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Labor's Second Front: The Foreign Policy of the American and British Trade Union Movements during the Second World War

According to the literature on trade union internationalism, the identification of national trade unions with their nation state, so that their international activities are incorporated into the foreign policy pursued by the state and serve primarily to promote state interests, is a generally accepted incentive for trade unions to engage in international politics.¹ In particular cases, however, it is also true that trade unions do not develop international cooperation for political reasons. Circumstances can therefore arise in which national trade unions that are loyal to their national state end up in a situation whereby the national state develops a foreign policy that is in conflict with the trade union's fundamental political convictions. What line will the trade union follow in such an event: national interest or trade union policy? Furthermore, what are the reasons for opting for one or the other, or, in other words, what is the strategic purpose behind the foreign policy of this trade union movement?

In this article, I explore both questions within the context of the foreign policy of the two major players in this area during the Second World War, the British Trade Union Congress (TUC) and the American Federation of Labor (AFL).² I do this largely on the basis of original sources from both union and state archives and use a narrative approach, as I believe that this approach makes it possible to situate a wide range of often conflicting ambitions within the rapidly evolving context inevitable in war.

True internationalism in the sense of developing a vision aiming beyond the national level and surpassing national interest is rare in trade unions. By nature, trade unions are oriented towards their national context and are mainly interested in national reforms for their members' benefit. National ambition is even supported at an international level, which is why trade unions mainly take action on the international level if they believe national action is inadequate when

1. Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden, 2008); Geert Van Goethem, *The Amsterdam International: The World of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), 1913–1945* (Aldershot, England, 2006), 283–91.

2. I am not considering the CIO because, on the one hand, this would lead us too far within the limited framework of this contribution, and, on the other, because the CIO only became a truly international actor at the end of the war.

it comes to achieving their objectives.³ However, history reveals particular instances where a number of major national trade union confederations not only developed a true international vision, but also tried to implement it. It is no coincidence that wars and international crises are often the catalyst making this possible, and it is no coincidence that the national trade union confederations of the major powers developed the greatest activity in this field.

While the First World War could be considered as the “pilot project” for trade union internationalism, the results that were achieved at the end of this war soon attained an almost mythical reputation in the eyes of the trade union leaders and the generation that followed. In many European countries, trade unions often had the status of pariahs up to 1914, despised by the regimes and the ruling elites. At the end of the war, in the face of revolutionary movements presenting an image of doom, the impossible suddenly became feasible. Not only did the eight-hour working day become a fact, but world leaders also recognized the right of association and created an international instrument, the International Labor Organization (ILO). The importance of the ILO for the trade union movement can hardly be overstated. The ILO was—and remains—the only international government institution in which private organizations are on an equal footing with governments. Via a tripartite structure, employers’ and workers’ organizations have a direct input into the development of international standards in the labor context. In 1919, this was a giant leap forward as trade unions gained influence, prestige, and status alike, and were able to enter the world of international diplomacy in Geneva through the front door. The first ILO director, the French socialist Albert Thomas, expressed this as follows: “I remember how, before the war, any discussions between workers had to take place in a pub or in a small room of one or other trade union. If I compare this with the meetings of the leaders of the workers’ movement here in Geneva, I see signs of major progress.”⁴ Even after the impotence of the ILO became clear during the great economic crisis and the subsequent years of nationalist extremism, workers’ movement circles never had any doubt that trade unions had a fundamental right to a seat at the negotiation tables in times of major international consultation between governments. It seemed that this right had definitely been acquired at Versailles. This ambition and this principle took a dominant position in the minds of a small group of national trade union leaders during World War II.

“IF BRITAIN DIES, WHO ELSE WILL LIVE?”⁵

The fall of the European democracies and the outbreak of the war caused havoc among European trade unions. With the exception of the isolated Swiss

3. John Logue, *Toward a Theory of Trade Union Internationalism* (Gothenburg, Sweden, 1980), 56.

4. IFTU, Report on Activities, 1922 and 1923 (Amsterdam, 1924), 259.

5. Jack Carney to Jay Lovestone, 5 December 1940, quoted in Ted Morgan, *A Covert Life: Jay Lovestone, Communist, Anticommunist and Spymaster* (New York, 1999), 136.

trade union movement, not a single free trade union survived the crisis. Together with their governments-in-exile, the European trade unions retreated to England⁶ where they awaited better times under the wing of the British TUC. London became a meeting place for political and trade union leaders of all kinds; an armory nurtured by these governments and secret services in the expectation that the day would come when they would be deployable.

This usefulness was already present at the start of the war. The British TUC, for example, had made a number of unlikely turns with regard to its international policy before the war, making it clear that its leading principles were not so much policy or ideology, but rather alignment to the foreign policy of the British government. The attitude adopted by the TUC towards the trade union movement of the Soviet Union is illustrative in this context. In 1937, the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), the umbrella organization of national trade union confederations, conducted accession negotiations with the unions in the Soviet Union, leading to an agreement. The TUC thereby immediately threatened to secede and was supported in this by the AFL. Under no circumstances whatsoever would the TUC consider cooperation with the Russians as they did not recognize the leading principle of the free trade union movement, the freedom of association. However, when it became clear a few months later that war with Germany was practically unavoidable, the situation changed. A discussion with the British prime minister explored the extent to which, in the event of a war, the TUC could contribute towards the aim of the British government in securing not only a front in the West against Germany, but also an Eastern front. At the trade union level, this directly translated into seeking cooperation with organizations from the Soviet Union. The 1938 TUC congress in Blackpool called for an Alliance of Peace Seeking Nations and included the Soviet Union as an indispensable partner. In the space of only one year, the TUC had completely changed its point of view in support of the British government's foreign policy. The signing of the Soviet-German Nonaggression Treaty in August 1939 put an end to this strategy for the same reason.

But the usefulness of the TUC went even further. The British government made use of trade union officials to conduct parallel diplomacy and missions that were difficult to pursue through official channels. At the start of the war, while Western Europe was being rapidly overrun by the German army, British hopes focused on the United States. But although the American government positioned itself as an ally of the Western democracies in political terms, there was little indication of America actually entering the war. Left-wing organizations and large parts of the American workers' movement were, to say the least, skeptical towards a military adventure overseas. Under these circumstances, an

6. They combined to form the Foreign National Trade Union Groups, with representatives from the national trade union confederations of Belgium, France, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Austria, Poland, Norway, and Spain.

official initiative by the British government could easily turn out to be counter-productive, whereas a form of “public diplomacy” from the British towards the American trade union movement was considered to be a good idea.

Walter Citrine, a prominent trade union leader and general secretary of the TUC, was sent on this mission. Citrine was a figure of status and authority in both the national and international environment. In the United States, he was reasonably well known in both labor and government circles following a visit he made in 1934. Citrine was a moderate trade union leader and an anticommunist with an appreciation for the free market and a strong attachment to British standards and values. He had been knighted in 1935, and had been known as “Sir Walter” ever since, which made him into an ideal billboard for the AFL as a fundraiser in their fight against fascism. In 1940, he acted as the unofficial ambassador for the British government in an attempt to persuade American public opinion to favor military support for Great Britain. His speech during the AFL convention in New Orleans—“his King’s English added class to content”⁷—dealt almost exclusively with the war, and his closing sentence “We want ‘planes, ‘planes, and more ‘planes”⁸ appealed directly to American public opinion. That Citrine’s words indeed carried weight was evident from the fact that his speech was discussed during a cabinet meeting of the American government, and that Labor Secretary Frances Perkins provided the president with a copy of the text at his request.⁹ A few weeks later, on January 28, Citrine was received by Roosevelt, together with AFL president William Green.

A PEOPLE’S WAR

Efforts from a labor perspective to persuade American public opinion to favor the cause of the Western allies were, in fact, also at the crossroads of labor and foreign policy. The organization of an International Labor Conference in New York in November 1941 was based on the same philosophy. At the outbreak of war, the ILO left its European headquarters in Geneva and moved to Montreal; it was the only international organization that was still active, although on a modest scale. It constituted the perfect forum to unite not only governments, but also representatives from the workers’ movement and industry. The ILO also offered an opportunity to organize consultations between those countries at war and those that were as yet undecided. But, above all, this ILO conference provided a platform for the American president, giving him an opportunity, surrounded by both labor and world leaders, to generate awareness within his own country for the United States’ responsibility, as a world power, to save democracy and social justice. The British government naturally supported

7. Gus Tyler, *Look for the Union Label* (Armonk, NY, 1995), 253.

8. Walter Citrine, *My American Diary* (London, 1941), 352.

9. Frances Perkins to F. D. Roosevelt, 30th November 1940, F. D. Roosevelt Library, Office Files, Hyde Park, New York.

this opinion wholeheartedly, convinced that “both the President and American Labor are vital to our war effort.”¹⁰

This conference provided unique opportunities, particularly for the American government, which had found it difficult to persuade the public to back participation in the war.¹¹ The American chairman of the Governing Body, Carter Goodrich, made no bones about it in a letter to Britain's Sir Frederick Legett. The aim of the conference was “to awaken the Americans still further to the need for giving the greatest possible assistance to the cause of democracy.”¹² The British government used the same argument to try to convince an initially very wary TUC: “The presence in the US of prominent labor leaders would have a powerful effect and would demonstrate a united front against the aggressor states.”¹³ Although the TUC leaders considered their place was with the British people during this phase of the war, they agreed that their top people would participate at the conference, which took place in New York in November 1941.

Labor Secretary Perkins later praised this ILO conference as a propaganda success. The agenda was, in fact, largely decided by the U.S. Labor Department, together with presidential advisers such as Isador Lubin, who, like the British, was convinced of the importance of labor in reinforcing the position of the president and all who favored an American commitment to war.

Up until then, the State Department had paid little attention to labor, at both the national and international level.¹⁴ The relationship with the ILO in Geneva had primarily been a task for the Labor Department, a playground granted to the “New Deal boys” in which official diplomacy had hardly taken any interest. This did not mean that they enjoyed a free hand, however. Mixed opinions within the American trade union movement and the bitter conflict between the AFL and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) obstructed the relationship between the workers' movement and the Roosevelt administration. “Walking on eggs” was an essential skill in the international field here, because the AFL demanded total exclusivity, while the CIO insisted on equal treatment. The war highlighted this conflict even more, and it was clear that the problems between the two organizations at the international level threatened immediate repercussions at the national level.

10. J. Van Daele, “Engineering Social Peace: De Internationale Arbeidsorganisatie als laboratorium voor de transnationale uitwisseling van ideeën en de invloed op de sociale politiek in België tussen 1919 en 1944” (PhD diss., University of Ghent, 2007), 322.

11. Geert Van Goethem, “Phelan's War: The International Labour Organization in Limbo, 1941–1948,” in M. Rodríguez García, ed., *Past and Future of the International Labour Organization* (Bern, 2010), 318.

12. Carter Goodrich to F. W. Legett, December 27 1940, Mss 292/925/1–929/3, Modern Records Centre, TUC Archives, Coventry, England (hereinafter TUC Archives).

13. Note on a conversation between G. Tomlinson, Sir Frederick Legett, Mr. Butler, J. Hallsworth, Walter Citrine, Mr. W. J. Bolton, May 22, 1941, Mss 292/925/1–929/3, TUC Archives.

14. David A. Morse Oral History Interview, July 25, 1977, Truman Library, Independence, Missouri.

A NEW WORLD ORGANIZATION

After Pearl Harbor, nothing was the same; the objective was now to win a world war. But this also involved winning the peace and creating a new world order and a new architecture for the system of international organizations. The first question was where to start: from scratch or from whatever that was left of the prewar system. It made sense that the first exercises in this context examined the option of starting from the only international organization that was still in operation, the ILO. On the basis of the Atlantic Charter and the ILO resolutions in New York, labor insisted on extending the ILO's authority to incorporate the economic field and postwar reconstruction. It was also clear that the ILO would only be able to achieve this mission if all the Allied superpowers, including the Soviet Union, would be part of it. This was now a problem, because the Soviet Union had been shown the door rather unceremoniously by the ILO itself,¹⁵ and Moscow had not yet forgotten this. Getting the Russians back into the ILO was a major concern for the labor departments of the British and American governments. This inevitably brought the issue into the realm of foreign policy and immediately raised the question as to whether labor's ambitions could be reconciled with the broader international perspective. On the initiative of Isador Lubin, an informal but important group of experts¹⁶ convened at Columbia University on December 28, 1941. This group included technical experts as well as administration personnel. The State Department was also represented in the person of Leo Pasvolsky. At this time, Pasvolsky, who later became a prime architect of the new international system, was busy drawing up an inventory of the problems in international cooperation and was examining the instruments that could be developed. He considered these problems primarily from the point of view of aid and reconstruction. Pasvolsky started from a blank sheet, but, in a sense, his proposals already suggested a direction. He considered several options to the question of "who should be in charge"—"an official international organization: (a) one created specially for this purpose? (b) one of the existing organizations such as the International Labor Office or the League of Nations (c) a new association of nations?"¹⁷

Carter Goodrich, the American chairman of the ILO Governing Body, pointed out to the members of the State Department and others the importance

15. The Soviet Union walked out of the League of Nations in 1938. According to statute, this also ended their ILO membership. The ILO did not apply the statutes as rigorously to other nations.

16. Present were Isador Lubin (adviser to President Roosevelt), Carter Goodrich (Chairman of the ILO Governing Body), Luther Gulick (professor of economics), Albert F. Hinrichs (lead economist, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics), Leo Pasvolsky (U.S. State Department), Alexander Loveday (head of the economic and financial department of the League of Nations), Professor R.H. Tawney (British Labor Attaché in the United States), and Pierre, Waelbroeck (assistant director of the ILO).

17. Department of State, Division of Special Research, Problems of International Relief, February 19, 1942, RG 59 Leo Pasvolsky, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, Maryland.

of ensuring the cooperation of the “organized workers” in the context of developing international reconstruction programs: “It is important to try to avoid having labor opinion running against what you believe would be best for the economic situation of the world.”¹⁸ For this reason, the ILO was to be allocated a prominent role in the postwar preparation. And, even though the State Department was not particularly keen on labor interfering in the British-American discussions, there was general agreement that the involvement of the ILO in phrasing proposals for the postwar period could be useful “to popularize policies upon which the two Governments could agree.”¹⁹

But it also became quite clear that the days in which international labor issues were virtually the exclusive responsibility of the Labor Department were finished. The Labor Department and the labor movement certainly felt that the ILO should be given a prominent role in the development of postwar plans, but the State Department clearly had a different idea: “The Department of State is structurally the only organization equipped and situated to carry out this type of planning.” The labor community’s desire to have more fingers in the pie with regard to postwar reconstruction planning and to simultaneously broaden the scope of the organization to include economic and financial issues was not embraced by the Foreign Office in Great Britain: “It seems clearly inadvisable for the ILO to embark on wider questions of financial and economic policy.”²⁰

The British government delegate at the ILO, Sir Frederick Legett, interpreted the situation specifically as an internal American struggle for domination. Pasvolsky and his section within the administration “are using the ILO resolution to bring themselves into a position of prominence. A group of enthusiastic people in the USA are bent on making the ILO a mere background for their own discussions.”²¹ In the meantime, even Labour’s driving force in the British government, Ernest Bevin, had come to the conclusion that an extension of the ILO mandate was not under discussion: “The ILO will stand or fall by what it does in its own proper sphere, and that is labor and industry.”²² They were, however, of the opinion that the ILO was indeed a useful instrument with a proper place and the right to be recognized within the new world structure.

The ILO was a major area of attention within the labor movements of Great Britain and the United States, but by no means the only one. The British workers’ movement had clearly adopted a double strategy: to ensure that labor would be represented in the national delegations at a general peace conference and to secure an important role for the ILO with labor representation included

18. Minutes, Meeting on the Reconstruction Program, Columbia University, December 28, 1941, NARA, RG 59, Leo Pasvolsky.

19. Department of State, Memorandum of Conversation, December 30, 1941, NARA, RG 59, Leo Pasvolsky.

20. Telegram from the Foreign Office, March 4, 1942, NARA, RG 59, Leo Pasvolsky.

21. F. W. Legett to Mr. Makings, January 13, 1942, FO 371, The National Archives (TNA), Kew, England.

22. Ernest Bevin to Antony Eden, July 3, 1943, FO 37, TNA.

here as well. The AFL also appeared to prefer this double strategy. The AFL convention in Toronto in October 1942 resolved "To press for labor representation in delegations from all countries at the Peace Conference."²³ In addition, the AFL had a *de facto* monopoly of American workers' delegates within the ILO, much to the displeasure of the CIO, but this ensured AFL support for Perkins, Lubin, and the international ambitions of the Labor Department.

Versailles dominated the way that the British and American trade unions thought about the upcoming peace talks. They assumed that the conditions for peace and the framework for reconstruction would be drawn up within an overall conference. But the international recognition of the trade union movement's status was of particular interest to the British—more so than the Americans—and this was to be achieved via an official representation at such a conference.

LABOR'S ACTIVE FOREIGN POLICY

The British TUC, and more particularly Sir Walter Citrine, practiced a very active parallel diplomacy at the beginning of the war. Sir Walter not only undertook missions to the United States on behalf of the British government, but also visited Moscow. He was in Kubishev in October 1941, where, on behalf of the British government, he discussed the military situation with the Soviet minister of foreign affairs, Molotov. He reported this discussion to Winston Churchill later.²⁴

The national leadership of the British TUC developed this far-reaching commitment with the idea that, in exchange for these services, the British government would support the trade union movement in its quest to achieve representation on the world stage. Because this objective was partly situated beyond the reach of their government, it was now necessary to find partners at the international level: "Such a policy is more likely to be successful if it represented the voice of the Soviet, American and British trade union movements, linked together in a joint committee."²⁵ For this reason, the TUC decided to make every effort to bring the Soviet Union's trade union movement on board. It was exactly this decision that generated the major conflict between the AFL and the TUC. By 1945, this conflict had escalated to open warfare and led the AFL to develop an instrument that would enable them to propagate and defend American values globally.

Once again, it was Walter Citrine who received the assignment to implement the TUC policy. He visited the United States in May 1942 with the aim of forging a structural link between the national trade union movements of the three world powers. The AFL was well aware of what was happening in Great Britain and knew the importance of Citrine's mission. The Americans also

23. Report of M.D. Gordon, Labor Attaché, December 1942, FO 371, TNA.

24. Anglo-Soviet Trade Union Committee, Report, October 1941, Mss 292c/918.1/1, TUC Archives.

25. TUC, Confidential Report, January 29, 1942, Mss 292c/918.1/1, TUC Archives.

understood the difficult position in which the TUC found itself: "They are probably being pressed by their Government to collaborate [with the Russians] in every possible way,"²⁶ and they were aware that "Mr. Citrine came to the United States with the full knowledge and approval of the Prime Minister of Great Britain."

But the AFL leadership realized both the national and international political issues at stake. If the Americans accepted the British proposal, it would immediately open the door for the CIO to launch itself into international affairs. However, the AFL had reaffiliated with the international trade union movement in 1937, after having been absent for more than fifteen years, precisely because it wanted to prevent its national competitor from gaining international recognition.²⁷ Acceptance of the British proposal also meant that the Soviet Union would gain membership again in both the ILO and the IFTU. At this precise moment, however, the AFL found itself under substantial pressure from Isador Lubin and the U.S. Labor Department to accept the full participation of the Soviet Union in international organizations. Once the door had been opened to communism at an international level, feared AFL leaders, the position of communist elements within the American workers' movement would be reinforced.²⁸ The AFL had resisted this before the war and saw no reason to change this opinion. Therefore, all things considered, the AFL did not deem it possible to accept the British proposal: "We could not explain to our people how and why we would join with Soviet Russia as proposed by Brother Citrine."²⁹ William Green instead suggested the foundation of an Anglo-American trade union committee, in addition to the existing Anglo-Soviet committee, to ensure some degree of coordination without requiring the formal commitment of the AFL to cooperate with Russia. Furthermore, the AFL explicitly asked Citrine not to contact the CIO.

This placed the British trade union leader in a particularly awkward predicament, especially as the British Embassy in Washington and the Foreign Office believed that the CIO was a more interesting partner than the AFL: "The CIO, whose membership is drawn largely from the vital war industries, is more important to our cause than the AFL"³⁰ Citrine thus received the recommendation "that although his hosts were the AFL, he should also open a direct line with the CIO."³¹ Citrine decided not to pursue this line for the time being, which angered the CIO. A few months later, a delegation of five TUC members

26. AFL, Executive Council, minutes, May 13–22, 1942, George Meany Memorial Archives (GMMA), AFL-CIO Archives, Silver Spring, MD.

27. Van Goethem, *The Amsterdam International*, 182.

28. Walter Citrine, *Visit to America*, 1/33–35, Walter Citrine Papers, British Library of Political and Economic Science (BLPES), London, England.

29. AFL, Executive Council, minutes, May 13–22, 1942, GMMA, AFL-CIO Archives.

30. Report, Labor Attaché Prof. Tawney, Washington, August 1942, , FO/371/30700, TNA.

31. Note, Foreign Office to C. R. Attlee, deputy prime minister, August 1942, FO/371/30700, TNA.

planned another visit to the United States and again omitted a meeting with the CIO. At precisely that moment, with the support of President Roosevelt, CIO head Phil Murray made efforts to close the breach with the AFL. The British Foreign Office therefore resolved “to warn Sir W. Citrine that a repetition of the refusal of the T.U.C. to have official relations with the CIO is likely to prejudice the efforts now being made to heal the split in the American Labor Movement and to have unfortunate repercussions on Anglo-US relations.”³²

In addition to this, British relations with the Soviet Union seemed to be undermined by these developments. When the British informed the Soviets that the AFL had refused to create a tripartite committee, they declared themselves “very deeply aggrieved about their exclusion. Very deeply aggrieved.”³³ This, naturally, also threatened to jeopardize the American relationship with the Soviets, and caused a state of alert in the American Embassy in London.³⁴ To make matters worse, all this occurred just a few months before the U.S. House elections of November 1942, a period during which the nerves are stretched to the limit, even in normal times. The result was that Citrine, ready to do anything to serve the British government, became a liability rather than a useful partner. The British government and White House officials therefore insisted that the planned meeting of the Anglo-American committee be postponed.³⁵ They exerted maximum pressure to this effect on both the AFL and the TUC.³⁶

Neither the TUC nor the AFL was very pleased with these interventions by their governments. The general council of the TUC adopted a resolution condemning the British government’s attempt to mix in trade union affairs. Although the meeting was indeed postponed, the first contact between AFL and TUC leadership in January 1943 took place in a tense atmosphere. Green and Citrine ended up directly opposing each other, and the AFL obstinately refused to consider the TUC’s explicit request to extend their cooperation to incorporate the CIO. The British referred to how both their governments recognized the CIO as a “bona fide” trade union movement and Walter Citrine argued that President Roosevelt had made his agreement clear. The AFL, however, “denounced” the CIO as separatists without the representative authority they claimed to have; it threatened a breach with the TUC if the latter opted for cooperation with the CIO.

At the urgent request of the British Embassy and the Foreign Office, a meeting took place between the British delegation and the CIO leadership a few days later. The atmosphere during this conversation was tense and unfriendly and resulted in a confrontation between James B. Carey and Walter Citrine, who

32. Report, Labor Attaché Prof. Tawney, Washington, August 1942, FO/371/30700, TNA.

33. AFL, Executive Council, minutes, January 18–27, 1943, GMMA, AFL-CIO Archives.

34. Message from Ambassador Winant, September 10, 1942, RG 59, 841.5043/66, NARA.

35. AFL, Executive Council, minutes, January 18–27, 1943, GMMA, AFL-CIO Archives.

36. Message from Ambassador Winant, September 10, 1942, RG 59, 841.5043/66, NARA.

described the attitude of the CIO as “totally uncooperative.”³⁷ To make matters worse, a *New York Times* front-page headline on February 25, 1943 read “British Labor Leader Is Rebuffed By AFL Over Soviet Amity Plea.” Citrine had made public the AFL rejection of trade union unity during a lunch in New York. This dragged the conflict between the two trade union federations, the question of U.S.-Soviet relations, and the potential position of the ILO within a new international framework into the public spotlight. The consequences were incalculable—everything was shaken. British diplomats and politicians were particularly displeased at the clumsy performance of the TUC in the United States, and Citrine’s description of the British Embassy officers in Washington as “impossible and inefficient” was no help. His reputation in Labour party circles suffered even more after he declared that “The best elements in American public life are to be found in the Republican Party.”³⁸ Citrine was a dead duck in his own circles and, again, found himself in an extremely uncomfortable situation. Being a more traditional and conservative trade union leader, his natural American ally was the AFL. Politically, he maintained the best relations with Winston Churchill and had a troubled relationship with the Labour party’s driving force, Ernest Bevin. His ambition to play a prominent role in the expected peace negotiations forced Citrine to cooperate both with the Soviet Union, which constituted an indispensable international partner, and with the CIO, which the British government deemed more important than the AFL. However, both the Soviet Union and the CIO mistrusted Citrine, and now he had unwillingly run into an open conflict with the AFL. All this forced him into a flight forward towards the world trade union conference.

WORLDWIDE UNDERSTANDING?

The summer of 1943 brought a sudden rush of activity onto the international trade union front. As during the previous world war, the various players attempted to strengthen their position in the field and to maximize their grip on events. The TUC now put all its efforts into global unity, “a world-wide trade union organization, an organization tolerant of each other’s individual problems.”³⁹ During the TUC congress in September 1943, the board was asked to organize a World Trade Union Conference (WTUC) in order to reinforce the claim “for a voice in the settlement of the terms and conditions of peace.”⁴⁰ The TUC organized the event and sent out invitations in its own name and on its own responsibility. Invitations went out to seventy-one trade union organizations in thirty-one countries, including the Soviet Union and the AFL and the

37. Walter Citrine, Visit to America, unpublished diary, 1/37–38, Walter Citrine Papers, BLPES.

38. Memo from Willie Tyrell, Foreign Office, March 25, 1943, FO 371/34154, TNA.

39. Walter Citrine to William Green, draft without date, Mss 292c/918.1/1, TUC Archives.

40. TUC, International Committee, minutes, October 19, 1943, Mss 209/901/5, TUC Archives.

CIO. The IFTU normally would have been the appropriate body to organize such an international conference. The TUC, however, decided to sidestep the IFTU, assuming that the AFL, a prominent IFTU member, would never agree to a conference and because neither the Soviet Union nor the CIO were members of the IFTU.⁴¹ This headstrong initiative by the TUC caused global resentment and resistance but did lead to a new, global trade union organization, the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), and, as the British had wanted, the cooperation of trade union organizations from the three superpowers. For the AFL this constituted a declaration of war, and it prepared to take all possible action to thwart the initiatives of both the TUC and the WFTU.

The AFL's first target was the TUC's plan to merge the WTUC with the International Labor Conference in the spring of 1944.⁴² The AFL succeeded in "checkmating"⁴³ the attempt to hold both events simultaneously. The ILO conference was eventually organized in Philadelphia in April 1944, and the world trade union conference had to be postponed to February 1945. This was the first major setback for the TUC and for Citrine personally.

At the same time, the AFL was working on an alternative strategy involving a multilateral and a bilateral approach. The multilateral approach was based on the legitimacy of the IFTU; the AFL argued that it was the only body with the authority to represent the international "bona fide" trade union movement. The AFL, however, was in an isolated position within the IFTU. Both the context and the structure of the international trade union movement were largely dominated by the TUC, which provided the IFTU's international headquarters in London. Simultaneously, the AFL developed a second approach that involved the people who had dominated the AFL's activist foreign policy since 1934. This policy was shaped by a small group of top people, with William Green as the ostensible head but with Jay Lovestone as the real power, assisted by Matthew Woll, David Dubinsky, and George Meany.⁴⁴ This structure and method dated back to 1934, when the AFL created the "Chest for the Liberation of the Workers of Europe," which granted financial support to underground trade union movements in Germany and Italy, under the control of Woll and Dubinsky.⁴⁵ The Chest stopped its activities in 1937, mainly as a result of the rift within the American trade union movement. But the AFL picked up the thread again in November 1940 with the foundation of "League for Human Rights, Freedom and Democracy

41. The All-Union Central of Trade Unions of the USSR made an attempt to have the invitation signed by themselves and the CIO, but the TUC refused this.

42. This was a proven recipe. During the First World War, Samuel Gompers had tried the same by attempting to have the workers' congress coincide with the overall peace conference. This did not work out in the end (see Elizabeth McKillen's article in this issue, 643–62).

43. *AFL Weekly News Service*, December 28, 1943.

44. Ted Morgan, *A Covert Life: Jay Lovestone, Communist, Anticommunist and Spymaster* (New York, 1999).

45. Van Goethem, *The Amsterdam International*, 182.

Sponsored by Organized Labor for the Preservation and Extension of Democracy as the American Way of Life.”⁴⁶ The first important project of the League was an “American Labor Committee to aid British Labor,” which made propaganda for American support of the British under the pretext of collecting relief funds, even before the US entered the war.⁴⁷ Propaganda was also the major motive of the League for Human Rights during the years to come, with publications such as “As Americans” and “Who is This Man?”

The League’s mission changed in April 1943, when it entered into an agreement with the American National War Fund⁴⁸ that granted them access to this fund’s resources. And these were not small.⁴⁹ In 1944, the National War Fund approved a total of \$950,000 for “labor projects.” The application of these resources was largely under the supervision and control of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) but served the target the AFL was aiming at, namely, the reconstruction of a free, noncommunist trade union movement, initially in Europe, and, from 1944 onwards, on a global scale. The AFL started a practice of “covert activism,” thereby seconding the development away from the public forum of an interventionist American foreign policy, via “complicated foreign aid schemes designed to enhance the United States’ influence abroad.”⁵⁰ The secret character of these operations necessitated the prevention of any form of external supervision. For this reason, the Free Trade Union Committee was founded during the AFL convention in 1944 as an agency of the League for Human Rights. With this instrument, and the resources made available via the American secret services, the AFL attracted worldwide allies, and simultaneously started a head-on attack against the World Trade Union Federation as an exponent of international communism.⁵¹

The AFL foreign policy doctrine continued to build on the tradition shaped by Samuel Gompers during the First World War: emphasizing with missionary zeal “the right and manifest duty of the United States to help and eventually save the world.”⁵² Such missionary work does not usually tolerate compromises.

46. Labor League for Human Rights, program, November 18, 1940, Dubinsky Papers, 5780/2, box 78 ff 3d, Kheel Center Archives, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York (hereinafter Kheel Center).

47. Ibid.

48. League for Human Rights, agreement draft, April 1943, 5780/2, box 78 ff3d, Kheel Center.

49. The National War Fund would make a total of \$343,249,564 available to twenty-three recognized agencies spread over three years.

50. Sallie Pisani, *The CIO and the Marshall Plan* (Lawrence, KS, 1991), 3.

51. Annie Lacroix-Riz, “Autour d’Irving Brown: L’AFL, le Free Trade Union Committee, le Département d’état et la scission syndicale française (1944–1947),” *Le Mouvement Sociale* 151 (1990): 79–114; Anthony Carew, “The American Labor Movement in Fizzland: The Free Trade Union Movement and the CIA,” *Labor History* 39 (1998): 25–42.

52. Ronald Radosh, *American Labor and United States Foreign Policy* (New York, 1969), 303.

LABOR AT WAR

The conflict between the AFL and the TUC was certainly not of a nature to strengthen the status of the labor movement as a solid partner in the peace process. Labor had become rather an inhibiting factor in both Great Britain and the United States, and this also applied to the ILO. During this phase of the peace process, which coincided with the military end-phase of the war, the position of the Soviet Union was of crucial importance. As both the labor movement and the ILO were at odds with the Soviets, they had become virtually useless from a foreign policy point of view. At the end of 1943, with the peace process in full preparation, the man at the drawing board was Leo Pasvolosky. He was familiar with labor and the ILO, and, to the displeasure of the U.S. Labor Department,⁵³ he decided to leave them out of the equation for the time being. The new international structure was developed in a “shifting, labyrinthine context”⁵⁴ in which it was unclear to the active participants which current would eventually get the upper hand.

Eventually, the group surrounding Secretary of State Cordell Hull won, despite efforts by several departments within the U.S. government and the White House to interfere in the affair. With political support from Hull, and against the more regionalist vision of Sumner Welles, Pasvolosky developed the visionary framework for a global structure that eventually took shape in the UN organization. To a large extent, this development remained hidden, however. Even top American people, such as Frances Perkins and Isador Lubin, were not involved, and Frances Perkins had to arrange a personal interview with Pasvolosky to obtain a briefing on the situation. The situation seemed to bode ill for labor’s ambitions. In the American State Department’s opinion, labor was not to be involved in the postwar preparations except with regard to limited areas of expertise. This can be regarded as a direct attack on the ambitions of the New Deal followers to continue a high degree of economic state intervention after the war, an ambition that was shared by the British labor movement, both as party and trade union.

The first overt signal that something was going wrong occurred during the UN Conference on Food and Agriculture at Hot Springs in May 1943. Despite continued pressure from labor quarters, labor was unsuccessful in obtaining a representation at the conference. This was an alarming situation for both the American and British labor movements. What seemed a matter of course in 1941, leaving only the question of the approach labor would take to end up at the negotiation table, had now become highly uncertain. Labor realized that they had to return to the international front and fell back on the formula that had been successful in 1941: an international labor conference. This took place in Philadelphia in April 1944, with the “declaration concerning the aims and

53. Telegram from Phelan to ILO Office in London, March 19, 1945, Phelan Cabinet Papers, Z 14/1/2, ILO Archives, Geneva, Switzerland.

54. Stephen C. Schlesinger, *Act of Creation* (Cambridge, 2003), 36.

purposes” as a major result, widening and deepening the 1919 Labor Charter. But Philadelphia also exposed the major opposing views within the international labor community. First of all, even after a personal intervention from Roosevelt to convince Stalin, it had turned out to be impossible to persuade the Soviet Union to participate in the conference. The Russians continued their hostile aloofness towards the ILO. This, in turn, reinforced the conflict between the AFL and the TUC. The fact that the conference did not take place in London, as the TUC had demanded, but in the United States, was proof in itself. On top of this, the conflict between the two American trade union federations now reached the international level. In Philadelphia, Robert Watt, the AFL delegate at the ILO, declared to all who listened: “Citrine and the CIO call for a fight? Fine, they’ll get one!”⁵⁵

ELBOWED OUT!

At the end of the war, labor now found itself sidetracked. At the time the new outlines of the postwar world order were actually being signed, labor no longer had a position via the ILO at either the national or international level. During the Dumbarton Oaks conference, and even more so in San Francisco, the failure of the international labor policy became embarrassingly clear. Even though an ILO delegation was present in San Francisco, the Soviet Union’s opposition turned out to be an insurmountable obstacle, and the American State Department deemed the ILO to be of minor importance at the time. The reactions in workers’ movement circles and from the British labor ministry delegate reflected bewilderment at the apparent “inertia, ineptitude and even malice of the State Department.”⁵⁶ But the TUC’s strategy had also failed miserably. In February 1945, the WTUC in London had claimed a direct representation in San Francisco. It was already clear at the time that this would not be feasible due to the conflict with the AFL. The TUC thereby changed tack and demanded that the three allied governments ensure “trade union representation in their delegations,” but the British Foreign Office resisted this and, in a note to the British prime minister, emphasized that any delegates of the workers’ movement in San Francisco “*Should not* be given any official status.”⁵⁷ Meanwhile, the AFL also made an effort to frustrate the TUC’s plans. Chairman Green publicly called Citrine a traitor, and also aimed some arrows at the WTUC. William Green and George Meany arranged a personal interview with Secretary of State Stettinius, who made a note of how both men were “very much excited” to make sure that the rumors they had heard about the WTUC being present in San

55. Jef Rens, notes on an interview with Robert Watt, December 1944, Jef Rens, PR5-830/217, Studie en Documentatiecentrum Oorlog en Hedendaagse Maatschappij, Brussels.

56. Myrdinn Evans to the British FO, May 5, 1945, FO 371, TNA.

57. Note of the Foreign Office, March 7, 1945, TNA, FO 371, TNA.

Francisco were unfounded.⁵⁸ There was general astonishment in diplomatic circles and at the OSS. Those who had spoken in “very pompous terms about . . . ‘Labor’s place at the peace table’” during the war now discovered that “Labor has no seat at all.” “Instead of fighting for that seat . . . the AFL is actually fighting in San Francisco to *deny* any seat.”⁵⁹ In the end, the result was that the leaders of the trade union movement who went to San Francisco on their own personal initiative received the same treatment as the “Rotary, Kiwanis and ‘do-good’ organizations.”

The TUC had asked for a fight, and they had received one and lost it. The winner appeared to be the AFL, but this victory came at a price. The CIO followed the same political line as the American government and enjoyed international recognition. The AFL had become the pariah of the international workers’ movement and, by preventing others from participating in the peace talks, had effectively maneuvered itself out of the game. But at the time that this battle was fought, another war was in the making. Even though this was not yet clear in May 1945, the AFL had strong trumps that would take them to the front line in the fight against the new enemy, communism, in the coming decade. The instrument they had created, the Free Trade Union Committee, and the alliance that had been forged with the American secret service, would prove very useful in the decades to come.

CONCLUSION

The Second World War was of exceptional importance for the workers’ movements of the two Western superpowers. At a national level, these unions came out of the war stronger than before, with membership figures peaking. This strong position was mainly due to their cooperation with their governments. In the context of virtually unlimited economic intervention by the government during the war, trade unions were indispensable allies. These allies were given the green light to become structurally embedded in the instruments those governments created as a function of this interventionism. At a national level, this simply reduced to a swap: power for cooperation. This could certainly accommodate a little ideological flexibility. For the “socialist” TUC, with its collectivization programs, this period could perhaps be considered as a step in the right direction. For the more traditional and procapitalist AFL this was more complex. Andrew E. Kersten concluded, however, that “Ideologically, the Federation was fundamentally different in 1945 from what it had been in 1941,” referring to their complete turnabout in favor of the New Deal policy.⁶⁰

58. Department of State, Memorandum of Conversation, April 9, 1945, Stettinius Papers, RG 59, NARA.

59. This and the previous quotation: note from David Shaw (OSS), to George Pratt (OSS), 3 May 3, 1945, RG 226, E 190, B 306, F 190, NARA.

60. Andrew Kersten, *Labor’s Home Front: The American Federation of Labor During World War II* (New York, 2006), xii.

This type of ideological flexibility did not apply to the foreign policy field, however. Based on a clear ideological mission, "Preservation and Extension of Democracy as the American Way of Life," continuity, and constancy were trump values in AFL's foreign policy. This ideology, however, hardly left any space for compromise, even in a time of war, when, for military reasons, the American government had to enter into partnerships with powers who did not respect these values. This approach was fundamentally different from the British approach, which was dominated by the idea that their nation's military-political alliances should be reflected in a corresponding trade union derivative. Compared to the high level of consistency observed within the AFL,⁶¹ the TUC displayed a remarkable maneuverability. Their strategic objectives were thoroughly different. By focusing on convergence, the British attempted to attain objectives that were in line with their national objectives as a trade union. These related to typical trade union issues: employment, industrial development, labor standards. They were also not insensitive to the prestige of being seen to work together with global political and economic leaders at an international level. The objective of British policy was therefore mainly a short-term one. The AFL on the other hand, acting on their principles of constancy and mission, was less interested in this and adopted a long-term orientation: consistency against flexibility, mission against pragmatism.

These were not the only differences between Great Britain and America. The political position of both movements was also different. The AFL had always kept away from true political activities, concentrating on participation in government agencies such as the National Labor Relations Board. The TUC, on the other hand, was represented at the heart of the British government⁶² by the Labour Party, of which it was a structural part, with ministers being recruited directly from the trade unions. Internationally, however, this was not really an advantage for the TUC. When the moment of truth came, they were let down by their friends in the government. Other rules reigned in foreign policy and diplomacy, and these were stronger than the alliance between a trade union and a political party. The international position of a trade union is a position of dependency. In contrast with their national status, they only have few instruments available when it comes to the international level. This makes them susceptible to becoming a pawn that can either be used or not, depending on the situation. The creation of an instrument with a view to direct overseas intervention is precisely the most remarkable development of the AFL's foreign policy during WWII. The trade union's direct link with social components that were deemed important for the targets of the foreign policy of a government—or rather a regime—appeared to be a major

61. Michael Kerper, *The International Ideology of US Labor, 1941–1975* (Göteborg, Sweden, 1976), 39.

62. Alan Campbell et al., *The Post-War Compromise. British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, 1945–1964* (Monmouth, Wales, 2007), 76.

trump. Indeed, although the AFL and the American government had apparently different points of view on foreign policy, the AFL did position itself in the front line together with those inside the American administration who were involved in the development of a "determined interventionism."⁶³ Determined interventionism was kept a secret at first but was pushed into the spotlight from October 1946 onwards. The British trade union movement, on the other hand, never had the possibility of developing such a machinery and consistently continued to try and reflect the foreign alliances of their nation. When this succeeded with the organization of the WTUC, this strategy appeared to be the correct one, but the world then toppled over, and the new friends became enemies again.

63. Pisani, *The CIA and the Marshall Plan*, 9.