

SOLIDARITY

Chapter Two

The State Fights Back

Aggressive statements, increasing trade union confidence and the threat of international strikes provoked disquiet among employers and governments. The unwelcome appearance of foreign trade unionists - seen as professional agitators - resulted in arrests, deportations and banning orders. Times of industrial unrest could be periods of high tension and the federation's leaders made no secret of their enthusiasm for international strikes and boycotts.

Officials of the fledgling ITF soon found they were targets for official reaction when they tried to intervene in disputes in other countries. Mann, Wilson and C.L. Buzzo, who was secretary of the Antwerp branch of the National Sailors' and Firemen's Union, were immediately banned from Belgium for their activities in encouraging trade unionism. Ben Tillett's treatment at the hands of the Antwerp police in 1896 created a small diplomatic incident, with the British Government eventually failing to extract an apology for his treatment. Protesting about the arrest in a letter on 19 September 1896 to George Curzon, MP, Under Secretary of State at the Foreign Office, Mann wrote: 'Mr Tillett is a very old friend of mine. I have known

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A photograph taken during Tom Mann's tour of Sweden on behalf of the International Federation of Ship, Dock and River Workers in 1897. With Mann (centre) are Charles Lindley (right), Axel Danielson and Kleijn of the Swedish Transport Workers' Union.

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him many years before he was as publicly known as he now is and I have the greatest faith in the accuracy of all the statements he has made of complaints as to his treatment. He assures me that eight days after his liberation he vomited every day and that the stench of the cell and its receptacle for human excrement has such an effect upon his health that he still suffers from it.'

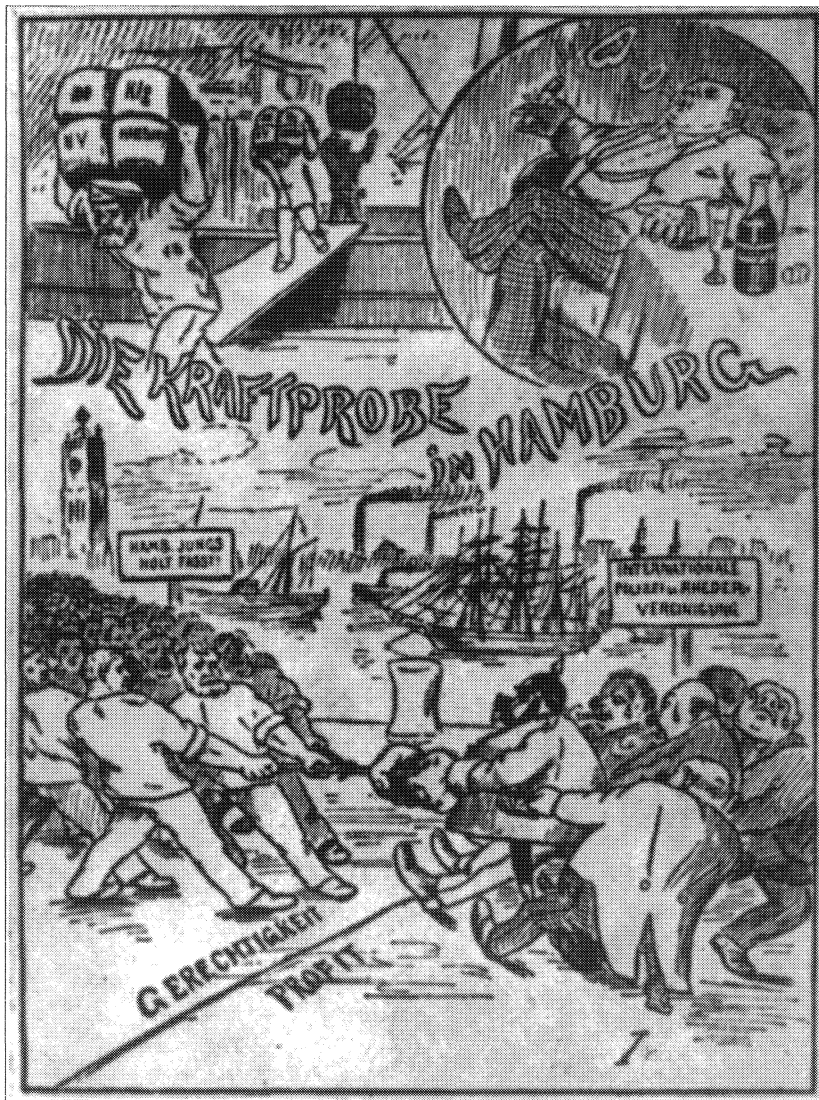
Mann was arrested and deported during the Hamburg dock strike in 1896-7. The federation's early leaflets were full of details of detentions and deportations. There were also reports of repression, arrests and persecution in Russia and Spain.

The Hamburg dock strike

But it was the Hamburg dock strike which was to cruelly expose the rhetoric of optimistic international solidarity to the reality of a harsh and bitter dispute. Poor conditions in Hamburg had led to a great deal of resentment. The local leadership of the Verband der Hafenarbeiter (Association of Port Workers) believed that the dockers were not yet ready for a strike. As they had not fully included the intransigence of the port employers in their calculations, a moderate demand for improved conditions in November only resulted in a few minor concessions. The patience of the stevedores, whose average wage was £1 a week, cracked and they walked out on strike on 21 November joined soon after by seamen and other dock workers, the number on strike rose to 8,000 by the end of the first week.

Dock owners refused pleas of mediation while the workers turned down a proposal from the provincial Senate to go

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A contemporary cartoon about the Hamburg dock strike in 1896–7 from the German Social Democratic paper *Der wahre Jacob*. The cartoon is entitled 'trial of strength in Hamburg' and it depicts a tug of war with Hamburg dockers on one side and police and shipowners on the other side.

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A cartoon published in 1903 about a Dutch rail strike which the ITF supported with financial aid.

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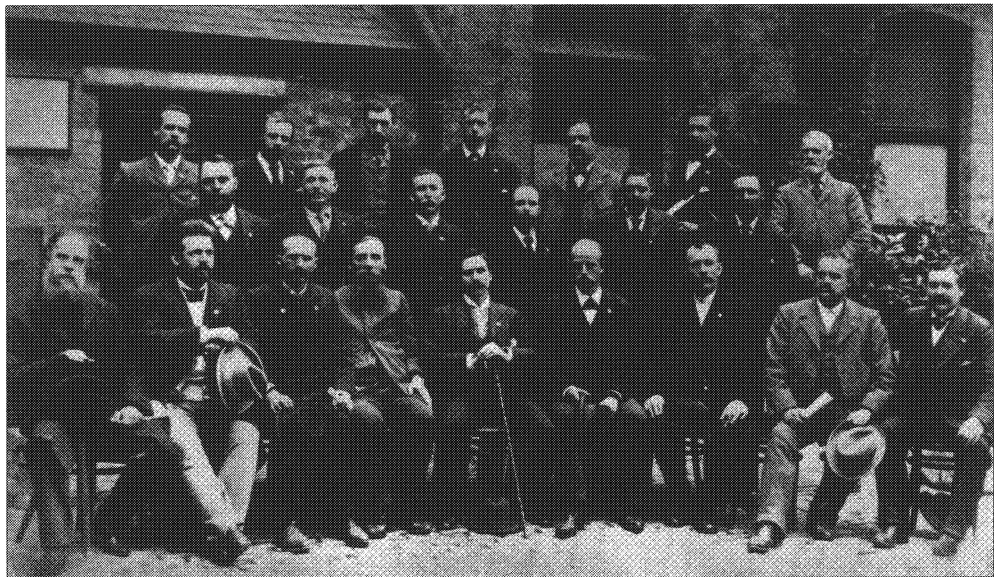
back to work on the old terms while an inquiry into their conditions was held. The employers searched the ports of northern Europe for strikebreakers, but they were expensive and unproductive when recruited. After 11 weeks of winter, the strikers were forced back to work, largely through the threat of starvation. The dispute was called off and although some employers conceded the workers' demands, the dispute was a defeat. A Hamburg Senate inquiry set up after the strike confirmed the justification of the workers' grievances. Improvements followed, while Hamburg dockers and seamen had learnt the importance of trade union organisation.

The *Seamen's Chronicle*, which had begun to be translated into Flemish, summarised the feeling of the union leadership: 'It was hunger that has won the battle. We say to the arrogant and wealth-proud employers of Hamburg: "You will find your victory purchased at a dear price." The men of Hamburg have suffered - the iron has entered their souls; they will remember how they were beaten and their past experience will serve them well in their next attempt to win better conditions.'

The International Federation of Transport Workers

This chastening defeat produced a degree of resentment over the inability of the federation and of the British unions to stem the flow of strikebreakers. By the time of the 1898 congress, held in London, delegates were less impressed by the 'gimmicks' of the early years and there were calls for more solid organisation. The federation's programme - an eight-hour day, no Sunday or night work and a Saturday

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The London congress of 1898 in which the organisation adopted the name International Transport Workers' Federation.

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half-holiday - were to be achieved by propaganda, negotiation and the ballot box. Ship boycotts were to be used whenever it was necessary to bring pressure on employers, and there was no talk of co-ordinated international strikes.

The congress also took a step that automatically extended its appeal. The International Federation of Ship, Dock and Riverside Workers became simply the International Transport Workers' Federation. The decision, which gave the ITF its enduring name, was surprisingly uncontroversial and Tom Mann commented from his president's chair: 'It would make us more cosmopolitan than we are at present and would carry no special risk.'

A lack of obvious success on the industrial front led to a period of disillusionment, made worse when Tom Mann left for a ten-year period in Australia in 1901. Poor finances inevitably limited the ability of the ITF to support international action and did not improve until after the headquarters were moved to Germany in 1904.

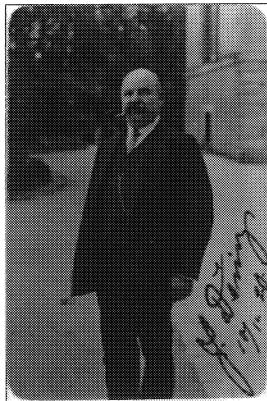
As well as a more determined effort to put the ITF on a sound organisational footing came a harder line on the romantic support of workers in struggle, which had been a characteristic of the federation's early leadership. Hermann Jochade, of the German railway workers, who had taken over as president, was not impressed, for example, by a call by the Argentine Socialist Party for European dockers to boycott Argentine vessels in support of a series of strikes in 1905: 'We are the authority to declare such a boycott in co-operation with the comrades in those countries. We will not assist independent action in any way.' Even when the request was made formally to the central council it was



ITF President and International Secretary Hermann Jochade who led the ITF from 1904 to 1916. Jochade was killed in a Nazi concentration camp in the 1930s.

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rejected, as was a similar appeal from Norwegian dockers in the port of Kragerö.



German dockers' leader Johann Döring was a founder of the ITF and the leader of the 1896–7 Hamburg dock strike.

Johann Döring, leader of the German dockers, raised the issue at the 1906 Congress in Milan. He believed there was little point in solidarity action until there was a well-founded organisation of transport workers in existence to carry it out. 'There have, for example, been several strikes in both France and Holland, of which - without being a prophet - one could predict with mathematical certainty that they would not end successfully,' he said. 'The big shipping companies would rather expend 10m Marks on opposing strikes than 50,000 Marks in the form of a wage increase. Only when all organisations have been properly developed and internationally united can one successfully prosecute the struggle at all points both home and abroad.'

A number of skirmishes in European ports - maritime disputes of seamen and dockers dominated industrial activities - resulted in shipowners and port employers establishing their own federations in Britain, France, Germany, the Scandinavian countries, Italy, Spain and the United States. An international conference convened in 1906 led to secret agreements for employers to exchange lists of strikebreakers, and they drew up special contracts for use on ships, which effectively outlawed official disputes.

The volatile nature of industrial conflict was highlighted during a Swedish dock strike in 1908, when several British strikebreakers were killed by a bomb tossed aboard the *Amalthea*, a barrack ship anchored in Malmö harbour. Local anarchists were blamed for the action.

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Seamen take on the owners

By the time of the Copenhagen Congress in 1910, there was considerable frustration about the lack of international activity, particularly by the seamen. Although they made up a small percentage (under 10 per cent) of the total membership of 470,000, the seafarers were easily the most vocal group. Havelock Wilson warned of an impending strike and called for international support. Backed by the Americans, Wilson made it clear to the ITF that his union wanted to take action to improve its members' conditions. Following two special seafarers' conferences, the Dutch, Belgians, Danes and Norwegians all agreed on a dispute.

The pay demand was for £6 a month for firemen and £5.50 for ABs. Wilson had caught the mood perfectly and the strikers in ports around were joined by those in Belgium and the Netherlands. Dockers, who demanded 8d (3.3p) per hour and one shilling (5p) overtime, also took part in the strikes in Britain. By the end of 1911, more than a million workers had taken part in the strikes and the unions involved had doubled their membership. An enthusiastic Wilson wrote to Jochade in Berlin: 'We have proved conclusively that if all the unions engaged in the shipping trade will agree to strike in every port at one and the same time, the shipowners' federation is helpless. I have never seen such a tie-up in all the 31 years I have been engaged with the seamen's movement. It is simply lovely.' The German unions, which did not take part in the strikes, nevertheless sent two instalments of Dm5,000 to the strike fund.