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Globalisation and the dilemmas of international trade unionism

Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick*

E *Summary*

This article presents the author's reflections on the possibilities of a restructuring of the international trade union movement, on the basis of a collective research project to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) which seeks to open a debate within the movement over the lessons to be learned from its history as a guide for its future action. The most important question facing the trade union movement today is what is generally called 'globalisation', a phenomenon that goes back many years, both in terms of economic developments and labour struggles. From this perspective, the paper examines the basis for the existing divisions of the international labour movement, before going over the work of the ICFTU and of the International Trade Secretariats (ITSs) to achieve the regulation of the multinational corporations and of the international economy, and concluding on the prospects for unity of action in the unions' work around the global economy.



F *Résumé*

Cet article présente quelques réflexions sur les possibilités et les enjeux d'une recomposition du mouvement syndical international, inspirées par une recherche collective qui sortira prochainement pour marquer les cinquante ans de la Confédération Internationale des Syndicats Libres (CISL), dont le but principal est de lancer un débat sur l'histoire du mouvement syndical international afin de réfléchir sur les leçons à tirer de ses réussites et de ses défaites et d'amener à une action syndicale plus conséquente aujourd'hui. Or la question la plus actuelle au sein du mouvement est ce que l'on appelle désormais "la mondialisation", un phénomène qui a déjà, bien qu'on ait tendance à l'oublier, une longue histoire, aussi bien dans les mutations de l'économie internationale que dans la lutte syndicale. Il nous a paru dès lors intéressant de commencer l'article avec un tableau synthétique de la situation complexe présente et passée de la division syndicale, pour synthétiser ensuite l'évolution des luttes et des stratégies du syndicalisme international à l'égard des sociétés multinationales, avant de conclure sur les perspectives actuelles d'une plus grande unité d'action dans la lutte contre la mondialisation.



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This article is loosely based on Gumbrell-McCormick 2000a, 2000b and 2000c. All views expressed are those of the author.

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D *Zusammenfassung*

Die Frage, wie die internationale Gewerkschaftsbewegung reformiert werden kann und welche Lehren aus der Vergangenheit für die Zukunft gezogen werden können, ist Gegenstand dieses Beitrags, dem ein Forschungsprojekt zur Zukunft der internationalen Gewerkschaftsbewegung zugrunde liegt. Die wichtigste, allerdings für die Gewerkschaften nicht neue Herausforderung, ist die Globalisierung. Vor diesem Hintergrund unternimmt der Artikel zunächst eine historische Bestandsaufnahme der internationalen Gewerkschaftsbewegung und untersucht die Gründe für ihre Teilung. Danach beschreibt er die Arbeit des Internationalen Bundes Freier Gewerkschaften (IBFG) und der Internationalen Berufssekretariate (IBS), deren Ziel eine Regulierung multinationaler Unternehmen und der Weltwirtschaft ist. Der Beitrag schließt mit einem Ausblick auf mögliche gemeinsame weltweite Gewerkschaftsaktionen vor dem Hintergrund der Globalisierung.



What is generally called 'globalisation' is often seen as an unstoppable force. A number of elements of this process go back many years, and were already the object of lively debate within the labour movement at the end of the 19th century. Trade union members today know little or nothing about these past debates and often accept the fatalism with regard to the world economy that has become the 'realism' of today. At the same time, they perceive that the trade union movement is divided and express a desire for unity. Even if they are looking through rose-coloured glasses at a unity that never existed, their point is none the less well taken: against globalisation, a new international 'countervailing force' is needed to defend their interests (Levinson 1973, Tudyka/Etty/Sucha 1978). And what better time than now, at the end of the seemingly interminable Cold War? This paper will therefore focus on the efforts of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and of the International Trade Secretariats (ITSs) over many decades to achieve the regulation of the multinational corporations and of the international economy. It will also examine briefly the relations between the ICFTU, ITSs, and regional and other international trade union bodies, in order to determine the perspectives for greater unity of action in their work around the global economy.

The present state of the international trade union movement

The current situation appears at least at first glance to be most favourable to the restructuring of the international trade union movement. At present, the movement is still split into three main confederations based on ideological divisions that go back to the origins of the labour movement: the ICFTU, with a largely socialist/social-democratic or general orientation, the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), which after the split of 1949 contained mainly communist-inspired unions or those in the Soviet bloc, and the World Confederation of Labour (WCL), formerly the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions (IFCTU) (Windmuller and Pursey 1998). The ICFTU has long been the major player within the movement: in 1999, it had 215 affiliated unions in 145 countries, with a total of 125 million members. Statistics on the membership of the other two confederations are less reliable, and in the case of WFTU more difficult to obtain. In 1986,

WFTU had between 200 and 250 million members, but more than half of these came from the Soviet central federation, which has since disintegrated. Following the recent departure of the French CGT, there are few influential unions left. The WCL, the formerly Christian confederation, deconfessionalised since 1968 (Pasture 1999) claimed in 1993 a membership of 19 million, with the largest affiliates in Poland (Solidarnosc, with a dual affiliation to the ICFTU) and Belgium (the ACV-CSC).

If the international labour movement comprised only these three confederations, the ICFTU's position would clearly be hegemonic, but things are not so simple. In parallel to the three confederations, based on the membership of individual national centres (the inter-professional level), are several other types and layers of organisations: the regional organisations of the three confederations, alongside a few independent regional bodies, most importantly the ETUC (Gobin 1887) and the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU); and above all, organisations based on sectoral national unions, known at the international level as International Trade Secretariats (ITSs), and at the European level as European Industry Federations (EIFs). The ITSs are considered part of the same 'trade union family' as the ICFTU, but are formally autonomous. WFTU also has similar bodies, the Trade Union Internationals (TUIs) which unlike the ITSs, are integrated into the WFTU structure¹. Many of the industrial federations of the WCL have joined with the appropriate ITS (Pasture 1999: 404-412). The ITSs currently have about 50 million members, including nearly 20 million in Education International (EI) and 16 million in the IMF alone as of 1995; the figure today is probably somewhat higher (Windmuller and Pursey 1998: 71). Recent mergers have led to the creation of a few other large federations, such as the Union Network International (UNI). Several of the medium-sized ITSs, like the food and agricultural workers' IUF, or the chemical, general workers' and miners' ICEM, enjoy an influence way beyond their membership on the basis of dynamic policies and leadership, as shall be seen below. Alongside the confederal, regional and industrial organisations are a few specialised bodies, the most significant of which is probably TUAC, the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD, which includes affiliates from both the ICFTU and WCL from the industrialised countries, along with a few unaffiliated national centres.

The historical basis for the division of the international movement

Trade unionists have been talking about the need for unity of the international labour movement in order to pursue effective common action at least since the early years of the 20th century. For division, or at least a multiplicity of organisations, is no recent aberration, rather a characteristic of the movement from its inception. International organisation itself goes back almost as long as national organisation: the International Trade Union Secretariat (ITUS) was founded in 1901; some of the ITS were formed as early as 1889 (Rütters 1990). From the beginning, it also became

¹ A proposal for the ITSs to become 'trade departments' within WFTU was one of the major causes of its split in 1949; ITSs like the International Transportworkers' Federation (ITF) and the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF) were major actors in the developments that led to the creation of the ICFTU, whose first general secretary was J. Oldenbroek, previously general secretary of ITF (MacShane 1992).

clear that, despite the socialist ideology of proletarian internationalism, working class organisations were not only nationally-based, but in many cases incorporated nationalism into their identity in the search for membership and popular support. Organisationally, in the ITUS and its successors, the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), the WFTU and the ICFTU, representation was by countries, usually by the top officials of national centres. International organisation by national centres and by industries were also different in their orientation: the ITUs aimed at practical international solidarity with fellow workers in the same industry, for example by refusing to supply labour to other countries in industrial disputes, and were therefore concerned by similar industrial problems and acted within the same international labour market, sometimes confronting the same employer (Koch-Baumgarten 1998). The ITUS and its successors dealt mainly with issues regarding individual states or inter-governmental institutions, and were deeply involved in the original proposals for and the creation of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) after the first world war.

Christian trade unions were often founded in opposition to these largely socialist and social-democratic organisations, and were first organised on an international basis in 1920 (Pasture 1999). The creation of the communist international, the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), one year later had a much more powerful impact at the time. While separate organisation was not pursued during the Popular Front era in most European countries, communists played a significant role as militants and leaders of many trade unions, often wielding tremendous influence through their abilities and dedication. The successor organisation of the ITUS, the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), founded in 1913, remained nonetheless the most representative international organisation after the first world war, with between ten and twenty million members, mainly in Europe (Van Goethem 2000).

The division within the trade union movement provoked considerable discussion, especially during the Popular Front period. The desire for unity was based to a large degree on the fear of fascism, but also on the sincere beliefs of trade unionists who perceived the dangers of splits at their own workplaces and in their own countries. This unity was finally achieved in the foundation of WFTU after the second world war, grouping together socialist, communist and non-aligned unions – but neither the christian unions nor the powerful American Federation of Labor (AFL). The split within WFTU only four years later, when the Dutch NVV, British TUC and American Congress of Industrial Organisations (CIO) walked out, was at the same time a symptom of the growing tensions of the international political situation and a contribution to its further polarisation. The newly-created ICFTU identified itself by its very name – ‘free’ trade unionism – with a particular set of beliefs, unlike its predecessor IFTU or indeed its antagonist WFTU (Rütters 1990). The desire on the part of many trade unionists in the West to avoid the polarisation of the labour movement on ideological grounds did long not survive the outbreak of the Cold War.

In the post-war period, trade unions responded to the greater impetus to international and regional organisation provided by the creation of the United Nations, the European Communities and other inter-governmental institutions; yet they had to develop their organisations in the context of economic and political rivalries between ideologies, states, and regions, and did not escape the divisions that the new world order established (Carew 1984, MacShane 1992). The Anglo-American trade union committee, which carried out much of the work of the IFTU during the

war years, led indirectly to the formation of the trade union committee of the European Recovery Programme, which later became TUAC. In the Americas, the *Confederación Inter-Americana de Trabajadores* (CIT), founded largely through the efforts of the AFL in cooperation with US diplomacy, was incorporated into the ICFTU in 1951 as the *Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores* (ORIT). In the 1970s, the OATUU was founded with the assistance of the countries grouped in the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), as part of their efforts to promote pan-Africanism.

Thus, while international trade union organisation has been present over the past 100 years, this does not mean that international trade union unity has been a given. Rather, it has had to be achieved through the efforts of international and national leaders and activists, to identify and articulate the common interests of workers in different countries and regions and with differing political and economic perspectives. The international trade union movement has had to carry out its search for unity in the context of an emerging global economy and the growth of inter-governmental institutions, which have been at the same time an impetus to unity and a potential hindrance.

The evolution of trade union strategies toward the international economy

It would be impossible to describe here the complete history of trade union strategies with regard to the world economy or what is now called globalisation, but it is important nonetheless to show how they have evolved, before paying closer attention to recent developments, for there has been a great continuity between the end of the 19th century and the last decades of the 20th.

The labour movement organised its first meetings on the theme of the regulation of international trade and the economy toward the end of the 19th century (Kyløh 1998), and was influenced by the ideas of internationalism that were widespread in socialist and liberal circles alike. This internationalist current had its high point around the turn of the century, and was not entirely swept away in the terrible years that followed. On the contrary, the creation of the ILO in 1919 was in many ways the realisation of the internationalist project of trade unions and other social movements of that time, based on a rationalist and legalist world view, where the representation of the interests of workers alongside employers and the state could lead to agreements acceptable to all parties. We are far from the vision of Wilson, Gompers and Jouhaux today, but we are still living with these same institutions and their approach (Van Goethem 2000). The trade union world was split as a result of the Soviet revolution, but the IFTU continued along the lines of the social-democratic unionism of before. This style of trade union internationalism – based on formal representation within the ILO and other inter-governmental or international institutions – was challenged by the new Red International, but also by one of the leaders of the ‘Amsterdam International’ itself: Edo Fimmen, general secretary of the ITF. His style of internationalism, based on the ITSs and on direct action, had a major impact in the struggle against fascism, in which the ITF organised boycotts and gave vital assistance to anti-fascists and refugees, but it remained a minority voice in the ‘free’ trade unionism of his time (Reinalda 1997, ETTY 1976, Fimmen 1924).

The first attempts to control the multinationals in the engineering industry

After the second world war, the foundation of the United Nations recalled the idealistic vision around the creation of the ILO after the previous world conflict; indeed, the ILO was incorporated into the UN system and was the only UN body with a tripartite structure. The years of the post-war economic miracle were also those of the Cold War, marked by the expansion of the economic and political influence of the United States, and in Europe by the 'social-democratic compromise'. It was in the 1950s that the trade union movement undertook its first serious attempt to build a countervailing force against the growing power of the multinational corporations (MNCs) which was already beginning to threaten the balance of power between employers and unions that some have argued had shifted in favour of organised labour in the immediate post-war period.

The earliest major advocates of a trade union approach to the multinationals were trade unions representing car workers, with a strong potential for concerted international action. All main producers were transnational and unions faced the risk that these companies might transfer production abroad. Walter Reuther, president of the North American United Auto Workers (UAW) and vice president of the ICFTU, and Otto Brenner, general secretary of the German *IG Metall* and president of the IMF, advocated research and action around the MNCs in their countries (Bendiner 1987, ETTY/Tudyka 1974: 7). The metalworkers' federation was the first ITS to take up the issue, commissioning a series of reports and beginning to plan a programme from the mid-1950s onward, under the responsibility of then assistant general secretary Charles Levinson and his successor, Karl Casserini (previously secretary of TUAC), who first coined the term 'social clause'. The IMF set up the first world company councils (WCCs) at Ford and General Electric in 1966 (ETTY 1978: 70-1). Other councils were then created rapidly by IMF affiliates in the rest of the car and related engineering industries (Piehl 1974b: 239-42, ETTY/Tudyka 1974: 10).

The 'mobilisation coalition'

While the IMF initiated the first practical examples of world company councils, it was clearly the secretary general of the International Chemical Workers' Federation (ICF), Charles Levinson, who popularised the idea throughout the labour movement and the broader public after he left the IMF to become head of the chemical and general workers' international in 1963. Levinson had a major impact with the publication of influential books and articles including *International Trade Unionism* (1972). The ICF set up a number of coordinating bodies, similar to the IMF's world company councils, in leading industries in its sector. It was the ICF's council at the French-based multinational Saint-Gobain that in 1969 provided the first major successes of the councils in achieving the aims of unions in dispute at national level through coordinated international action (Levinson 1972: 8-21, ETTY/Tudyka 1974: 14). Despite the sometimes radical nature of their action, however, there was nothing revolutionary in the original objectives of the WCCs. They were not seeking to establish international collective bargaining, although many of their opponents claimed that this was the case (Northrup and Rowan 1979). Furthermore, there was no question of cooperation with unions outside the ICFTU family, especially those connected with WFTU. This position, shared by all the members of the 'mobilisation coalition', as the German press dubbed the

ICF, IUF and IMF, had important consequences for the participation of European unions in the WCCs, and impeded the search for unified action within the industry, as the French CGT, the Italian CGIL, or the Spanish CC.OO. sometimes represented the largest number of workers at a plant (Piehl 1974b). Be that as it may, the modest proposals of the ITSs and their company councils for the exchange of information on company profits, wage policies or plans for expansion, leading to the coordination of trade union demands among the countries involved were nonetheless ambitious, and opened the way to a potential challenge to the power of management of the corporations and to a form of industrial democracy similar to that practised in Germany and some other European countries (Tudyka/Etty/Sucha 1978).

Despite their initial enthusiasm, the ITSs soon discovered the limits of this approach to the regulation of the multinationals. The IMF found limitations in the capacity of its WCCs to intervene in disputes. After the relative success at disputes at Ford in Belgium and the UK in the early 1970s (Piehl 1974a, Scanlon 1970: 3-4, Etty/Tudyka 1974: 31), the ITSs lost much of the initial advantage of surprise, as was seen in the failure of international solidarity action to protect jobs at Enka/Akzo in 1975-76 (Etty 1978: 75). Indeed, very few of the WCCs stood the test of time or achieved the results intended (Reutter 1996). From a longer historical perspective, it can be argued that the failure of the national unions to give up any power and invest any real authority in the councils or indeed in the ITSs (Scanlon 1970) and the persistence of differences of national interests within the labour movement went a long way towards explaining the failure of the councils to achieve their more ambitious objectives. Added to this, by concentrating on organising workers at all the operations of an individual company, the WCCs ran the risk of creating '*company egoism*', that is, of encouraging the splintering of the labour movement or its integration into the strategies of management, instead of fostering its closer unity of objectives and action across companies (Etty/Tudyka 1974: 31-2). Furthermore, WCCs provided a more appropriate opportunity for some industries than for others. They were perhaps appropriate to the car industry with a handful of key producers, but not for example in chemicals where there were far more large companies. In pursuing this strategy the ICF over-extended itself and depleted its resources. Many other industries were low-skilled, decentralised and labour-intensive, providing few opportunities for the same sort of coordinated international collective action. For such workers, individual action by the ITSs was not enough to create a 'countervailing power' to the transnationals: only the regulation of the activities of the MNCs as a whole had any chance of achieving the labour movement's aims. This is precisely where the ICFTU came into the picture.

The ICFTU in the 1970s: regulating the multinationals

The ICFTU became closely involved in action on the world economy in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when it became apparent that the early signs of economic crisis in the industrialised countries, and the growing strength of the multinationals, were creating serious problems for its affiliates. The 10th congress (London, July 1972) recommended action on the MNCs, which led to the creation of a joint ICFTU/ITS working party. All ITSs were invited to take part, but not all welcomed the initiative: some leaders, including Levinson, felt that their work around individual corporations was more likely to bear fruit than action within inter-governmental institutions like the ILO (Etty/Tudyka 1974: 27). An agreement was worked out at the first meeting on the division of

labour: relations between MNCs and unions would be the primary responsibility of the ITSs, while relations between these corporations and governments and inter-governmental organisations would be the responsibility of the ICFTU. The ETUC and TUAC were invited as observers from an early stage. The WCL, which was working along parallel lines on the MNCs, was not officially included, but was invited to conferences and seminars on the subject organised by the ICFTU, as well as to meetings of the working party organised jointly with TUAC.

The confederation's objective was to push for the adoption of a 'firm international legal framework' based on 'binding rules', to counteract the ability of the MNCs to avoid the control of national laws and industrial relations systems by transfers of capital and production, using their power to pit workers in different countries against each other to impose anti-union practices in host countries and home countries alike. The basis of this alternative economic policy was a form of neo-keynesianism; the political strategy was based on the view that it was in the interests of national governments to regulate the activities of the MNCs in order to protect national sovereignty and avoid a global 'race to the bottom', and that friendly governments could be persuaded to form a coalition with the labour movement to regulate the MNCs. The economic and political analysis of the ICFTU was profoundly marked by the political currents within many left parties and unions in the 1960s and 70s, which called for the transformation of the economy and society through the development of industrial democracy and an equitable world economic system. At the world economic conference of 1971, Brenner argued for 'direct involvement in corporate management', as was already the case in the West German model of *Mitbestimmung*; similar views were expressed forcefully by Lennart Nyström and other Nordic leaders. The arguments for workers' control put forward by national centres like the Belgian ABVV/FGTB and the French CFDT (not yet an ICFTU affiliate), and by left activists in industrial unions like the British TGWU and German *IG Metall*, captured the attention of workers at a time of great activism within the labour movement and helped shape the arguments within the ICFTU.

The long march through the institutions

In the 1970s, the ICFTU and its affiliates played a major role in the adoption of the only international instruments that have so far been adopted along the lines suggested by the international labour movement for the regulation of the multinationals. The foundation of the UN Centre and Commission on Transnational Corporations in 1974 provided an opportunity for the international labour movement to take part in consultations and also served as a significant source of information. While pursuing its action within the UN, the ICFTU was deeply engaged in action within other inter-governmental bodies, most notably the ILO. Through its control of the majority of the Workers' Group, the confederation was able to push for the first tripartite meetings to discuss the multinationals in the autumn of 1972, leading to the adoption of a programme of activities on the MNCs. Despite the strong opposition of employers and many governments, the Governing Body adopted a 'Tripartite Declaration of Principles Concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy' in November 1977 (ILO 1991). The declaration was based on the report of a working group of which Casserini was workers' vice-chair, and whose members included Paul Barton (AFL-CIO), Charles Ford, Casserini's successor at TUAC and subsequently general secretary of the textile workers' ITGLWF, and Steven Pursey (TUC), who went

on to become secretary of the working party and head of the ICFTU's Social and Economic Policy department in 1981. However, the declaration was not followed up by international instruments on the MNCs.

The ICFTU and ITSs were also pressing hard for the adoption of regulations on the MNCs in the OECD, where the international labour movement had two important forms of leverage: TUAC had been founded at the beginning of the European Recovery Programme and remained in place through its successive changes (Gaskell 1998). While never officially linked to the ICFTU the latter effectively controlled the organisation. TUAC representatives were routinely invited to meetings of the working party on MNCs and other ICFTU meetings on economic issues. At the same time, within the OECD structures, the unions had been instrumental in the creation in 1953 of the Social Affairs Division of the Manpower and Social Affairs Directorate, originally part of the European Productivity Agency (EPA). Some of the earliest studies of the MNCs were carried out by the division, such as Casserini's 'Multi-national Companies and Collective Bargaining' (1969).

In June 1976 the OECD developed a series of guidelines for the conduct of the MNCs, as part of its Declaration on International Investment and Multinational Enterprises. This was the first international instrument for regulating the MNCs, and was welcomed by the ICFTU and TUAC as the first step toward a code of conduct. There were serious drawbacks, however: the guidelines were applicable only to the multinationals' operations within OECD member states – and therefore did not apply to the developing countries where they were most needed – and were wholly voluntary in nature (Riddell 1976). Nor was there a formal complaints procedure. Yet the international trade union movement found that it was possible to use the guidelines to ask for 'clarifications' about the practices of individual companies. The most significant of these was probably the Badger case, where the Belgian subsidiary of a US-based multinational shut down its operations but did not pay the redundancy required under Belgian law. The guidelines never became a popular means of resolving disputes, nor did national centres and ITSs make full use of them after the first few years, yet the precedent had been established, that the MNCs were vulnerable in the eyes of public opinion.

During the 1970s, the ICFTU's response to globalisation was primarily addressed to the power and practices of MNCs. But the outcome of this effort was disappointing: there is little evidence that codes of conduct had a significant impact on corporate behaviour, except perhaps in the case of MNC activities in South Africa. Subsequently the confederation began to highlight economic issues which were already on its agenda in the 1970s but had then received less emphasis: the effects on developing economies of the debt burden, particularly in a climate of high interest rates; the dynamics of financial and trade liberalisation; the policies of the international economic institutions. But the confederation's years of work within the institutions nonetheless established the foundation for the new emphasis on global regulation in the 1990s.

The 1990s – globalisation and the renewal of trade union action

Although its novelty and inevitability are often exaggerated, what is now popularly called 'globalisation' does nonetheless correspond to real economic and social change. The 'deregulation'

favoured by certain governments and the 'macho management' of some employers have given rise to great insecurity among workers, in turn affecting their ability to undertake collective action. In the course of the 1990s, trade unionists began to call for new collective and international strategies to respond to globalisation, and the question of the regulation of the world economy returned to the centre of trade union thought and action. In response, the ICFTU and ITSs needed to develop a sophisticated approach with an articulation between different levels of engagement. The confederation intensified its regional activities, developing a dialogue with union leaders and activists who were in the front line of the effects of globalisation; and adopted a more assertive campaigning approach, seeking an impact by highlighting abusive labour practices and the damaging consequences of unregulated competitive forces. At the same time, it developed its work within the world financial institutions, holding regular meetings with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and intervening in the trade liberalisation negotiations within the framework of GATT and its successor, the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

On the occasion of an international conference in Elsinore in 1990, the ICFTU, its affiliates, and the ITSs worked out a new strategy of cooperation around the multinationals. Recognising the 'pivotal role' of the ITSs, the conclusions of the conference pointed to the need for greater cooperation amongst the ITSs, and between them and the ICFTU, in a climate of economic change where increasingly large corporations operated in a number of areas and the boundaries between industrial sectors became less distinct. Implementing the new strategy would require great efforts in terms of research, documentation and exchange of information about individual corporations, where in fact the ITSs already had much more experience. However, the confederation had a greater capacity for attracting the attention of leading decision-makers in government and in the inter-governmental institutions.

Renewed efforts within the institutions – and on the streets

Toward the end of the 1990s, the confederation argued that 'multilateral rules governing the behaviour of the TNCs are the most effective way of maximising the potential benefits of foreign direct investment and minimising the potential costs' (Jordan 1997), and began to make progress with governments and employers' organisations. For Bill Jordan, who became general secretary in 1995, this had to be the major function of the ICFTU in an increasingly integrated global economy. Within the international institutions, especially the ILO, the ICFTU continued to play a major role. Yet in many respects it appeared that the initiative had passed to other organisations, such as the negotiations at GATT, and later at the WTO. The Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) and other attempts to set up rules for international trade – such as NAFTA or APEC at the regional level – aroused mixed reactions within the labour movement. For many unionists, globalisation stemmed from a deliberate series of actions by the multinationals and conservative government policy-makers, a logical consequence of the neo-liberal ideas that had taken hold in the 1980s. It was a phenomenon that the labour movement must combat, not adapt to. Some national centres, most notably the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), but also many within the US, Australian and New Zealand unions, saw world trade agreements as so irredeemably hostile to the interests of trade unionists that they also opposed the ICFTU granting such agreements any legitimacy by tacking on what appeared a largely ineffectual social clause. The confederation as a whole did not oppose proposals such as the MAI in principle, but was willing to judge it by its contents. In the event, the talks foundered in 1999.

According to Pursey, who was actively involved in the negotiations, 'we would not have lost any sleep' had it been approved, because a number of proposals put forward by the trade union movement had been adopted; but 'we did not shed any tears' at its failure. The same applied to the collapse of the WTO summit in Seattle at the end of the year.

The cautious lobbying within the international institutions which was central to ICFTU action in the 1990s contrasted with the uncompromising opposition to trade liberalisation by many NGOs, which inspired the opposition of the French government to the MAI and resulted in its collapse; and seemed also to contribute to the *débacle* of the Seattle summit. Yet the alternative was not entirely clear. One response, reflecting the more critical attitude to globalisation which began to take hold in the late 1990s, was provided by some ITs such as the ICEM (formed through the merger of the ICEF and Miners' International Federation) which criticised the continued efforts to seek regulation through the international institutions – the ILO, UN, WTO and OECD – as an unrealistic approach requiring enormous resources but unlikely to yield significant results. A more aggressive response to the MNCs, with greater coordination among the ITs and between them and the ICFTU, and appealing directly to public (and consumer) opinion, was seen as a better option, and was put forward in the conclusions of a major international conference sponsored by the Danish *Specialarbejderforbundet* (SiD) in 1997.

Toward the end of the decade, however, hopes were raised for a renewed dynamism within the UN system, or at least the ILO, with the appointment of Juan Somavia as the new Director General, and a greater role for the Organisation in setting the world economic and social policy agenda. This appeared to justify the ICFTU's long-running work within the ILO, and made its displacement in favour of the Bretton Woods institutions or the WTO appear premature. At the same time, changes in the governments of the leading industrial countries indicated a possible end to the paralysis of policy-making since the 1980s, when they were first confronted with the challenge of globalisation. These developments encouraged renewed efforts by national affiliates to push their own governments to adopt a coordinated policy for control of the international economy, with the goal of restoring democratic accountability. This same process had been anticipated at the European level, where the europeanisation of the economy had already led to fresh approaches by the ETUC and its affiliates to the democratisation of control of the economy within the European Union.

Back to trade union unity

The development of an approach by the trade union movement as a whole in response to the challenge of globalisation brings us back to the question of trade union unity. Many trade unionists believe that the supposed end of the Cold War should now lead directly to a restructuring or re-unification of the trade union movement, at the international as at the national level; as pointed out above, this will not be simple. For the Cold War was neither the sole cause of the division of international trade unionism nor the only reason for its persistence. Alongside the division between communists and anti-communists there remain the other divisions, including the ideological division between social-democrats and christians, and the organisational division between an international unionism based on national centres and one based on sectoral unions. These two types of divisions intertwine: the ETUC cannot return to the ICFTU because of the presence of affiliates from WCL; the EIFs cannot be offi-

cially linked to the ITSs for the same reason²; the ITSs cannot become an integral part of the ICFTU – mainly because they do not want to – but also because of their different organisational base and the presence of some unions that are not affiliated to the ICFTU. Be that as it may, at the time of writing, the pressures toward unity appear to be growing, both external pressures from the international economy and society, and those within the trade union movement itself.

Some recent initiatives have centred on a restructuring of the international labour movement around the ITSs, which was already the idea of Fimmen in 1924, and a number of trade union leaders have taken up his vision in the past decade. This was indeed one of the main ideas circulated at the conference organised by SiD, and has been brought up by Dan Gallin and other present and former leaders of the ITSs (Gallin 1994). The IUF, ICEM and a few others have pursued closer cooperation for some time, in the organisation of joint campaigns around particular multinationals, conferences and publications, and the sharing of information and resources. The ICFTU is itself examining the possibilities of a restructuring of the international labour movement, and intends to consider the matter at its congress in Durban in April 2000. At the time of writing, we do not yet know the results of that congress, or whether anything will come of the hopes of its general secretary for a reunification of the international labour movement. It may be an opportune moment, however, to ask a few questions about the pressures in favour of unity: what *in the end* is its purpose? If an organisational unity led to a sort of United Nations of labour, where all unions would be included whatever their outlook and their links to governments and employers, genuine unity of action, based on the articulation of common interests and beliefs, might well be hampered. Moreover, an organisational unity with the ITSs might interfere with the sensible division of tasks between the two parts of the labour movement, so that each might tread on the other's toes. On the other hand, what future would the international movement have if it kept up its present divisions, which have on many past occasions hindered effective action in response to the multinationals and changes in the global economy? The answers to these and related questions are far from clear. Perhaps an element in the response, as suggested by Roger Briesch, former international secretary of the CFDT, would be to develop a 'positive hegemony' that would encourage unity of action without forcing an organic unity of organisation. Indeed, if unity is necessary in order to facilitate the common action of workers in the defence of interests that go beyond the local or national level, then the present lack of unity, in a world now dominated by large companies that do not need to worry about strength of numbers, is clearly contrary to workers' interests. It is up to the labour movement to decide what form of unity would be best suited to the sort of targeted and innovative actions called for in the present situation.

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This paper is primarily based on unpublished materials at the ICFTU archive at the *Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis*, Amsterdam, and the archives of the CLC at the National

² There are exceptions to this rule, as some of the ITSs have accepted the membership of Christian unions; in general, the relations between the ITSs and EIFs are extremely complex and merit further study. See Keller and Hennenberger 1995 and Gumbrell-McCormick 1996.

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