

# SOLIDARITY

## Chapter Seven

### Fighting Fascism

While trade unions were enjoying increased influence in a number of industrialised nations and were beginning to be recognised in international gatherings, persecution was still widespread. A flavour of the difficulties union members faced was given by Nathan Nathans, assistant general secretary of the ITF, following a meeting he attended in Budapest of the Hungarian Transport Workers' Union, in 1923.

'Only 5,500 members of the Budapest transport workers were represented at the congress: the branches in other towns have been closed. A special police permit is required before a meeting is held - even for a committee meeting. At the congress itself a police officer sat on the right of the president, a subaltern police officer on his left. In addition there were three policemen at the entrance and two plain clothes men in the body of the hall. Ten days before the congress was held the secretary was arrested for having delivered a speech three years before. He will probably be released in a few weeks' time; in any case a single day would have sufficed for the investigation of the charge.'

## Fighting Fascism



Nathan Nathans (1883–1937), first secretary of the ITF Railwaymen Section and first ITF assistant general secretary. Nathans worked as a clerk for the Dutch railways and was involved in the great 1903 strike. He worked with Fimmen on the reconstitution of the ITF after the First World War; was elected first secretary of the ITF Railwaymen's Section in 1922 and voted ITF assistant general secretary in 1924. Nathans was very involved in support work for the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. He died suddenly on 8 July 1937 in an airplane crash during a flight from Holland to Paris.

## SOLIDARITY

The period between the wars was characterised by hostile attacks as fascist governments deliberately sought to destroy the trade union movement. In Italy, where the transport unions were involved in both the Hungarian and Polish boycotts, they were immediately persecuted after Benito Mussolini came to power in 1922. More than 30,000 railway workers were sacked during the years 1918–20 for trade union and political activities. The union's headquarters were closed down in 1925 when it had only 6,000 members compared with a peak of more than 100,000. Most of the railway workers' leaders were arrested, but later released following ITF intervention through the ILO in Geneva. The ITF gave financial support to sacked workers and helped resistance organisations, as by April 1926 only fascist organisations could represent Italian workers.

Guiseppe Sardelli, secretary of the tram workers' union, fled to France to escape arrest. He was sentenced to five years in prison but became active within the ITF, denouncing the regime and arranging for publication of pamphlets and manifestos which were smuggled to Italy. The ITF was also involved in one of the more unusual events in the resistance to fascism. On 11 July 1930 Giovanni Bassanesi, a young teacher, dropped leaflets from a plane for 15 minutes over Milan. Financed by the ITF and the Swiss railway workers, he took off close to the Italian border before arriving over Milan at lunch time. The daring act created a big impression on the whole of northern Italy and demonstrated that anti-fascists were still in existence and had enough money to charter a plane.

Fimmen was acutely aware of the dangers posed by the Nazi regime in Germany and consistently urged trade

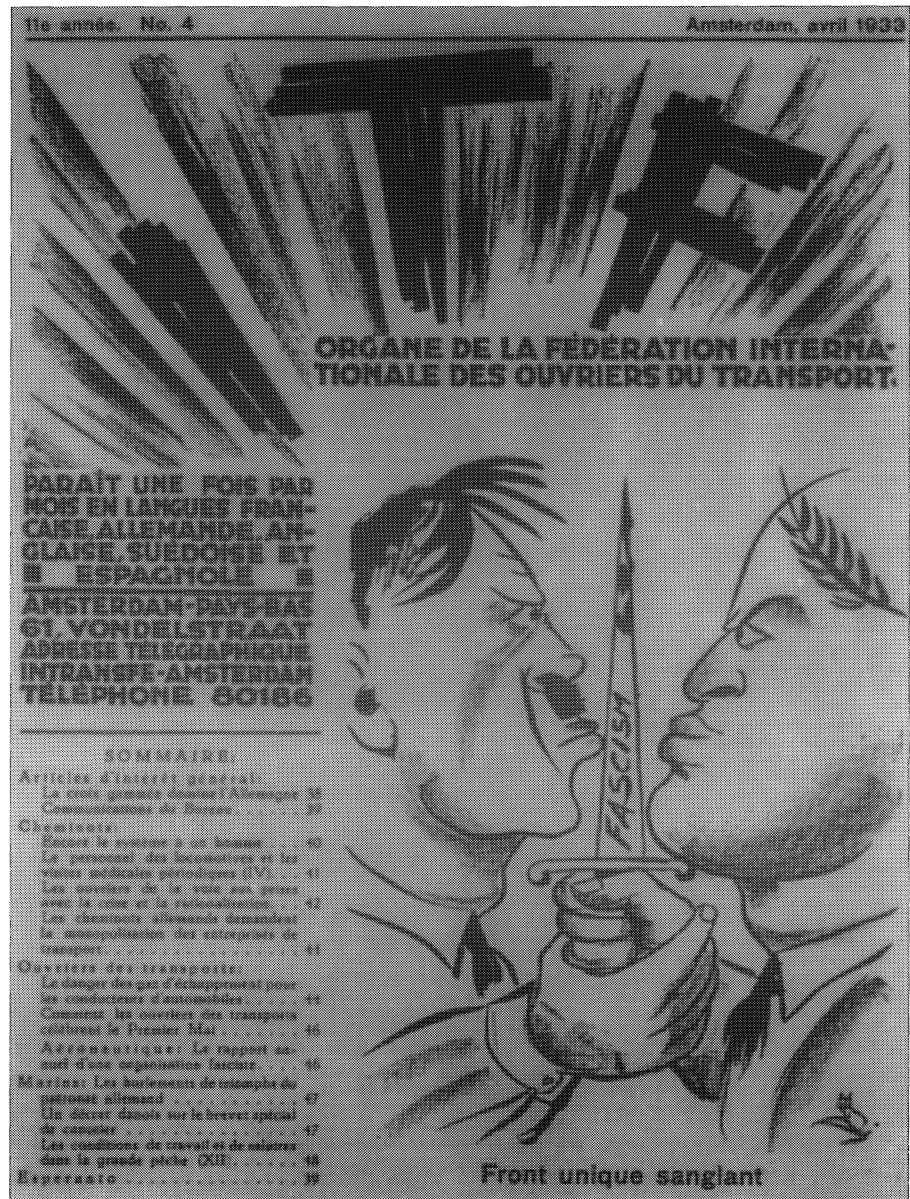
## Fighting Fascism



The original of an ITF Italian language poster produced in the 1920s to encourage transport workers to take action against fascism.



# SOLIDARITY



The front page of ITF News in April 1933.

## Fighting Fascism

unionists to resist. He wrote to affiliates in all countries after the fall of Italy to fascism, warning them of what to expect. Totalitarian regimes had spread during the late 1920s and at the 1930 London congress a German railwayman declared: 'We are today living in a state of latent war which is the more dangerous because it creates the moral conditions necessary for the outbreak of another war in which weapons still more destructive of life and property would be used. Herein lies the great danger of fascism, and here also are its roots. Fascism feeds on the misery and suffering of our times.'

The 1932 congress in Prague was to be the last to be attended by delegates from Germany. The Italians were represented by delegates in exile while the Poles were prevented from attending by their government. The German unions, declining offers of ITF support, mistakenly believed they were strong enough to withstand the Nazi onslaught which was to sweep through their country a year later. All genuine union organisation disappeared, leaders were arrested or sent to concentration camps, buildings were taken over and unions filled by Nazi sympathisers. The Dolfuss regime took control of Austria a year later. In 1936 civil war broke out in Spain.

Although the ITF was powerless to stop the spread of fascism, Fimmen was not content to sit back and do nothing. The ITF office in Amsterdam was deeply involved in resistance movements in Germany and in helping the Republican movement in Spain. Illegal newsletters and pamphlets were produced and sent to the fascist countries. By 1934, the ITF's publication 'Germany under the Swastika' had been replaced by 'Fascism'. Issue one explained the change: 'That Germany under the Swastika is

## SOLIDARITY



Anti-Hitler graphic produced for ITF anti-Nazi publications that were distributed in the 1930s.

## Fighting Fascism



The ITF's General Council and ITF staff meeting in Amsterdam in February 1936.

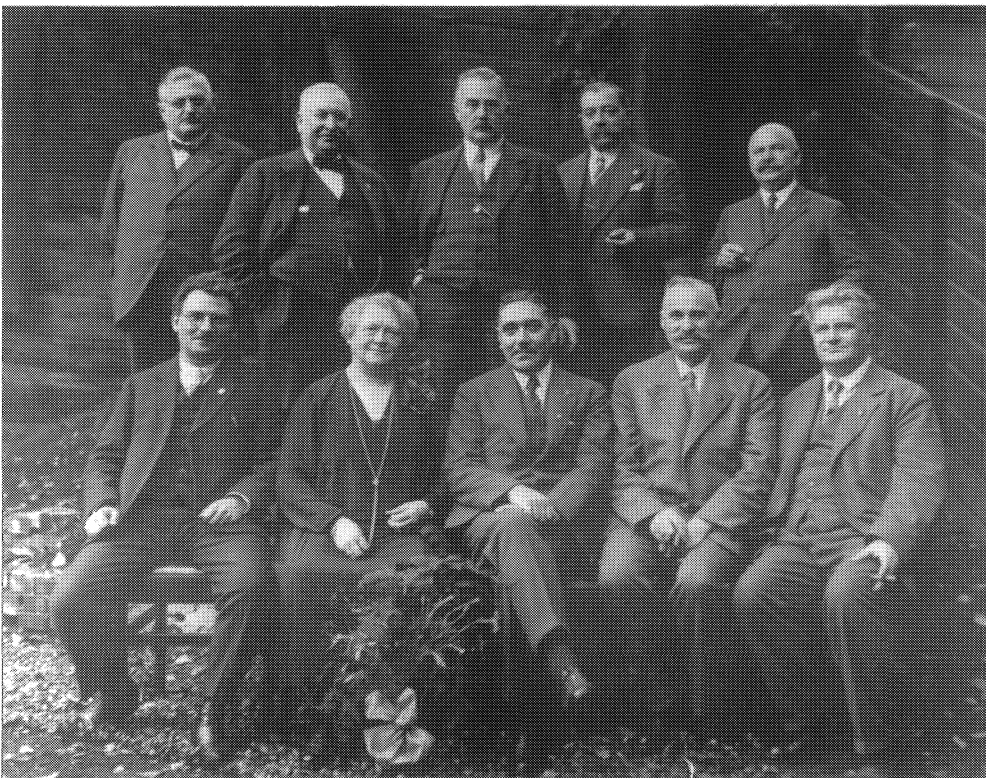
## SOLIDARITY

to appear no more is not because there was no need for it. The opposite is the case - unfortunately. Since its first appearance the number of countries where Fascism has risen to power, and then robbed the working classes of their rights and liberties, has increased by three, while in other countries Fascist influence has grown considerably. These facts have occasioned us to extend our publication, hitherto confined to events in Hitler Germany, to other countries under Fascist government.'

The ITF managed to maintain contact with trade unionists through a secret underground network that was gradually established throughout Germany. It was an extremely hazardous business. Hermann Jochade, leader of the German railwaymen and secretary of the ITF from 1904-16, was kicked to death by Nazi concentration camp guards in 1939. Discovery by the Gestapo could mean arrest, imprisonment and death. All the ITF's leaders, including Fimmen, took part in undercover missions to Germany. Local union leaders like Hans Jahn, of the railway workers, Wilhelm Voss, of the seafarers' section of the Transport Workers' Federation, and Adolph Kummernuss, of the Hamburg dockers, took incredible risks. Many trade unionists led double lives, respectable workers on the one hand and organisers and couriers for the secret movement on the other.

Voss and Jahn managed to secure cover jobs as commercial travellers, which allowed them to move relatively freely. Jahn established a national network of underground railway trade union fighters, while Voss's group operated under the guise of a sailing club where leaflets were distributed, many with ITF help.

## Fighting Fascism



The ITF Executive and Management Committee meeting in Amsterdam in 1929 with Hermann and Mathilde Jochade (front) who were celebrating their 25th Jubilee.



## SOLIDARITY



Hans Jahn, President of the ITF from 1955 to 1958. Jahn was the co-ordinator of ITF railway workers' resistance and sabotage against Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Jahn travelled incognito and used the pseudonym Fritz Krämer. He spent most of the war in London and following the defeat of Hitler, he was the first President of the re-created German Railwaymen's Union.

By 1935 Fimmen planned a conference of all ITF representatives of illegal groups in Roskilde, Denmark. A few weeks after the conference the Gestapo succeeded in uncovering groups which had contact with those connected with the ITF. Voss, Jahn and Kummernuss were arrested. Evidence was found against all, except Jahn (who had been arrested twice previously), against whom only minor points could be proved. Jahn's wife, Friedel, tried to secure his release by going in person, carrying his one-and-a-half year-old daughter, to the concentration camp in which he was held. He was released just hours before the Gestapo found evidence that he had been at the Roskilde meeting. He fled to Czechoslovakia and then to Amsterdam where he continued to organise resistance until, in 1937, his group was penetrated when a car with illegal leaflets was stopped at the border. Jahn was deported and went to Antwerp and then to Luxembourg to work on the German frontier. When Luxembourg was invaded Jahn fled again, but Friedel was arrested with their young child and spent eight years in detention, four in the Ravensbruck concentration camp. Jahn went through France, Spain and Portugal to England from where he eventually led ITF sabotage groups of railwaymen in Germany. He later became president of the ITF in 1956.

A surviving copy of one of the underground leaflets for seafarers *Die Schiffahrt* explained how the new German federation of transport workers existed: 'This federation is an illegal organisation, for the Gestapo it is an invisible organisation. The federation comprises all anti-fascist revolutionary German seafarers, inland navigation workers and dockers. We exist without local groups, treasurer, membership books, union dues coupons, register and without paid officials. Our identity card is the hate against

## Fighting Fascism

the system of brown bandits, the will to overthrow the regime and to create a better Germany in which liberty, peace and justice will rule instead.'

Adolph Kummernuss remembered Fimmen's anti-Nazi activities during the period before war commenced. 'How often did I, on my visits to Edo Fimmen in the Vondelstraat, (Amsterdam) implore him not to come to Germany any more for we knew the grave risks he was running. If he had fallen into the hands of the Gestapo, he would not have left Germany alive. But pleading was in vain, and one day he would turn up in Hamburg, the next day in Berlin or some other town, always anxious to ease our difficult task.'

Even the ITF's offices were not exempt from the threat of infiltration. Leo Magits, a Belgian member of staff, recalled the attempts of the Gestapo to find out the ITF's plans: 'One day I caught someone close to me copying the text of a postcard I had received from Germany. The police were called. This man was in fact a member of the National Socialist Movement in the Netherlands and was keeping a stock of Nazi propaganda in his bedroom. He had not done a very good job at copying - he was obviously an amateur spy. This same clumsiness was found also among so-called emigrants from Germany, Italy and, later, Spain, who were looking for protection or support. Quite often they would come with tears in their eyes, threatening to commit suicide, if they were not given immediate financial support. It was my job to see these "customers" and to put them to the test. Quite often, a brief interview was enough to unmask false statements of these unfortunates but sometimes also to identify spies badly prepared for their role.'



ITF General Secretary  
Edo Fimmen in 1938.



## SOLIDARITY

Financial support for the Austrian movement and for the families of those arrested was provided by the ITF. The call for help from the Spanish republicans resulted in a boycott of many vessels bound for ports held by the fascists, while ITF funds bought food and chartered ships to carry provisions to Republican-held parts of Spain. Many trade unionists, including transport workers, fought in the International Brigade and Fimmen and other ITF leaders visited Spain to help co-ordinate the federation's assistance. Nathan Nathans, ITF assistant general secretary, was killed in a plane crash near Brussels in 1937 while on a mission to provide Spanish children with accommodation abroad.



Nathan Nathans in Braila, Romania, in May 1937 with the Romanian Dockers' Union.

## Fighting Fascism

In late 1932 the ITF stood on the brink. Within a year the emergence of national socialism and the assault of fascism in Central and Eastern Europe cut deeply into ITF membership – many unions which left the ITF in the 1930s did not return until after 1989. While the ITF and General Secretary Edo Fimmen tried hard to warn European transport workers of the dangers of the growth of fascism, the period following Hitler's seizure of power in Germany in 1933 were dark days for the international labour movement. In 1932 the ITF called upon its affiliated members to provide photographs of national 1 May demonstrations. Reproduced on the following pages are surviving photographs from Austria, Spain, the Netherlands, France and Poland.



French dockers in Marseilles on 1 May 1931.

## SOLIDARITY



Dutch seafarers in May 1931 in Utrecht.

## Fighting Fascism



Two photographs depicting May day in Gdynia, Poland in 1932.

## SOLIDARITY



Two photographs depicting May day 1931 in Vienna, Austria.



## Fighting Fascism



## SOLIDARITY



Two photos – workers gather in Madrid, Spain for 1 May 1931 and 1932.

## Fighting Fascism

