

## **SOLIDARITY**

The First 100 Years of the  
International Transport Workers' Federation



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## Introduction



One hundred years is a landmark for any organisation. It is a time for celebration, a time to look back in history on past triumphs and glories. It is also a time for reflection, to ponder whether there are any lessons in the past that can be applied to the future.

The history of the International Transport Workers' Federation is particularly rich. It was founded through the motives of international solidarity and belief in the maxim that 'unity is strength'. It has been intimately involved in most of the major events of the past century - transport workers, by the nature of their jobs, are close to social and economic changes.

When modern trade unions began to function in Europe in the late nineteenth century, working conditions were appalling. Long hours, low pay, the ever-present risk of hunger and maltreatment were the lot of the working classes. The ITF has been part of the pressure for the transformation of conditions in the industrialised world.

But reading the stories of the ITF's founders reveals a pattern of events which every trade unionist could recognise. There are still parts of the world where exploitation is a daily event, where children work for a pittance and women are abused. Trade unions and their leaders face repression and reaction in many countries. Some even fear for their lives. Employers are often as keen

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as they were 100 years ago to restrict the rights of workers and their independent organisations.

The founders of the ITF would be staggered by the changes in the speed and technology of railway systems, the growth of road transport, the huge size of modern ships and the mechanisation of ports. The first aeroplane had yet to take off.

But they would probably be quite at home with modern trade unionists. Discussions and debates over the right tactic, on how to maximise international support and of the value of strikes and boycotts were as common in the rooms of transport union leaders in 1896 as they are today.

Although the influence of international regulation and international organisations, such as the twentieth-century creations of the United Nations and the International Labour Organisation, would be unknown, the early internationalists had a faith that the joining together of nations would inevitably mean progress.

They wanted to make sure that all workers in the world – regardless of race, religion and language – were treated fairly, had dignity and were allowed true independence and freedom.