

Chapter Fifteen

The Membership Explosion in the 1960s

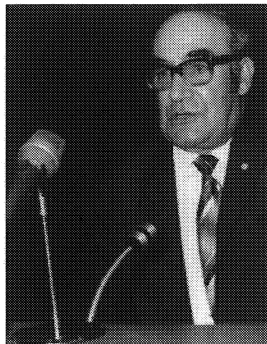
The resignation of Omer Becu shortly before the ITF's 26th congress in Bern in July 1960 marked the end of an era dominated by the Second World War and its immediate aftermath. Becu left to take over from Jaap Oldenbroek, his predecessor at the ITF, as general secretary of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions.

The new decade necessitated a change of direction in the wake of the growing impact of new technologies and the expansion of the ITF's regional influence and activities. Pieter de Vries, director of regional affairs and former president of the Dutch seafarers' union, was elected as a 'caretaker' acting general secretary. He immediately began to modernise the ITF's structures and two years later at the Helsinki congress the constitution was heavily revised. Congress itself would become triennial, the executive committee became the 'executive board' and was doubled in size. It was also decided to hold elections to the board on a regional formula which reflected the spread of the ITF membership. Europeans still formed the largest single group, but North Americans, Africans, Asians and Latin

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Americans/Caribbeans could choose their own members free from any outside influence.

Pieter de Vries skilfully presided over the changes but by 1965 he indicated that he was ready to retire. Hans Imhof, assistant general secretary and former secretary of the Swiss railway workers' union, was unanimously elected to take his place. His period in office lasted a mere three years before he was defeated in an election at the Wiesbaden congress by Charles Blyth, who had been appointed assistant general secretary a year earlier.

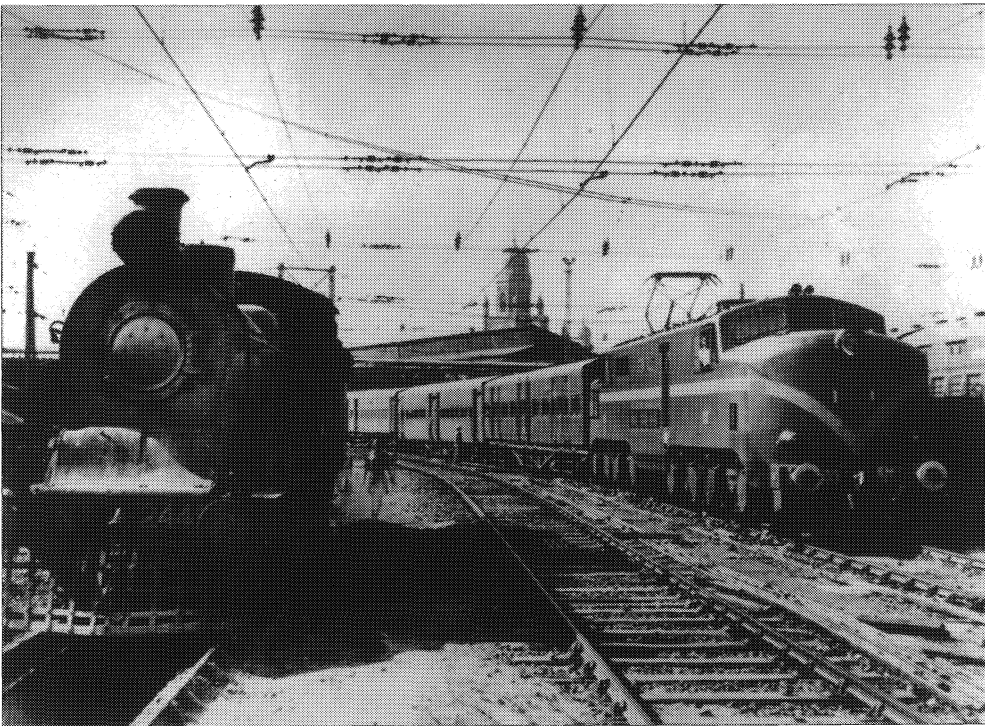


Charles Blyth, ITF
General Secretary from
1968 to 1977.

Blyth's succession was popular. A tough member of the British National Union of Seamen, he was self-educated and had been seconded to the ITF in Hong Kong before becoming head of the special seafarers' section. He preferred to see the ITF in very practical, bread-and-butter terms. Affiliates found that he gave a human face to international activities which could otherwise seem remote from daily life.

The dismantling of the British, French and other colonial empires gave a stimulus to the formation and growth of unions in the emerging, independent states. The ITF was well placed to benefit from these changes as it had a long record of opposition to colonialism. In the early 1960s the ITF's membership in Africa grew fourfold and almost as rapidly in Latin America. The Asian membership grew too from a base in India and Japan. De Vries had given a high priority to the 'regions'. In Africa, the regional office was revived in April 1961 by the appointment of Emile Laflamme, a bilingual American railwayman of French-Canadian stock. His task was soon complicated, however, by the growing tendency among African

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Old and new: Indian railways in the 1980s.

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governments to see trade unions either as political allies or political enemies, and not as independent bodies answerable only to their members. It was a great loss when bad health forced his early retirement in 1967 but he had given valuable training to his young Nigerian assistant, Ben Udogwu. After a spell at the ITF headquarters and after the 'Biafra' war had made Lagos an impracticable venue, he opened an ITF regional office in Accra early in 1970. By the end of 1972 the ITF had retained strong memberships in Ghana, Nigeria, Malawi, Sierra Leone and 'Rhodesia'.

Disputes on the railways in Malaysia in 1962 and on the docks in the Philippines in 1963 raised the profile of the ITF and its affiliates in Asia. Donald U'ren, leader of the Malayan railway workers during their dispute, became the ITF's Asian representative in 1964 with a regional office in Kuala Lumpur. An 'Asian advisory committee', composed of representatives of Asian affiliates and giving them a direct line to the executive board, was formed in late 1965.

If, by the late 1960s, the ITF could claim a broad and generally representative membership in Asia, it could not do so for Australia where, despite the long-standing affiliation of a number of unions, others continued to find the ITF politically unacceptable. A significant breakthrough came in 1971 with the affiliation of the Australian Waterside Workers' Federation, a dockers' union of great strength and influence. Its arrival was to prove of lasting benefit to the ITF both as an active supporter of the Flag of Convenience campaign and more widely in the Pacific region as a whole.

Politics of another kind had long bedevilled the trade unions of Latin America, a continent plagued by

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demagogues or reactionary government. Some transport workers' unions had very long histories and a few, such as the Locomotivemen's Union of Argentina, 'La Fraternidad', had connections with the ITF going back long before the Second World War. The ITF's regional office in Mexico City and the ITF's Latin American activities were maintained by a number of transitional arrangements after the sudden death of Trifón Gómez in 1955, but it was not until the Spanish exile, Fernando Azaña, - and later Jack Otero - took over as director of the regional office that the activities developed substantially. The achievement was all the greater due to the very unfavourable political background with a coup in Brazil and a military government in Ecuador.

The many and weighty reports on the future of transport in a post-war Europe had been prepared and discussed on the assumption that since the great majority of the ITF's membership was European (more precisely West European), then it was only right that the Europeans should have such a large share of the ITF's time and resources.

The move within a number of European states towards economic integration in the form of a European Economic Community (EEC) demanded a response both from the national centres of those countries - initially the 'six' of Belgium, France, Federal Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands - and specifically from the transport unions, who knew that part of the integration process would entail the introduction of a common transport policy. By the early 1970s, and especially when three more states - Denmark, Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland - joined the EEC, there was pressure for the ITF to form its own European regional organisation and so ensure that the

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ITF's European affiliates were not divided into two camps - those in the EEC and those outside it.

A feature of the ITF's regional activities by the early 1970s was the growing number of conferences in Africa, Asia and Latin America that had specific sectional themes. Because the ITF had always been shaped by the needs of its affiliates, the trend had a practical purpose and that same pragmatic basis underlies the whole development of ITF sectional activities in the post-war era. From a study of the agendas and decisions of ITF sectional activities it is possible to form a picture of what has happened within the transport industry over the last 50 years.

After the war, for example, there was great concern to organise the industry in a rational way to avoid wasting resources on unnecessary competition. The railways, by far the largest of the public transport services at the time and by far the largest single employer, clearly had most at stake. The railwaymen's section recognised that topics such as road and rail infrastructure costs, which might seem academic to the outsider, were a vital element in keeping their industry in business and their members in work.

Both railway workers and road transport drivers had a common interest in keeping working hours within reasonable bounds. Railway drivers were worried that their own hours were under reasonable control and did not want unfair competition from an uncontrolled road transport industry. Road transport unions believe, of course, that excessive working hours are socially unacceptable and a danger to road users, but they have also to fight constantly to secure or maintain a good level of trade union organisation in an industry that is

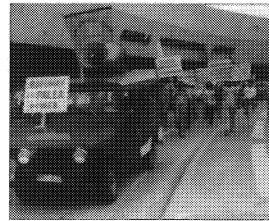
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notoriously fragmented and sometimes dominated by family or even one-person businesses.

One of the dockers' main concerns in 1945 was to limit the weight a man was expected to carry, but by the 1960s this had moved on to 'containerisation'. The impact was clearly to be felt on jobs and renewed efforts were made at international level to lay down standards for decasualising the port industry and ensuring guaranteed levels of wages and benefits.

When the proposal was made to set up a civil aviation section, Oldenbroek had clear doubts about whether it would be anything other than a marginal industry. However, in 20 years it was to become second only to the seafarers' section within the ITF in its breadth and influence. Drawing its strength from the practical nature of its business, issues such as flight-deck crew complement or cabin attendant training could only be settled at international level in an industry which - at one time - even had an international definition of an in-flight sandwich.

The changes within transport meant that by 1974 total ITF membership had stagnated. Railway employment in particular had been hit hard by mechanisation and automation while containerisation still had to do its worst in the docks. But the ITF's influence and its organic strength had never been greater. It had won great respect for its principled and determined opposition to the forces of dictatorship, suspending all its Greek affiliates in 1968 on suspicion that their opposition to the 'Colonels' was half-hearted, and calling on all its affiliates to oppose the murderous coup in Chile in September 1973.



Filipino aviation workers demonstrating in May 1986 in Manila airport.

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Dock work before containerisation.

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Automation has replaced manual labour in many areas of transport. One of a number of the transport professions in danger of disappearing, pictured here is a maritime radio officer on board a UK flag ship in 1964.