

SOLIDARITY

Chapter Five

The ITF's Early Industrial Work

Throughout its history, the ITF has reflected changes in transport as well as the relative strength of the various workers' organisations. The early years of the federation were dominated by seafarers and dockers, the two groups most involved in the organisation's formation. Most were also British, reflecting the fact that the ITF was founded in Britain and based in London. But by the turn of the century, the membership profile had already started to change. In 1901, the ITF's 114,000 members were made up of 44,000 dockers (39 per cent), 34,000 railway workers (30 per cent), 27,000 transport workers (24 per cent) and 8,000 seafarers (7 per cent). Only 20 per cent of the members (22,800) were British, the others being Belgian, Danish, German, French, Dutch, Norwegian, Austrian and Swedish.

The start of the century began to see the transformation of transport systems, with the development of a comprehensive road network for the growing number of motor vehicles, and the increasing use of more advanced technology in the docks. The first international regulation for motor traffic was introduced in 1909, and consisted of

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rules for the issue of international driving licences, the crossing of frontiers and the marking of dangerous places. After the First World War, the first commercial air services were introduced.

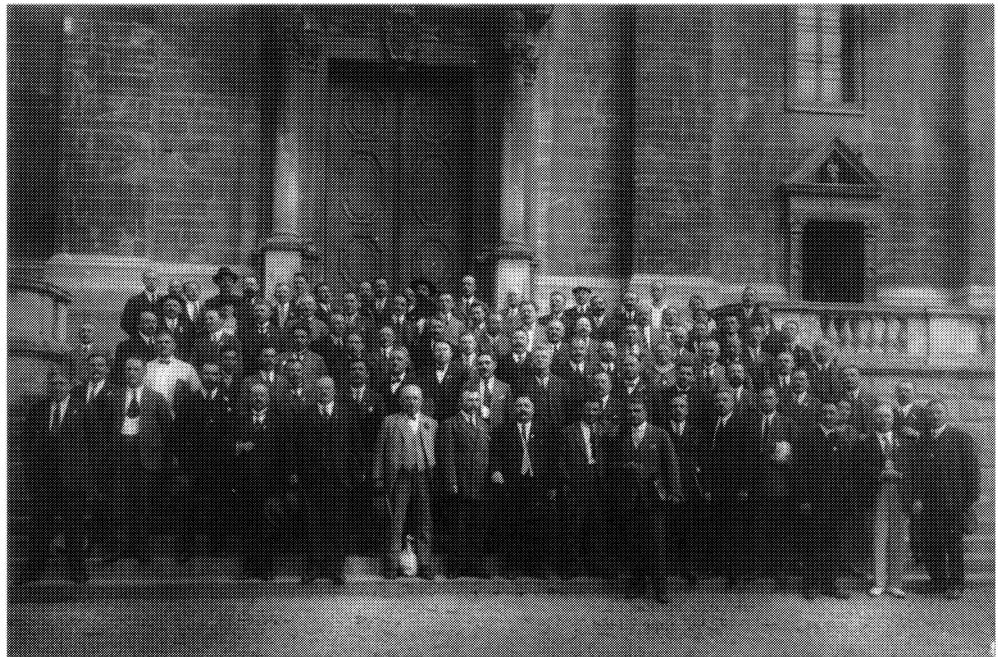
But the years before 1939 belonged to the railways. They provided the bulk of distance transport for both goods and people. Their workers, through their unions, also began to dominate the ITF, at least in terms of numerical representation. By 1910, 57 per cent of the ITF's 500,000 members were railway workers. The proportion of dockers was just 18 per cent and six per cent were seafarers. The table below shows the position during a period of ITF growth after the First World War. The railway membership was both large and stable.

Membership ITF sections 1923–32

year	seafarers	dockers	inland waterway workers	road transport workers	tramway workers	railway workers	civil aviation workers
1923	60,571	192,602	34,354	374,740	142,504	1,224,644	178
1924	54,581	246,688	30,168	118,944	164,946	1,106,790	180
1925	123,424					1,130,428	
1926	110,882	198,727	26,970	137,399	147,713	1,298,151	337
1927	69,768					1,243,444	
1928	71,838	196,093	38,632	191,025	127,881	1,197,251	217
1929	101,895				138,778	1,207,686	
1930	198,450	178,633	37,506	245,800	139,847	1,272,300	586
1932	215,290	176,683	24,905	194,162	135,332	1,314,959	544

Source: Bob Reinalda, Nijmegen University (based on ITF, *Report of Activities, 1922–31*); categories 'other' and 'unknown' are left out. There is no reliable information for 1931.

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The 1925 Railwaymen's Section conference in Bellinzona, Switzerland.

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A division of the federation's membership into industrial sections was begun in 1922 and the railway workers were the first to have their own secretary, Nathan Nathans. The group also held a separate section conference during every ITF congress.

As the International Labour Organisation grew in influence following its foundation in 1919, the railway workers, like seafarers and dockers, used their special conferences to draw up policies that could be developed through the use of international bodies. Attitudes towards issues of safety, such as the introduction of automatic coupling and protection against electrification, were debated, as well as more general trade union concerns of relative pay and conditions.

Dockers also developed their own section conference and drew up a special programme of demands, including the ending of casual labour. The group was also concerned with safety and wanted protection against being forced to lift and carry heavy loads. Eventually, pressure from the ITF was successful in producing ILO conventions governing the marking of the weight of heavy loads and in gaining measures to prevent accidents to workers loading and discharging ships.

Despite their relatively small size in proportion to total ITF membership, seafarers were often the most vociferous in congress and the most active in international affairs. A dispute between the ITF and American and British unions made the membership figures more volatile, but the need for a common front between seafarers and dockers eventually led to a growth in numbers and more affiliations.

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An ITF Railwaymen's Section conference held in Madrid, Spain from 20 April to 3 May 1930.

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The International Labour Organisation's Labour Conference in Geneva in July 1928. Pictured here are members of the workers' group from ITF affiliates.

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There was also a timetable of practical measures to be taken at the ILO. The International Seafarers' Federation, formed by Andrew Furuseth, of the American Seafarers' International Union, and Havelock Wilson, from Britain, was successful in promoting an international seafarers' code. Intended as a series of international conventions, it was hoped this would cover wages and conditions as well as questions of safety and professional competence. Between 1921 and 1939 no fewer than 13 conventions and six recommendations were adopted by the ILO covering seafarers, far more than for any other group of workers. A seafarers' code had been developed.

The ITF had plenty of competition in representing seafarers. Furuseth and Wilson's ISF was formed after the First World War out of anti-German unions (the wartime u-boat war against merchant shipping was denounced in their founding statement) and was dominated by the 'conservative' politics of Havelock Wilson (who opposed the strike weapon). On the 'left' the ITF was challenged by the anarchist seafaring unions linked to the US Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the pro-Moscow Communist unions working with the Revolutionary International of Labour Unions (RILU) who, eventually, came together into the Hamburg based International Seamen and Harbour workers (ISH), which was formed in 1930. The vast majority of all these organisations affiliated ratings not officers. Officers were in the International Mercantile Marine Officers' Association (IMMOA) - a group that eventually merged into the ITF after the Second World War (under the leadership of Omer Becu, who later became ITF President and General Secretary).

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The plenary session of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Maritime Session on 10 October 1929.

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The founding conference in 1930 of the International Seamen and Harbourworkers' Organisation (ISH).

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This 'competition' helps to explain why seafaring issues were so prominent within the ITF, and was also one of the reasons why the Joint Maritime Commission (JMC) of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) was created in 1921. The JMC remains a unique bipartite grouping (owners' and workers' representatives without governments) in a tripartite body. The JMC was the only forum where all the diverse seafarers' organisations worked together.

The ITF and IMMOA came to dominate the JMC by the late 1930s. Following Havelock Wilson's death, the ISF collapsed and most of their unions joined the ITF. Tensions within the ISH caused by the Soviet government's increasing interference (and the policy of attacking social democrats instead of fascists) led to splits and walkouts - these activists and unions were welcomed with open arms by ITF General Secretary Edo Fimmen. Many ex-ISH activists formed the backbone of the ITF's anti-fascist 'Seeleute' group which was based in Antwerp. One of the most famous members of this group was Hermann Knüfken - an ISH founder and the first head of the Leningrad International Seamen's Club (Interklub).

The original idea of the seafarers' code had emerged back at the ITF Copenhagen congress in 1910. This congress, like many others, was dominated by seafarers' issues. But it was also the first to recognise the changes taking place elsewhere in transport and the rise in the numbers of motor drivers. A policy resolution called upon the parliaments of 'civilised states' to introduce legislation laying down maximum working hours of nine hours for those in the 'horse and cart' trade and eight hours for

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The first ITF meeting of tramwaymen (the first International Tramwaymen's Conference) held in Brussels, Belgium in July 1925.

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motor and tram drivers. A legal rest period of a minimum of 36 hours was also sought.

Until 1924, road transport workers were grouped with dockers, but they then formed their own section, and the congress at Hamburg was billed as the First International Motor Drivers' Conference. The ITF had to compete hard with the automobile and car clubs to get its voice heard at international meetings, but by 1929 had drawn up a set of firm demands to be presented to the ILO. At a time when working days of 18 hours were not uncommon, the union's list included restrictions on driving time, adequate guaranteed rest periods and the control of night work.

The growing status of trade unions in international affairs during the 1920s was emphasised by Johan Brautigam, of the Dutch seafarers, in his description of the 1928 congress in Stockholm. The contrast with Charles Lindley's account of the 1902 Stockholm congress, when delegates found it difficult to find interpreters who were willing to mix with workers' representatives, could not have been greater. 'The approach to the hall where the congress was to be held was already enough to set hearts fluttering. The square before it, and its surroundings, were ringed with masts from which the flags of all nations, and that of the ITF, waved in the sun to welcome the delegates. The congress was held in the Swedish parliament building, kindly placed at our disposal by the government. This was in itself a convincing proof of the change that had come over things: the ITF was everywhere recognised as an established organisation.'

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One of the first Road Transport Section meetings was this international conference of road drivers held in June 1927 in Paris.