Agency, West African Intellectuals and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers* (Leiden, 2014).

²⁶At the fifth Comintern Congress in June 1924, Roy said that the Comintern should support revolutionary movements in the colonies "for the exclusive purpose of uniting the various units of the future proletarian parties and educating them to the consciousness of their specific tasks, that is, to the tasks of the struggle against the bourgeois democratic tendencies within their respective nationalities". Gene D. Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller, *Communism in India* (Bombay, 1950), p. 71; Arno Sonderegger, "Which Way Africa? Re-Reading George Padmore's Pan-Africanism or Communism", in *idem* (ed.), *African Thoughts on Colonial and Neo-Colonial Worlds* (Berlin, 2015), pp. 191–202.

²⁷Wilder, "Freedom Time", p. 1.

²⁸WFTU, *Report of the World Trade Union Conference, September 25–October 8, 1945* (Paris, 1945), pp. 285–293.

²⁹This split within the Indian trade union movement is relatively complex and rooted in various historical developments. While in the interwar period the Indian labour movement was primarily marked by conflicts between socialist and communist tendencies, this later fragmentation was above all a reaction to positions on World War II and questions of positioning; see Kutsche, "Between Global Standards and Unequal Treatment", pp. 312–314.

colonies attended, which likely reflected stricter colonial controls over international travel as well as political reluctance to allow colonial representatives to appear at such forums.³⁰

Despite the rhetoric of inclusivity, decision-making power within the WFTU remained concentrated in the hands of European, US, and Soviet delegates. Representation on the executive committee was apportioned according to membership size and financial strength. The Soviet, US, and British unions each held three seats, whereas other regions were grouped together. West Indian and Latin American unions were represented by Lázaro Peña³¹ and Vicente Lombardo Toledano;³² one seat was allocated jointly to India and Ceylon (held by Dange and V.B. Karnik) and one to Africa (held by Brian Goodwin³³). The influential executive bureau, however, included no representatives from Africa or South Asia. Chaired by Citrine, the bureau counted among its vice-presidents Vassili V. Kuznetsov (ACCTU), Sidney Hillman (CIO), Léon Jouhaux (Confédération générale du travail (General Confederation of Labour), CGT), Giuseppe Di Vittorio (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (Italian General Confederation of Labour), CGIL), and Evert Kupers (Nederlands Verbond van Vakverenigingen (Dutch Confederation of Trade Unions), NVV), alongside Lombardo Toledano and the Chinese trade unionist Xuefan Chu.³⁴ This institutional architecture structurally limited the influence of delegates from colonial and semi-colonial territories, even as their presence was hailed as a hallmark of the federation's global reach.

³⁰José Pedro Monteiro, "The 'Least Irresponsible Organization': the Portuguese Colonial Question and the International Labour Organization (1945–1962)", *Histoire Politique*, 41 (2020). Available: <https://doi.org/10.4000/histoirepolitique.346>; last accessed 27 January 2026. Liudmila V. Ponomarenko and Elena G. Zueva, "Son of Struggling Africa: On the Centenary of Patrice Lumumba's Birth (July 2, 1925–January 17, 1961)", *Vestnik RUDN: International Relations*, 25:3 (2025), pp. 339–354. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2025-25-3-339-354>; last accessed 27 January 2026.

³¹Lázaro Peña, a black tobacco worker, became a member of the Cuban Communist Party in 1930. He was imprisoned several times for participating in strikes and fighting against the Gerardo Machado dictatorship. In 1939, he was elected as the first general secretary of the Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba (Confederation of Cuban Workers, CTC) until he was released by the anti-communist government of Ramón Grau San Martín. Peña fled first to Mexico, then to the Soviet Union, and returned to Cuba when Fidel Castro Ruz took power in 1959. Lucinda Miranda Fernández (ed.), *Lázaro Peña, Capitán de la Clase Obrera Cubana* (Havana, 1984).

³²Vicente Lombardo Toledano was president of the Confederación de Trabajadores de América Latina (Confederation of Latin American Workers, CTAL) and had supported the anti-colonial struggle in Latin America since its foundation in 1938. Lombardo Toledano saw Mexico as a semi-colonial country and himself as a pioneer of the anti-colonial movements in the discussions at the WFTU, but later did not argue for the non-aligned path that many anti-colonial movements adopted; Daniela Spenser, *In Combat: The Life of Lombardo Toledano* (Leiden, 2019). For further information, see also Patricio Herrera's article "Anti-imperialism in the Confederation of Latin American Workers and the Early WFTU (1938–1953)" in this Special Issue.

³³Brian Goodwin, a trade unionist from the Northern Rhodesian Mineworkers' Union, represented the interests of white workers. Duncan Money argues that the union used an international language of class struggle, but did not represent African workers ("passive white laborism"). However, Goodwin was one of those who spoke out in favour of a multi-ethnic union in Africa, albeit under "white" leadership; Duncan Money, *White Mineworkers on Zambia's Copperbelt, 1926–1974* (Leiden, 2022), p. 151.

³⁴Pohrt, *Die internationale Gewerkschaftsbewegung*, p. 254.

Two political camps formed with diverging views on colonialism: those whose governments still owned colonies were reluctant to publicly articulate their political views, because they could find themselves in a conflict of interests between supporting national foreign policy and the goals of the WFTU.³⁵ Many delegates from colonial or semi-colonial countries saw themselves as communists, even if they defined what that meant in very different ways. But they saw the Bolshevik Revolution as a great example for their own movements and in some cases had also had contact with Moscow in the interwar period or even received training there.³⁶ Many had been imprisoned for their political beliefs, so their support for communism also arose from a certain opposition to their governments. Elsewhere, I explore the question of how the demands for decolonization went hand in hand with communist ideas and argue that many of the actors developed their beliefs out of communist ideologies without following them dogmatically. They were communist actors with their own globalization project: a project that was directed against racism, imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism but also against the globalization projects of the US and of West European and Soviet countries.³⁷

All this applied to Dange. In 1929, he, along with thirty others, was arrested on a charge of conspiracy against the British Crown. In court, he spoke openly about his sympathy for communism and Marxism.³⁸ A biography describes how Dange “lived under the banner of Communism which was the foundation of his thinking and his being”.³⁹ He supported Marxist ideology by arguing that:

[T]he fundamental proposition of Marxism applies to every social group, wherever it exists. Thus when I follow Marxism, Leninism or Communism, I am not following a method of this country or that but the method of reconstruction of society which is proved historically to be necessary and correct.⁴⁰

He was convinced of orthodox Marxist ideology but sought to infuse it with the historical and cultural contexts of Indian reality. One striking feature of Dange’s conception of the Indian path to communism was that working-class unity could not be achieved without Hindu and Muslim unity. He remained true to this belief in later years. In the early 1960s, he commented on developments in the Cold War as follows:

Our workers are proud of the great socialist countries and their achievements; they speak of the Soviet Union and China and other countries. We are familiar with the idea of two camps – the Camp of Imperialism and the Camp of

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 455–456.

³⁶ Irina Filatova, “Indoctrination or Scholarship? Education of Africans at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East in the Soviet Union, 1923–1937”, *Paedagogica Historica*, 35:1 (1999), pp. 41–66. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0030923990350104>; last accessed 27 January 2026. Many Indians were also trained there.

³⁷ Johanna Wolf, “Der Weltgewerkschaftsbund und die Antikolonialbewegung während der Nachkriegszeit”, in Marcel Bois, Christian Dietrich, and Rhena Stürmer (eds), *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung 2026* (forthcoming 2026).

³⁸ Banerjee and Chattopadhyay, “Editorial”.

³⁹ Lok Sabha Secretariat, *Comrade Shripad Amrit Dange*, p. 8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

Socialism. But there is also the bigger [one] now: the Camp of Peace. It consists of socialist countries and also those which are not socialist but are neutral and peace-loving, opposed to war.⁴¹

The WFTU conference in London in February 1945 coincided with the Yalta Conference between Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin, which underscored the extent to which the WFTU was operating in the shadow of high-level intergovernmental negotiations. Trade unions were under pressure to formulate positions on the war and on post-war reconstruction if they wished to be taken seriously as global actors. Debates about peace, fascism, and reconstruction dominated the agenda. It was Lombardo Toledano who first sought to broaden the discussion beyond Europe by insisting that the situation in the colonies needed to be addressed. Only after repeated interventions by other delegates from colonial territories did the chair allow further speeches on colonial questions. These delegates demanded that discussions on economic and social reconstruction not be separated from the realities of colonial and semi-colonial countries. They stressed that these societies required support in dismantling imperial structures that, if left intact, could pave the way for new forms of authoritarian rule.⁴²

In this context, Dange urged the committee on “Furtherance of the Allied War Effort” to extend its remit. He proposed that, in addition to endorsing civil and political freedoms in “liberated countries”, the committee should explicitly call on governments in control of colonies to apply similar principles there. The British TUC representative Arthur Deakin sidestepped the proposal by insisting that the committee’s mandate was strictly limited to measures directly related to the war effort. While he acknowledged the significance of the issues Dange had raised and offered assurances that they would be “taken into account” elsewhere, he effectively prevented any substantive commitment from being written into the committee’s report. This exchange epitomized the entrenched asymmetry between unionists from imperial centres, who could invoke procedural constraints to defer controversy, and those from colonial territories, whose calls for structural changes were repeatedly redirected into other channels.⁴³

Such patterns had a longer history. The British TUC sought to influence the Indian trade union movement’s development right from its earliest days, sending several fact-finding missions to India in the late 1920s. These missions were driven less by an interest in solidarity with anti-colonial struggles than by concerns about industrial relations and competition in the textile sector.⁴⁴ In Africa, similarly, the TUC established ties with colonial administrations and labour departments as well as with emerging unions. In 1942, it joined employers on the British Colonial Labour Advisory Committee, which channelled recommendations to the Colonial Office but did not

⁴¹“General Report by S.A. Dange of 26th Session of AITUC Coimbatore, 1961”, AITUC. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/10622/ARCH04803.180.1524.8>; last accessed 1 May 2025. In the original, “third one now” was crossed out and replaced with “bigger”.

⁴²WFTU, *Report of the World Trade Union Conference, February 6–17, 1945* (London, 1945).

⁴³*Ibid.*, pp. 173–174.

⁴⁴Marcel van der Linden and Anna Sailer, “Introduction: Indian Textile Industries and European Trade Union Delegations in the 1920s”, in Ravi Rhuja, Marcel van der Linden, and Anna Sailer (eds), *“The Distress is Impossible to Convey”: British and German Trade-Union Reports on Labour in India (1926–1928)* (Berlin and Boston, MA, 2020), pp. 1–18.

endorse independence movements.⁴⁵ This politics of “guided” trade union development shaped British positions within the WFTU and informed their ambivalent stance towards a more assertive anti-colonial agenda.

At the WFTU’s founding congress in Paris in autumn 1945, Dange resumed his earlier line of argument. While the London conference had focused on the defeat of fascism and the contours of peace in Europe, the Paris congress needed to address colonial questions directly: “Our world labour will have to define its attitude on this question. [...] You cannot avoid this question, because economy is essentially tied to the national independence of each country in Asia”.⁴⁶ This intervention can be read as an early formulation of his critique of monopoly capitalism. Dange rejected any conception of decolonization that would confine itself to constitutional change while leaving structures of foreign economic domination intact. He argued that political sovereignty in India would remain incomplete as long as key sectors remained under the control of Britain or other foreign powers, and that trade unions therefore had to treat the national question and the transformation of economic power relations as intrinsically linked dimensions of a single anti-imperialist project. His later writings and speeches on independent India’s development path – where he criticized the persistence of foreign corporate interests and the concentration of wealth in monopoly groups – can be seen as consistent elaborations of the intuition first articulated in Paris in 1945: that political independence without economic transformation would perpetuate a reconfigured but still fundamentally imperial regime of domination.

The Founding of a Colonial Department and a Planned Pan-Asian Conference

In December 1945, the WFTU executive bureau initiated the establishment of a Colonial Department within the federation. The move appeared to acknowledge that colonial and semi-colonial issues required sustained attention at the level of the secretariat. Yet, it took until the summer of 1946 to identify a candidate willing and able to head the new department. The American CIO was charged with proposing the director. After one candidate declined, the CIO appointed Adolph Germer; when his performance was deemed unsatisfactory, he was replaced in late 1947 by Elmer Cope, also of the CIO and known for his pronounced anti-communist stance. Cope’s appointment strengthened the CIO’s position in the secretariat but did little to transform the Colonial Department into an effective instrument for anti-colonial work.⁴⁷

The early activities of the Colonial Department and the debates in the executive bureau about its functions reveal divergent conceptions of what an anti-colonial policy for the WFTU should entail. The prolonged delay in staffing the department suggests that colonial issues were not a priority for the CIO. Once Cope took office, CIO representatives became concerned that communists might instrumentalize the department,

⁴⁵ Frederick Cooper, *Decolonisation and African Society: The Labour Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, 1996); Issa G. Shivji, *Law, State and the Working Class in Tanzania: C. 1920–1964* (Portsmouth, 1986); Spencer Mawby, *The End of Empire in Uganda: Decolonization and Institutional Conflict, 1945–79* (London and New York, 2020).

⁴⁶ WFTU, *Report of the World Trade Union Conference, September 25–October 8, 1945*, pp. 92–93.

⁴⁷ Pohrt, *Die internationale Gewerkschaftsbewegung*, p. 261.

and they advocated a cautious, narrowly defined mandate.⁴⁸ The British TUC likewise hindered the development of a robust anti-colonial policy. British union leaders did not deny that colonial questions mattered, but they framed work in this field as prohibitively costly and politically sensitive. WFTU president Citrine warned that such work would be “expensive and thankless” and feared that activities in Asia and Africa would be dominated by Soviet and communist propaganda.⁴⁹ Given the TUC’s long-standing entanglement with colonial administrations and its alignment with British foreign policy, these objections reflected not only financial concerns but also a desire to avoid initiatives that could undermine imperial interests.

Historians have often interpreted the role of the CIO and TUC in the WFTU primarily in terms of growing dissatisfaction with the federation’s perceived “politicization”, the intrusive character of communist propaganda, and the alleged “hijacking” of the organization by Soviet-aligned affiliates, culminating in the withdrawal in 1949.⁵⁰ The debates around the Colonial Department invite a more nuanced reading. British unionists deployed the critique of “propaganda” to circumscribe the development of any ambitious anti-colonial programme that might have required significant material commitments and challenged British imperial policies. The reluctance to empower the Colonial Department thus cannot be understood solely as a reaction to Soviet behaviour; it also reflects an attempt to maintain tight control over the scope and direction of the WFTU’s engagement with colonial questions.

By contrast, Soviet trade unionists and representatives of the Italian CGIL and the French CGT repeatedly called for an expansion of the Colonial Department’s activities.⁵¹ They urged the secretariat to undertake missions to Africa and Asia, to collect detailed information on local conditions, and to assist in building trade union structures in colonized territories. It was largely thanks to these initiatives that the WFTU undertook any action at all in these regions during its “united” phase.

Evidence on how Dange and other colonial actors assessed the delayed establishment, limited mandate, and hesitant functioning of the Colonial Department is difficult to come by. They were not represented in the key decision-making bodies that shaped these choices and left no published commentary on the internal organizational debates. Indirect evidence, however, suggests that Dange regarded the expansion of WFTU activities in the colonial and semi-colonial world as extremely urgent. The discussions surrounding the planned Pan-Asian conference, analysed in the next section, indicate

⁴⁸ Pohrt substantiates this observation with various sources from the US State Department; see Gee to Grossmith (Colonial Office), 12 February 1949, PRO, FO 371/78865, cited in Pohrt, *Die internationale Gewerkschaftsbewegung*, p. 261, fn. 718.

⁴⁹ Pohrt, *Die internationale Gewerkschaftsbewegung*, p. 261, fn. 720; an analysis by the US State Department, entitled “The USSR and the World Federation of Trade Unions”, [June 1947], NA 800.5043/6–2347, gave the following assessment of this discussion: “The difference as to the appropriate manner for expending WFTU funds clearly shows that the Russians place Soviet political objectives ahead of the interests of labour”. The British Foreign Office took a very similar view; see S. Peterson (British Embassy Moscow) to Bevin, 11 July 1946, PRO, FO 371/59735, cited in Pohrt, *Die internationale Gewerkschaftsbewegung*, p. 261, fn. 721.

⁵⁰ Carew, “A False Dawn”.

⁵¹ Pohrt, *Die internationale Gewerkschaftsbewegung*, p. 262.

that he pushed for a far more proactive stance and sought to transform Asia into a central area of WFTU work.

The negotiation and planning of the Pan-Asian conference, which ultimately did not take place, vividly illustrates the tensions already visible in the debates on the Colonial Department. From an early stage, it was widely accepted that a conference in Asia, alongside a similar initiative in Africa, would be indispensable for building closer relations with non-European unions and for demonstrating that the WFTU truly aspired to global representation. But the reluctance of British and US union leaders meant that such a gathering could not take place as long as the WFTU remained formally united. Both TUC and CIO representatives feared that a major Asian conference might strengthen communist trade unions and provide a platform for what they regarded as destabilizing agitation.

The need for a Pan-Asian conference was first discussed at the 1945 Paris congress, which adopted a resolution instructing the WFTU executive to convene such a conference. At the first executive committee session in Moscow in June 1946, the general secretary was authorized to organize the conference and to send a delegation to Asia in preparation. However, the initiative stalled and only in November 1947 did the executive bureau return to the issue. Lacking up-to-date information on conditions in Asia, the bureau invited Dange and the Australian union leader Albert Ernest Monk, who represented Asian countries on the executive committee, to report on the situation and advise on how the conference might be organized.⁵²

Monk, who had recently returned from an ILO conference in New Delhi, outlined the difficult circumstances under which many South-East Asian labour movements operated, highlighting political conflicts tied to liberation struggles and raising doubts about whether adequate representation of all workers could be guaranteed.⁵³ Fabiana Kutsche has provided a detailed analysis of both the preparation and proceedings of this conference.⁵⁴ It is striking that, despite the unstable situation in India, the ILO not only undertook an extended fact-finding mission in the spring of 1947 but also went ahead with the conference itself, which was attended by representatives from the countries discussed here. This suggests that there was, in principle, a readiness among ILO actors to travel to a volatile region – provided the initiative was conducted under the auspices of the “right” institution. Monk suggested Calcutta as a possible venue for the WFTU conference, citing its central location and relative accessibility for delegates with limited resources. At the same time, he emphasized that organizing a conference there would involve “great difficulties”.⁵⁵

Despite all the contradictions mentioned, Dange insisted that the conference should not be postponed. He argued that, even if trade union structures were not yet fully

⁵²“Documents on the Session of the Executive Bureau, 19–24 November 1947”, IISH, WFTU 69, p. 80.

⁵³The First (Preparatory) Asian Regional Conference, 7 October–8 November 1947. See ILO, *India and the ILO: Chronicle of a Shared Journey, 1919–2019* (Geneva, 2019), pp. 54–55. Available at: www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-asia/-ro-bangkok/-sro-new_delhi/documents/publication/wcms_735350.pdf; last accessed 1 May 2025.

⁵⁴Kutsche, “Between Global Standards and Unequal Treatment”, ch. 8.2: “At the Crossroads of Empire and Independence: The ILO, India, and Asia in 1947”, pp. 320–338.

⁵⁵“Documents on the Session of the Executive Bureau, 19–24 November 1947”, p. 81.

formed in some countries, holding the conference was essential to demonstrate that the WFTU genuinely existed for, and was interested in, Asian unions.⁵⁶ He also took issue with the suggestion that the conference be endowed with only an “advisory” status. In his view, it would be “striking” and politically damaging if, as at the earlier Dakar conference, resolutions adopted at the Pan-Asian conference were not formally binding and were not transmitted to the central WFTU bodies for implementation.⁵⁷ Dange thus framed the planned conference as a constitutive moment in which Asian unions should enter the WFTU not as peripheral consultees but as rights-bearing participants whose decisions would shape the federation’s overall direction, particularly on colonial policy.

Apart from the organizational issues, there was a debate about who should be present at the Pan-Asian conference, given that some countries had national trade unions with different political affiliations or unions that were still in the process of being formed. There was also the question of who should get access: only those who had paid their membership fees, or also those who would probably become members in the future? Enquiries by the general secretary as to whether a survey should be made beforehand regarding the situation in the respective movements made clear that relatively little information about the situation in the countries was available.

Once again, Dange intervened. This time, he did more than argue over the timing or practicalities of the conference, but raised the more fundamental question of who counted as a “worker” in Asia and what forms of labour the WFTU should prioritize. Responding to concerns that many wage earners in Asia were employed in agriculture, mining, or plantations, he emphasized that plantation work was much more similar to mining than to agriculture as understood in Europe.⁵⁸ Seen against his longer intellectual trajectory, including early writings such as *Gandhi vs. Lenin*,⁵⁹ in which he underscored the centrality of the peasant question and called for the dismantling of large estates, these remarks can be read as an attempt to broaden the category of the proletariat in colonial conditions. Rather than simply adopting a narrow Western focus on industrial workers, Dange questioned Eurocentric distinctions between “industrial” and “agrarian” labour and anticipated later political-economy analyses of plantation capitalism and the integration of rural and urban labour into global regimes of accumulation.⁶⁰ He was, of course, not alone in this. Indian delegates at the ILO conference had also drawn attention to conditions in the agrarian sector.⁶¹ They articulated clear expectations for development support in both industrial and agricultural spheres and

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁵⁷ Dange was referring here to the first Pan-African conference, which the WFTU held in Dakar in April 1947. At the suggestion of the African delegates, this meeting adopted several resolutions calling for greater consideration of workers in the African colonies, but these were given little attention in subsequent sessions of the WFTU executive, provoking considerable discontent. See also Immanuel R. Harisch and Gédéon N’goranin Bangali’s article “A Communist Ambassador of Labour: Abdoulaye Diallo, the World Federation of Trade Unions, and Unionism in Francophone West Africa, 1947–1957” in this Special Issue.

⁵⁸ “Documents on the Session of the Executive Bureau, 19–24 November 1947”, p. 84.

⁵⁹ Shripad Amrit Dange, *Gandhi vs. Lenin* (Bombay, 1921), p. 61.

⁶⁰ Ravi Raman, *Global Capital and Peripheral Labour: The History and Political Economy of Plantation Workers in India* (London, 2010).

⁶¹ Kutsche, “Between Global Standards and Unequal Treatment”, pp. 341–342.

challenged the ILO to broaden its policy frameworks. Although it is not possible here to examine in detail how these arguments diverged in their emphases and concrete proposals, even this brief summary underscores the broader point that actors from colonial and semi-colonial countries sought, in multiple international arenas, to draw attention to their specific situations and to question prevailing approaches.

The broader political context in India further complicated the prospects for a Pan-Asian conference in Calcutta. After prolonged negotiations between the British administration, the Indian National Congress, and the Muslim League, the British government resolved to terminate colonial rule and grant independence. This process culminated in the decision to partition British India into the two dominions of India and Pakistan, which was announced in June 1947 and sparked widespread communal violence and mass displacement. It was in this turbulent context that the WFTU executive committee met in Prague in June 1947, where Dange, in an interview on the sidelines, warned that Partition would almost inevitably lead to armed conflict, civil strife, and severe economic dislocations arising from the separation of industrial and raw-material regions.⁶² He contrasted this scenario with an alternative path based on radical democratic reforms – above all land redistribution and universal suffrage – that might have prevented division “along racial lines” and provided the basis for a unified, socially restructured India.

At the executive committee meeting in Rome in May 1948, the controversy over the Pan-Asian conference became a proxy for broader disagreements about colonial policy and responsibility within the WFTU. Brian Goodwin of the Northern Rhodesian Mineworkers’ Union criticized the federation’s approach to colonial questions as overly declaratory and lacking in concrete measures, invoking the Dakar resolution as an example. He warned that some major unions sought predominance rather than genuinely furthering anti-colonial work.⁶³ Monk then presented the failure to dispatch the planned Asiatic mission – which never even began its exploratory journey – as evidence of deeper political and administrative dysfunction.⁶⁴ General Secretary Louis Saillant rejected the suggestion that the collapse of the initiative was primarily due to secretariat mismanagement. Instead, he pointed out that key national unions, above all the British and US ones, had simply failed to nominate delegates – effectively blocking the formation of the commission and preventing the preparatory trip from going ahead.⁶⁵ The non-realization of the Pan-Asian conference thus appears to have been less a product of bureaucratic ineptitude and more one of political reluctance on the part of crucial Western affiliates.

Dange did not attend the Rome meeting, so his immediate reaction to these developments is unknown. Subsequent correspondence does, however, confirm that union leaders in India perceived the failure as sabotage. A 1949 letter from AITUC general secretary Manek Gandhi squarely blamed the TUC and the CIO for undermining the conference by withholding delegates, arguing that their inaction had caused “immeasurable damage” to the Asian trade union movement and prevented the WFTU from

⁶² *Österreichische Volksstimme*, 15 June 1947, p. 4.

⁶³ “Documents on the Session of the Executive Committee, 4–10 May 1948”, IISH, WFTU 83, pp. 12–13.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

fulfilling its responsibilities.⁶⁶ At the same time, the political situation on the ground further reduced the likelihood that Calcutta could host such a gathering. India's independence and Partition generated massive violence and instability. From the autumn of 1948 onwards, US and British unions delayed the convening of the preparatory commission, and at the executive bureau meeting of September 1948 the British TUC refused to contemplate holding the conference in view of the "critical political situation" in Asia. By then, the British were already preparing to leave the WFTU, and they pursued a strategy of blocking decisions on key questions. When the executive bureau reconvened in January 1949, the Pan-Asian conference was no longer on the agenda.

After the Split

The WFTU split in 1949 transformed the political landscape of international trade unionism. At its first post-split congress, held in Milan in the summer of that year, the federation reformulated its goals for colonial and dependent territories. It pledged to help end the system of colonies, protectorates, and dependent areas as zones of economic exploitation; to promote trade union organizations in these countries without discrimination; to encourage labour laws guaranteeing workers protection and effective participation in economic policymaking; to fight social, economic, and political discrimination based on race, colour, religion, or sex; and to support colonized peoples in asserting their right to self-determination and full national independence.⁶⁷ Travel and direct contact were now explicitly prioritized over correspondence, reflecting Saillant's conviction that letters alone could not build the networks and trust required for durable cooperation.⁶⁸

These commitments intersected with a rapidly changing situation in India. While the WFTU leadership welcomed Indian independence, it viewed the new government critically, seeing it as a bourgeois elite aligned with "the original colonialists" and "American imperialists" in promoting international capitalism.⁶⁹ Cooperation with institutions such as the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the International Monetary Fund was cited as evidence of this orientation. From the WFTU's perspective, the victims of this development were the Indian people, who faced rising prices, currency inflation, and restrictions on democratic trade union

⁶⁶ "Eine energische Antwort an den TUC", *Die Weltgewerkschaftsbewegung: Monatsrevue des Weltgewerkschaftsbundes*, 2 (June 1949), p. 7.

⁶⁷ "Resolution über die Berichte der gewerkschaftlichen Tätigkeit in Asien, Austral-Asien, Afrika und Lateinamerika vom Sekretariat des WGB auf Grund der Empfehlungen des Zweiten Weltgewerkschaftskongresses, des Vollzugsausschusses und der Resolutionen-Kommission ausgearbeitet", *Die Weltgewerkschaftsbewegung. Monatsrevue des Weltgewerkschaftsbundes*, 4 (August 1949), p. 34.

⁶⁸ "Der zweite Weltgewerkschaftskongreß wird eine Bestätigung dafür sein, daß der WGB eine fortschrittliche Kraft in der Welt ist", *Die Weltgewerkschaftsbewegung: Monatsrevue des Weltgewerkschaftsbundes*, 2 (June 1949), p. 2.

⁶⁹ "Grausame Unterdrückung der Arbeiter in Indien. Die indischen Arbeiter haben nur ihre Herren gewechselt", *Die Weltgewerkschaftsbewegung. Monatsrevue des Weltgewerkschaftsbundes*, 2 (June 1949), pp. 17–21.

activity. New legislation and policing practices hit the AITUC particularly hard.⁷⁰ By the late 1940s, many of its leading figures, including Dange, had been arrested without trial.

From 1948, the Communist Party of India (CPI) was forced underground as the post-colonial state responded to what it perceived as a revolutionary challenge from the left. The CPI adopted an increasingly confrontational line, portraying the Nehru government as aligned with Anglo-American imperialism, while seeking to radicalize sections of industrial labour. In response, central and provincial governments banned the party and cracked down on its mass organizations. Thousands of communists were arrested or detained, party offices were closed and clandestine structures proliferated; in some regions, legal bans persisted into the early 1950s. Given the close ties between the CPI and the AITUC, this repression severely affected the trade union federation. Membership declined, key leaders were imprisoned, and much of its work had to continue in semi-legal or underground forms.⁷¹

At the AITUC's twenty-third annual congress in May 1949, Dange was appointed general secretary in absentia and nominated as a delegate to the WFTU congress in Milan. The WFTU appealed to the Indian government to release him, but without success.⁷² As a result, the Indian labour movement was not represented in Milan, although Dange formally retained his position as one of the federation's vice-presidents. In 1950, while he was still in prison, the WFTU executive committee sought to exert pressure on Indian authorities through diplomatic protests and solidarity campaigns. It sent a formal message to Prime Minister Nehru, denouncing the continued detention of Dange and other labour leaders without inquiry or trial and framing these measures as violations of human rights, as proclaimed in the United Nations Charter.⁷³ The committee also addressed a message directly to Dange, praising him as a courageous fighter for the working class, portraying the Indian bourgeoisie as a new oppressor in the post-colonial state, and situating his case within a broader struggle for liberation from imperialism and its "lackeys".⁷⁴ By pledging to publicize the repression and mobilize international opinion, the WFTU attempted to turn Dange's imprisonment into an emblematic case of post-colonial injustice.

Given the difficult situation in India, the prospect of holding the Pan-Asian conference in Calcutta receded further. There was a lack of local organizers with sufficient authority and resources to coordinate a meeting of at least one hundred delegates. Ultimately, the change of venue from Calcutta to Beijing reflected not only these

⁷⁰For a contextualization of these new labour laws, see Ravi Ahuja, "'Produce or Perish': The Crisis of the Late 1940s and the Place of Labour in Post-Colonial India", *Modern Asian Studies*, 54:4 (2020), pp. 1041–1112. Available at: www.jstor.org/stable/26938736; last accessed 27 January 2026.

⁷¹Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, and Aditya Mukherjee, *India after Independence: 1947–2000* (New Delhi, 2000); Gene D. Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller, *Communism in India* (Bombay, 1950).

⁷²"Indien: Der 23. Jahreskongreß des All-Indischen Gewerkschaftsbundes", *Die Weltgewerkschaftsbewegung. Monatsrevue des Weltgewerkschaftsbundes*, 3 (July 1949), p. 25.

⁷³"Documents on the Session of the Executive Bureau and Committee", held in Budapest, May 1950, IISH, WFTU 93, p. 33.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*

political and practical obstacles but also China's growing importance within the communist trade union movement.⁷⁵ According to Leow, plans for an Asian conference in Beijing were being developed in Moscow in early 1949 and were endorsed at the Milan congress.⁷⁶ What was now called the Asian–Australasian Trade Union Conference took place in Beijing in November/December 1949 under the auspices of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). It aimed to consolidate support for the WFTU against its rivals, to establish an Asian liaison office, and to assist Asian trade unionists in both their workplace and political struggles.⁷⁷

One major outcome of the Beijing conference was the expansion of trade union education in Asia, coordinated by the ACFTU and the WFTU. The Asia–Australasian Liaison Bureau, staffed by representatives from the USSR, India, Indonesia, Korea, and Japan, became an important hub. In 1951 the ACFTU founded a training school for trade unionists and, by 1953, reported having trained over 100,000 people.⁷⁸ The WFTU, for its part, established an international solidarity fund in 1950 and launched its own international educational programme. Beginning in 1953, the first cohorts – drawn largely from Asia – attended classes in Budapest; by 1959, this institution had been formalized as the WFTU College.⁷⁹ Beyond institution-building and training, the WFTU also provided material aid in the event of natural disasters and social emergencies, reinforcing its profile as a global actor.

Dange was released from prison in 1950 and soon thereafter elected to the CPI politburo and central committee, where he contributed to debates over the party's programme and strategy.⁸⁰

Simultaneously, he intensified his work in the trade union movement through the AITUC. During the general textile strike of 1950, he again played a leading role in organizing and supporting workers under repressive conditions. His attempt to attend the World Economic Conference in Moscow in April 1950 failed, however, when Indian authorities refused to grant him an exit permit.⁸¹ This episode underscores the extent to which his international mobility remained constrained, despite or because of his positions in both (communist) party and trade union structures.

From 1953 onwards, Dange was once again able to travel abroad. He spent an extended period in Vienna, where the WFTU secretariat had its headquarters. During this stay he participated in the WFTU executive committee meeting in February 1953

⁷⁵The Women's International Democratic Federation also abandoned its original plan to meet in India and went to China in the same year as the WFTU. Yulia Gradska, "Women's International Democratic Federation, the 'Third World' and the Global Cold War from the late-1950s to the mid-1960s", *Women's History Review*, 29 (2020), pp. 270–288, 275.

⁷⁶Leow, "Asian Lessons in the Cold War Classroom", p. 433.

⁷⁷See also Sofia Graziani, "Chinese Communists and the World Federation of Trade Unions (1949–1966)" in this Special Issue.

⁷⁸Leow, "Asian Lessons in the Cold War Classroom", p. 433.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, p. 448; Immanuel R. Harisch and Eric Burton, "The Missing Link? Western Communists as Mediators between the East German FDGB, the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), and African Trade Unions in the Late 1950s and Early 1960s", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 103 (2023), pp. 292–311. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547922000333>; last accessed 27 January 2026.

⁸⁰B.T. Ranadive, "S.A. Dange (1959)", in Banerjee, S.A. *Dange*, pp. 16–31, 27.

⁸¹"Zustrom aus aller Welt zur Weltwirtschaftskonferenz", *Österreichische Zeitung*, 2 April 1952, p. 8.

and a subsequent conference on the defence, improvement, and extension of social welfare, which placed social security deficits and the role of trade unions in shaping welfare states at the centre of discussion.⁸² He was accompanied in Vienna by his wife, Ushabai Dange, who spoke at the conference as a representative of the Indian Federation of Textile Workers. Her intervention highlighted the precarious situation of Indian workers in the absence of a comprehensive welfare regime and under conditions of chronic unemployment, thus inserting Indian working-class experience into a transnational debate on social rights.⁸³

Ushabai was one of the first women trade union leaders in interwar and post-war Bombay. Moving from the position of a child widow to that of a central figure in textile workers' and women's organizing, she frequently acted as her husband's public stand-in and key organizer during his imprisonments, leading strikes and mobilizing women workers. Her Marathi autobiography *Pan Aikta Kaun* ("Who listens to me"), published in 1970, offers an intimate perspective on this shared political life, detailing her precarious existence as a communist and trade unionist, her repeated arrests, and the difficulties of raising children amid poverty, surveillance, and state violence. Although the relationship between Ushabai and Shripad Dange is not at the centre of this analysis, Ushabai's autobiography is still highly revealing, since it necessarily also offers a distinctive, intimate perspective. Her own entry into party and trade union work occurred through him, yet over time – particularly during his long periods of imprisonment – she carved out an increasingly autonomous role, which underscores a personal career path that, while remarkable, remained constrained by the gendered limits placed on Indian women of her generation. The fact that it was Ushabai, and not Shripad Dange, who addressed the Vienna conference, and that she appeared there not merely as his wife but as a representative of the textile workers' movement in her own right, highlights her position within the trade union movement and the specific authority she had acquired as an actor on the international stage.⁸⁴

Shripad Dange returned to Vienna in October 1953 for the WFTU's third world congress (see Figure 1). Bringing together 819 delegates from seventy-nine countries, the congress signalled a more systematic engagement with the problems of colonial and semi-colonial societies.⁸⁵ Dange was re-elected to the executive committee alongside figures such as Jacques N. Gom (French Cameroon) and Abdoulaye Diallo (French West Africa/Togo),⁸⁶ thereby embodying the federation's effort to integrate anti-colonial perspectives into its leadership. In his interventions, he framed recent strikes and mass protests in India as evidence of a "new phase" of working-class unity from below. He highlighted the contradiction between rising industrial output and worsening living standards, inflation, and unemployment, characterizing these

⁸²"Für die Stärkung der Aktionseinheit der Arbeiterklasse", *Österreichische Zeitung*, 1 March 1953, pp. 1–2; "Schärfste Ausbeutung in den Kolonialländern", *Österreichische Zeitung*, 4 March 1953, p. 2.

⁸³"Für soziale Sicherheit der Werktätigen", *Österreichische Zeitung*, 5 March 1953, pp. 1–2.

⁸⁴Ania Loomba, *Revolutionary Desires: Women, Communism, and Feminism in India* (London and New York, 2019).

⁸⁵*Die Weltgewerkschaftsbewegung: Monatsrevue des Weltgewerkschaftsbundes*, 21–22 (October 1953).

⁸⁶See also Harisch and Bangali, "A Communist Ambassador of Labour" in this Special Issue.

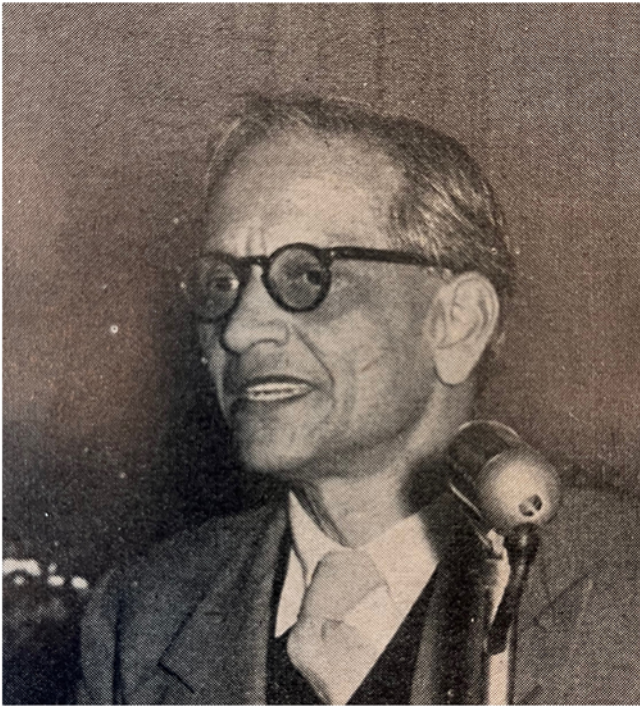


Figure 1. Shripad Amrit Dange at the third World Trade Union Congress, Vienna, October 1953.
 Source: World Federation of Trade Unions (ed.), *Die Weltgewerkschaftsbewegung*, double issue 21/22 (1953), p. 78.

dynamics as expressions of a “monopolistic system” and locating India within a broader post-colonial critique of capitalist development.⁸⁷

During 1954, although he did not travel, Dange continued to use WFTU channels and publications to raise awareness of labour conditions in India and to solicit international solidarity. In a May Day message published in the WFTU’s journal, he called on the international labour movement to defend principles of trade union liberty enshrined in the United Nations Charter and warned that monopoly capital, large landowners, and their governments were intensifying attacks on democratic freedoms. He stressed that the right to strike was nowhere explicitly guaranteed in the Indian Constitution and remained under constant pressure. Interpreting large-scale strikes – from the Calcutta tramway struggle to tea plantation disputes – as laboratories of unity from below, he argued that workers’ own unity committees and local action fronts had pointed beyond the fragmentation of the Indian trade union movement and offered a blueprint for national reunification and a more effective, internationally connected anti-imperialist labour politics.⁸⁸

⁸⁷*Die Weltgewerkschaftsbewegung. Monatsrevue des Weltgewerkschaftsbundes*, 21–22 (October 1953), pp. 50, 71, 78–79.

⁸⁸*Die Weltgewerkschaftsbewegung. Monatsrevue des Weltgewerkschaftsbundes*, 7–8 (1954), pp. 34–35; 11 (1954), pp. 34–35. For an insight into the increase in strikes in India during this period, see Ahuja,

At the WFTU general council meeting in Sofia in September 1956, Dange explicitly framed post-colonial India as a site of incomplete decolonization, where political sovereignty coexisted with brutal repression of labour protest. He urged the international trade union movement to combine support for the Indian government's "progressive" anti-colonial stance in foreign policy with open condemnation of police shootings and mass arrests of peaceful strikers.⁸⁹ For Dange, solidarity could not be equated with uncritical endorsement; it required active protest, material assistance, and the willingness to hold even formally independent governments accountable to working-class interests.

Dange's report "Trade Union Tasks in the Fight against Colonialism" (see Figure 2), delivered as a general political statement at the WFTU's fourth world congress in Leipzig in 1957, crystallized his mature position as both trade unionist and political leader. The report condensed a comprehensive strategy for decolonization into a trade union programme. Dange interpreted the "awakening" of hundreds of millions in Asia, Africa, and Latin America as the fulfilment of colonialism's historical fate, distinguished between already-independent states and those still under foreign rule, and insisted that political independence must be followed by economic decolonization through the expulsion of foreign monopoly capital and planned industrial development. Situated within what later historiography described as the "Bandung moment" of trade union internationalism, Dange's position anticipated Afro-Asian practices of "positive neutrality": he accepted international assistance in principle but demanded that it neither compromise sovereignty nor reproduce neo-colonial dependency.⁹⁰ Identifying as a communist, he presented socialist countries as preferred partners whose technical aid he framed as proletarian internationalism rather than imperial tutelage. At the same time, he called for inclusive trade union unity across international affiliations, arguing that cooperation with all unions willing to defend workers' interests was necessary to counter imperialist "splitting" tactics and sustain a broad anti-monopoly, anti-colonial front:

Make sure that you have international solidarity with the working class of the socialist countries, with the working class of the capitalist countries and with all people who can be won to your side. [...] On this basis we shall go forward to unite the working class on the basis of solidarity, to unite the working class without political conditions or prejudices.⁹¹

Within this framework, Dange's analysis of the worker–peasant alliance was particularly farsighted. He identified the peasantry as the "natural ally" of the working class

"Produce or Perish"; for a contextualization of the divergence within the Indian trade union movement, see Venkatanarayanan, "Struggle or Struggling to Unite".

⁸⁹ *Die Weltgewerkschaftsbewegung. Monatsrevue des Weltgewerkschaftsbundes*, 11 (1956), p. 47.

⁹⁰ Stolte argues that this new period of trade union internationalism must be seen through the "Bandung lens" – the space between the international federations "that an Afro-Asian trade unionism was able to develop". Stolte, "Introduction: Trade Union Networks", p. 334.

⁹¹ "To Win and Defend Independence Vigilance is Essential: Closing speech of S.A. Dange, General Secretary, All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), Vice-President of the WFTU at the 4th World Trade Union Congress, October 1957", AITUC, 117.714.7.

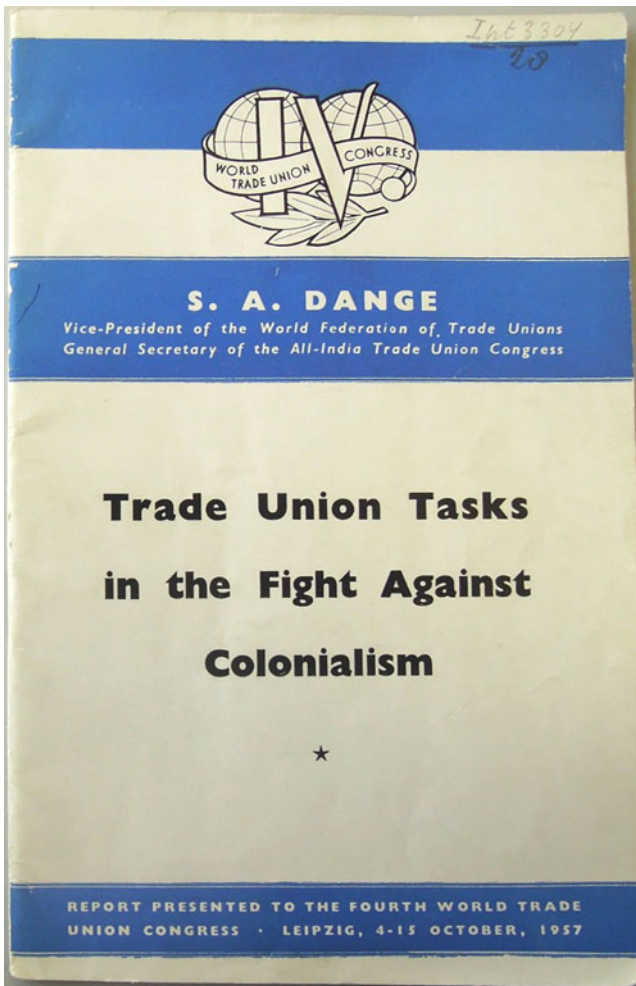


Figure 2. Cover page of the printed speech by Shripad Amrit Dange at the fourth World Trade Union Congress, Leipzig, 1957.

Source: World Federation of Trade Unions (ed.), S.A. Dange: Trade Union Tasks in the Fight against Colonialism. Report Presented to the Fourth World Trade Union Congress (Leipzig, 1957).

and urged trade unions to support independent peasant organization, land redistribution, and improvements in rural livelihoods. His emphasis on plantation labour as a hinge between rural and industrial worlds anticipated later scholarship that treated peasant and agrarian workers as central actors in global labour history, rather than as a mere “reserve”. It also resonated with contemporary debates on worker–peasant alliances as a precondition for effective anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggle.⁹²

⁹²Karin Hofmeester and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *Global Agricultural Workers from the 17th to the 21st Century* (Leiden, 2019).

Dange's Leipzig report thus appeared as a synthesis of ideas he had developed over decades and, in retrospect, as a paradigmatic articulation of mid-century Afro-Asian labour internationalism in alignment with the WFTU.

Conclusion

The post-war decades were marked by intense efforts to forge new forms of global solidarity under conditions of deepening Cold War division and accelerating decolonization. The WFTU, founded in 1945 as a united federation, briefly brought together labour movements across ideological and geographical divides and became a central arena in which conflicting visions of social justice, national sovereignty, and economic development were negotiated. This article has argued that the history of the WFTU's early years appears in a different light when reconstructed from an individual, (post-)colonial perspective. Shripad Amrit Dange's trajectory highlights both the opportunities and the limits that the federation offered to colonial and post-colonial actors: the possibility of inscribing anti-colonial concerns in international agendas, but also the persistence of structural inequalities that positioned unions from colonial and semi-colonial societies as "underdeveloped" junior partners, subject to travel restrictions, political repression, and the strategic calculations of more powerful affiliates.

By following Dange, the article has shown how a subaltern labour leader navigated and sought to reshape the WFTU as an arena of anti-colonial politics. It has traced his efforts to connect post-war discussions to the unresolved question of colonialism; examined his attempts to broaden the definition of the working class to include plantation and agrarian labour; and analysed his role in advocating a Pan-Asian conference that, in his view, should have made Asian unions full, rights-bearing participants in the federation. It has also shown how the combination of domestic repression and international reluctance – most notably the sabotage of the Calcutta conference and the TUC's and CIO's obstruction of the Colonial Department during the period of the united WFTU – narrowed the scope of these projects.

Dange's writings and speeches demonstrate that his communist convictions did not translate into uncritical alignment with any existing "camp". While he consistently regarded socialism as the preferred model of development and emphasized solidarity with socialist countries, he also articulated a vision of labour internationalism grounded in a global community of workers that transcended state boundaries and ideological divisions. His calls for unity "without political conditions or prejudices" and his insistence on the centrality of the worker-peasant alliance point beyond the immediate Cold War configurations towards later currents of non-alignment and Afro-Asian solidarity. Read in the light of the Bandung Conference of 1955 and the emergence of the non-aligned movement, Dange's interventions appear as an early trade union variant of these broader political projects: he sought to carve out an autonomous space between competing blocs, and to anchor this space in transnational networks.

Seen through the lens of subaltern internationalism, Dange thus appears as an actor whose mobility was constantly negotiated and often curtailed, yet whose ideas circulated widely and contributed to reshaping debates on colonialism, development, and labour at multiple scales. His biography thus invites a broader reconsideration

of how international trade union organizations functioned not only as transmission belts for great-power projects, but also as arenas in which structurally ambivalent actors from the colonial and post-colonial world developed their own projects of global transformation.

Acknowledgements. I would like to express my sincere thanks to my colleagues and co-editors of the Special Issue, Immanuel R. Harisch and Magaly Rodríguez García, for their comments on an earlier version and their supportive exchange of research findings. I am also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers.

OA Funding Statement. Open access funding provided by Max Planck Society.

Cite this article: Johanna Wolf, “Decolonizing Labour Internationalism: Shripad Amrit Dange and the World Federation of Trade Unions, 1945–1957”, *International Review of Social History* 71 (2026), pp. 51–75, S34. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859026101345>