

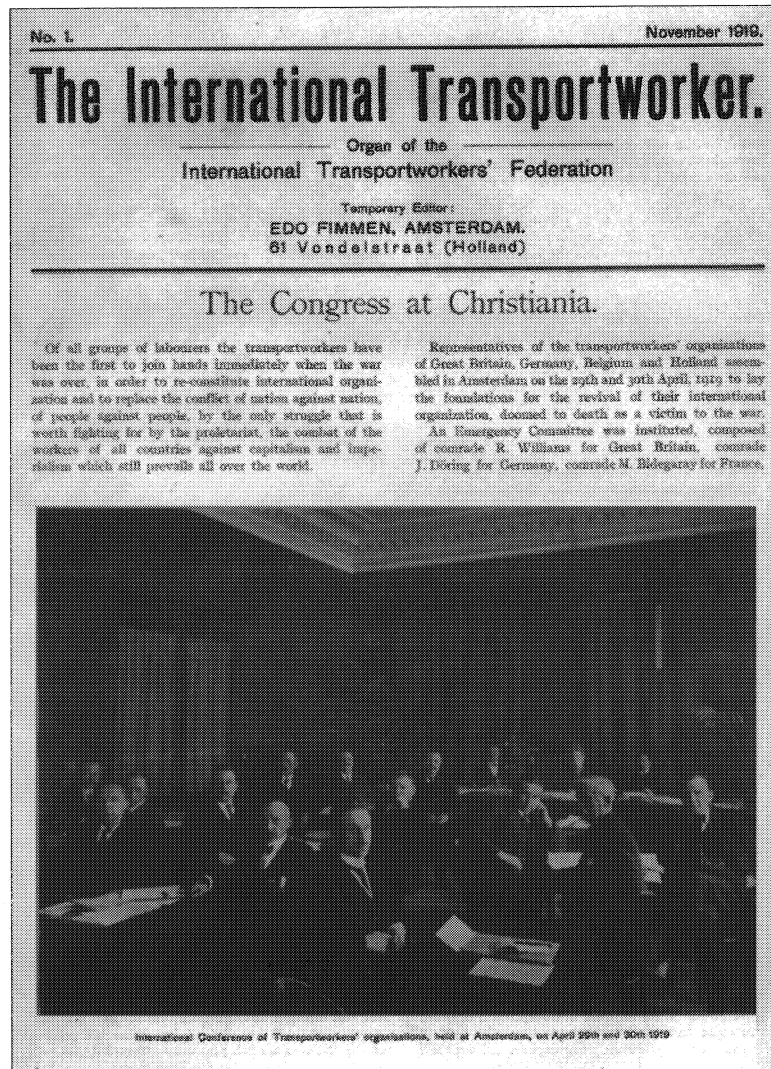
Chapter Six

Refoundation

Rebuilding the ITF following the disaster of the First World War was a priority for the unions of those neutral countries, particularly the Netherlands and Sweden, which had watched Europe tear itself apart. Transport workers were the first to try to re-establish their links following the Armistice in November 1918, and preparations were made for the first meeting of German and British representatives in Amsterdam in April 1919.

It was an event that was to stay in the memory of the leaders from both the warring countries. Johann Döring, of the German dockers, described it ten years later: 'It was with mixed feelings that on the April morning in question we set out for the hotel at which the British comrades were staying. When we reached the bridge near the tower of the old Amsterdam mint we saw the British comrades Robert Williams, Harry Gosling and Ernest Bevin approaching from the other side. When comrade Williams, who was then general secretary of the National Transport Workers' Federation, saw us, he took three or four great strides, and stretched out his hand, calling out: "All right?" With beating heart I clasped the proffered hand and

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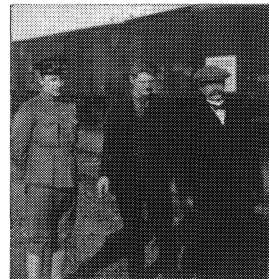
The front page of *The International Transportworker*, published in November 1919 following the Amsterdam meeting of transport workers, which was held on 29 and 30 April 1919 and led to the formal reconstruction of the ITF at the 9th congress in Christiania (Oslo), Norway, 15–19 March 1920.

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replied: "Very well!" Not a word more! And so peace was sealed between the principal unions in the ITF. I can honestly say it was the most significant moment of all my life and never before or since have I experienced such a strong feeling of joy as at that moment, which was decisive for the international transport workers and their position in the world.' Bevin, who was later to become leader of the Transport & General Workers' Union and British Foreign Secretary, was equally affected: 'A very happy meeting, which will ever live in one's memory, was that when, as by an act of Providence, the British and German delegations met on that little bridge in Amsterdam. The ready way in which both sides gave a handgrip of comradeship was significant. One could almost feel that, without uttering the words, they were saying: "We are glad the awful nightmare has passed and we can meet again".'

Both German and British delegates agreed that the ITF should be re-established with its headquarters in Amsterdam. Edo Fimmen, who was general secretary of the Dutch Federation of Trade Unions, was appointed honorary secretary. The minutes of the meeting were sent in French, English and German to every transport union that Fimmen was aware of and a congress of the reformed ITF was fixed to take place in Christiania (now Oslo) in March 1920. By the time of the meeting the membership of affiliated unions was 3m, more than three times the number that existed in 1914.

The appointment of Fimmen was to have huge significance as he began to stamp his own individual mark on the ITF. He dominated the organisation between the wars, with his own powerful mixture of socialism, internationalism and anti-fascism.



Edo Fimmen supervising food shipments to Austria during the ITF campaign.

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In Christiania, the congress adopted a new constitution, which covered everything from the aims of the organisation to how individual boycotts would be handled. The lines of management of the federation were also clarified, with supreme control remaining in the hands of congress, which was to meet every two years. The general council, meeting once a year, would supervise the executive committee, which came together every quarter, and the committee of management, made up of representatives of unions from the country where the ITF headquarters was based, was established and would handle day-to-day affairs.

Almost immediately after its reformation, the ITF was involved in high-profile international action. Fear of further global conflict prompted the 1920 congress to condemn efforts by allied powers to support measures to overthrow the Soviet Russian government following the 1917 revolution. Months later, two boycotts of munitions transport to Hungary and Poland attracted the attention of the world.

As the atrocities of the Horthy regime in Hungary became known in the spring of 1920, the ITF organised an effective protest against what was known as the 'white terror'. The imprisonment and execution of the regime's opponents, including trade unionists, led to an official trade boycott on 20 June. The Hungarian Transport Workers' Union had been a member of the ITF since 1905 and the boycott was supported by Austrian, Czech, Slovak, British, French and Italian trade unions. The country was effectively cut off, which forced negotiations between Edo Fimmen and the Hungarian ambassador in Vienna on 28 and 30 June in the presence of Karl Renner, the Austrian president. Eventually

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the boycott ended on 8 August. Although limited in its effect, the action drew international public attention to what was taking place in Hungary and forced the government to make a number of concessions. The action was described in the report to the 1921 congress in Geneva as the 'first tangible demonstration of the fact that the working classes in general and the transport workers and railwaymen in particular were becoming increasingly conscious of the necessity of using their economic power in order to combat effectively the monstrous tyranny of capitalism and militarism'.

As the summer progressed, the ITF again called on its affiliates to implement an international boycott, this time against the supply of munitions to Poland for their use in attacking Russia. Belgian, German and British dockers refused to load vessels bound for Poland and railwaymen in Austria and Italy halted munitions trains. The boycott continued for several months until negotiations eventually took place between Poland and Russia.

Continuing conflict between the peoples of Europe and the perpetual threat of another war left Edo Fimmen and the leadership of the ITF consistently warning of the dangers of militarism. A statement from the general council in April 1923 and signed by both Fimmen and Roger Williams, ITF president, is typical. 'Comrades, be on your guard. Do not cease to keep watch in all countries, for the transport of ammunition and other war material. See that this watch is kept as close as possible, and that no transport escapes your attention. Be ready, so that in case of necessity, as in the boycott of Hungary and the stoppage of shipment of munitions to Poland for use against Russia in 1920, you may be enabled, by your actions or any other

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means, to prevent the outbreak of another war. Down with war. Down with militarism, reaction and capitalism. Long live the workers' international.'

Such revolutionary language was favoured by Fimmen, who later chastised himself for not giving enough warning of the dangers in the rising tide of fascism and militarism, although his call to workers to defend themselves could not have been clearer in the ITF newsletter of May 1923. 'The working class must take its choice: either it must allow itself to be beaten down and crushed, or it must defend itself and its organisation, and if necessary, even the life of each one of its members, by every available means. If the argument of the fist is to be the only one used by the bourgeoisie, and is the only one they will listen to; then for the proletariat to attempt to meet it with paper resolutions, and to await with folded arms the triumph of Right, Law and Democracy, is not only ridiculous, it is criminal.'

As part of his efforts to unite European unions, Fimmen made repeated efforts to bring the Russian 'Red' unions into the ITF. A secret meeting between an ITF delegation, including Fimmen and Robert Williams, the ITF president, and the Russians was held in Berlin in May 1923, at which a draft agreement on mutual co-operation was agreed. A joint committee was put forward as a way of proceeding to a 'united front of transport workers'. A message to the transport workers in all countries, explaining the agreement and printed in the ITF newsletter, ended with the ringing revolutionary exclamation:

'Transport Workers! Comrades!
See to the carrying out of these decisions!
Down with Fascism!

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Down with Reaction!

Down with Capitalism!

Long live the United Front of the Transport Workers of all countries!

The high emotion was not to last long, however. The meeting and the co-operation agreement created a deep rift within the ITF, whose members were split between those implacably opposed to communist trade unions and those who supported the Red International. The central council of the ITF rejected Fimmen's agreement and both he and Robert Williams offered to resign. A personal note in the next issue of the newsletter reported the rebuff. 'It can hardly be a secret to anybody that I have been using all my influence and all my strength to bring about an understanding with the Russian workers,' Fimmen wrote. 'In so far as it was still necessary to do so I made this point perfectly clear at the General Council meeting. I must declare here that if I did anything wrong then I am to blame and if a scapegoat is needed it can be none other than I. Our president Robert Williams, speaking at the meeting on his own and my behalf, placed our two offices as president and secretary of the ITF at the disposal of the Central Council.' The resignations were not accepted.

Reaction to the failure came not only from those opposed to joining forces with the Russian communists. An attack from the International Propaganda Committee of the Revolutionary Transport Workers showed the intensity of the ideological battle during the 1920s. It said: 'The general Amsterdam tactics (those of the International Federation of Trade Unions) were also backed up by the reformist ITF. It is true that they induced their workers to boycott Horthy's bloodthirsty government, that they backed the transport

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workers of Soviet Russia in their war against Poland and that they rendered some assistance to their Norwegian comrades. But these few bright spots, which may be attributed to a growth of class consciousness among the transport workers, are extinguished by the rest of the history of the ITF which is one of constant trickery of the mass of the working class.'

Squabbling between the trade unions was soon to be overshadowed by a greater political danger, as the rise of fascism began to make its presence known across Europe. Fimmen was ready to make another principled stand.

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The ITF building in Vondelstraat, Amsterdam, which was the ITF headquarters from 1920 to 1939.