From Trade Union Internationalism to the International Federation of Trade Unions

Trade-union internationalism existed long before anyone had the idea of setting up a trade-union international.\(^1\) Like all the forms of internationalism which emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century, it had its precursors in the democratic movements that were formed following the French Revolution of 1789.\(^2\) The central point of this internationalism was the universal interest of humanity in creating republican and liberal nations; it was thus based on common ideals. Shortly afterwards, the first workers’ associations began to emerge, along with socialist ideas, and these developments raised the question of the common social interests of the new class which was being produced in a number of countries by industrialisation: the class of wage-earners.

Numerous contacts were established between the supporters of the various socialist schools of thought and political movements in France, Britain and Germany – in the German case this happened first and foremost in exile – and the question of international organisation was already being discussed on the eve of the 1848 revolutions. The ‘Communist Manifesto’ drawn up by Marx and Engels was the most precise theoretical expression of this phenomenon.\(^3\)

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1 This point was correctly made in a recent contribution by Jean-Marie Demaldent (1990, p. 19). In the present work, we have adopted the definition of trade unions given by the Webbs in the revised edition of their classic study of the history of the British trade-union movement (which explicitly altered the formulation given in the first edition produced in 1894): ‘A trade union, as we understand the term, is a continuous association of wage-earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their working lives’. They explained their change in a footnote, as follows: ‘In the first edition we said “of their employment”. This has been objected to as implying that trade unions have always contemplated a perpetual continuance of the capitalist or wage-system. No such implication was intended. Trade unions have, at various dates during the past century at any rate, frequently had aspirations towards a revolutionary change in social and economic relations’ (Sidney and Beatrice Webb 1920, p. 1).

2 Where not otherwise indicated, the present sketch is based on the following works: Lewis Lorwin 1930; Susan Milner 1990; and Ina Hermes 1979. For the historical and theoretical origins of internationalism, see also Friedemann and Hölscher 1982, pp. 367–97; and Hobsbawm 1988, pp. 3–16.

3 Of course, the Manifesto only mentions workers’ ‘associations’ and ‘combinations’ in passing. Even the description ‘Trade Unions’ was not present in the original. It was added in 1888 by
The defeat of the European revolution initially pushed the political form of working-class organisation advocated by Marx and Engels into the background. They had to accept that, for years to come, they would be faced with a greatly restricted field of activity on the European continent. In contrast to this, the more democratic and at the same time more economically advanced conditions in Great Britain (as also on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean) allowed a broad trade-union movement to emerge, and this proved to be a powerful instrument for improving the situation of at least the skilled workers. In fact the next impulse for the creation of an international workers’ organisation originated from this part of the world. Moreover, a large number of political exiles had found refuge in London, and they also influenced this process. Here too we find the first use of the word ‘international’ in connection with the workers’ movement, in the shape of the ‘International Committee’ set up in London in 1855, which was renamed the ‘International Association’ in the following year.

But the idea of an International did not find expression in an actual organisation until the impulse was provided by the employers’ decision to import strike-breakers from the Continent, in reaction to the London building workers’ strike of 1858. The leaders of the London trade unions responded to this in two ways. They joined together in a regional association, which later provided the foundation for the establishment in 1868 of a nationwide organisation, the Trades Union Congress, and they sought out international connections by making an appeal to the workers of Continental Europe. Their internationalism thus had highly practical and material motives. It was aimed above all at countering weaknesses in each nation’s individual labour movement.

The main external contacts they made were with French workers, but political exiles in London also played an important part in the process which led in September 1864 to the formation of the International Working Men’s Association (later described as the First International), which was the first relatively broad international workers’ organisation. Organisations of several different

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4 On this point, see, ‘The Forerunners of the International’, which is Part One, Section Three of Rothstein 1983 [1929], pp. 124–82.
6 See, for example, Milner 1990, p. 16.