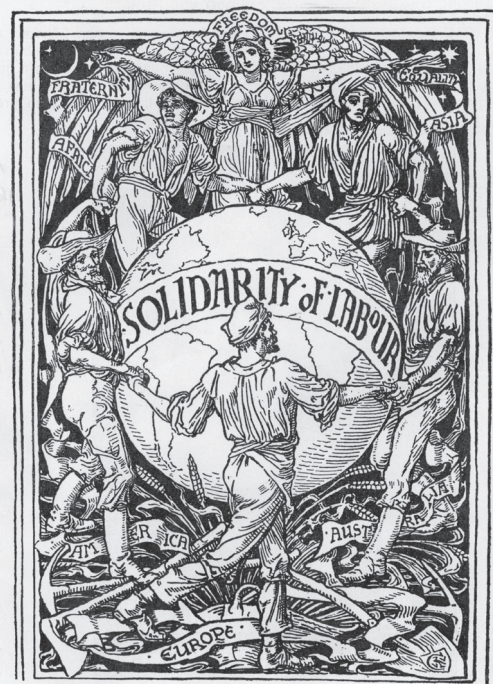


The Story of Our International Labour Movement



Daniel Edmonds

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*For our comrade Dave,
who firmly believed in the importance of labour history as a tool
for education. He spent his life inspiring activists to rediscover
their historic and political origins and was the catalyst that
made this book happen. We all miss him greatly.*

This book was published in collaboration with



The Global Labour Institute is a not-for-profit organisation working with the international trade union movement to conduct education, capacity-building and research on international labour movement development and organising strategies. It has specialist international experience in political education, organisation and trade union policy with informal economy workers, gender equality, climate crisis and just transition, and the design and management of international workers' education programmes. GLI's work also includes the GLI History project, a programme on the history of the international trade union movement, including a book accompanied by education projects to be undertaken with national and international unions. It is part of the GLI Network, an alliance of organisations guided by the values and principles of democratic socialism.

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List of Frequently-Used Abbreviations

- ACFTU** – All-China Federation of Trade Unions
- ADGB** – Allgemeiner Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund
(General German Trade Union Federation)
- AIFLD** – American Institute for Free Labor Development
- AFL** – American Federation of Labor
- AFL-CIO** – American Federation of Labor and Congress of
Industrial Organizations
- BWI** – Building and Wood Workers’ International
- CIO** – Congress of Industrial Organizations
- CFL** – Chinese Federation of Labour
- CGIL** – Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro
(Italian General Confederation of Labour)
- CGT** – Confédération Générale du Travail
(General Confederation of Labour)
- CNT** – Confederación Nacional del Trabajo
(National Confederation of Labour)
- COSATU** – Congress of South African Trade Unions
- CTUC** – Commonwealth Trade Union Council
- CUT** – Central Única dos Trabalhadores (Unified Workers’ Centre)
- DAF** – Deutsche Arbeitsfront (German Labour Front)
- ETUC** – European Trade Union Confederation
- FES** – Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (Friedrich Ebert Foundation)
- GLI** – Global Labour Institute
- GUF** – Global Union Federation

ICEF – International Federation of Chemical, Energy and General Workers’ Unions

ICFTU – International Confederation of Free Trade Unions

IFA – International Framework Agreement

IFCTU – International Federation of Christian Trade Unions

IUF – International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco, and Allied Workers’ Associations

ILO – International Labour Organisation/ International Labour Office

ISNTUC – International Secretariat of National Trade Union Centres

ITGWU – Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union

ISEL – Industrial Syndicalist Education League

ITF – International Transport Workers Federation

ITS – International Trade Secretariat

ITUC – International Trade Union Confederation

KMT – Kuomintang

IWW – Industrial Workers of the World

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

RILU – Red International of Labour Unions

SEWA – Self-Employed Women’s Association

SPD – Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
(German Social-Democratic Party)

TGWU – Transport and General Workers’ Union

TNC – Transnational Corporation

TUC – Trades Union Congress

WCL – World Confederation of Labour

WFTU – World Federation of Trade Unions

Glossary of terms

- **Anarchism:** Anarchism is a political philosophy that seeks to abolish all institutions that perpetuate unjust authority, social coercion and hierarchy. Anarchism can be divided into multiple tendencies that, by way of commonality, present themselves as a rejection of all forms of authority in principle. Nevertheless, in history Anarchism's dominant formation has been anarcho-communism, an anti-capitalist and anti-statist movement that seeks to establish a global human community predicated on overcoming the contradictions between individual and social freedoms. Like Marxists, anarchist communists believe the working class to be the revolutionary agent of history; but reject the necessity or possibility of state capture as an instrument for the establishment of communism. Sharing with Marxists a comprehension of the state as an organised body for upholding the rule of one class over another, anarchist communists infer from this that the immediate destruction of the state is a condition for the delivery of communism proper.
- **Bourgeoisie:** The Bourgeoisie are a class of business owners, merchants or wealthy people which emerged in the late Middle Ages, originally as a 'middle class' between peasants and the aristocracy. They are traditionally contrasted with the proletariat by their wealth, political power and their access to and control over cultural, social and financial capital. In communist philosophy the bourgeoisie is a social class that came to own the means of production during modern industrialization and whose social concerns are the preservation and maintenance of private property and the preservation of private capital so as to ensure their economic dominance over society.
- **Capitalism:** Capitalism is an economic system based on the private ownership of the means of production and their use for the purpose of profit. Capitalism is defined by several basic elements including – but not limited to private property, the maintenance of property rights, capital accumula-

tion, the profit motive, competitive markets, the division of labour, wage labour and commodification.

- **Commodity:** A commodity is an object, good or service that is produced by human labour. Commodities are the things that we make at work and the things that we then buy on the market. Marx suggests the financial value of an commodity is defined by how much labour time is necessary for its production. All workers – whether in the formal or informal economy – are involved in the creation, circulation and sale of commodities. By selling commodities for a higher price than they took to make, the capitalist class ensures its profits.
- **Communism:** Communism is a theory or system of social organization in which all property is owned by the community and each person contributes and receives according to their abilities and needs. A communist society entails the absence of private property and social classes, money and the state.
- **Marxism:** Marxism is an anti-capitalist body of thought, a political philosophy and a method of socio-economic analysis built on the writing and analysis of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marxism justifies and predicts the emergence of a stateless and classless society without private property
→ **communism**
- **Proletariat:** The Proletariat is the social class of wage-earners, those members of society whose possession of significant economic value is their labour power (their capacity to work). A member of such a class is a Proletarian. Marxists regard the proletariat under capitalism as an exploited class, forced to accept meagre wages in return for operating the means of production, which belong to the class of business owners – the bourgeoisie. Karl Marx argued that capitalist oppression gives the proletariat common economic and political interests that transcend economic boundaries, impelling them to unite and take over the power from the capitalist class, so as to create a socialist society free from class distinctions and exploitation.

- **Socialism:** Socialism is a political and economic theory of social organization, which advocates that the means of production, distribution and exchange should be owned or regulated by the community as a whole. For some Marxists, Socialism is seen as a transitional stage between the overthrow of capitalism and the realization of communism.
- **The working class:** The working class are those who sell their labour to the capitalist class. The working class do not own the means of production nor the goods they create. As such must sell their labour power to the capitalist class in return for a wage. The working class was once narrowly defined as those employed in the formal economy, but its definition has broadened to include the unemployed, housewives and others whose work – often invisible-reproduces capitalist social relationships.

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Introduction

What is the Point in History?

“The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”

Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte

During the 1990s, some claimed that we were living at the end of history. That capitalism had proved itself as the only way of running society. The idea that workers should have control of their workplace, or over society as a whole, was treated as an embarrassing idea from the past. The future of the world was just going to be more of the same.

And yet the last 30 years have seen immense changes. An explosion of new democracies has given way to a rise of new dictatorships. Violent nationalism and religious fundamentalism are on the march once again. Environmental disaster seems closer than ever before. Wars and conflicts between powerful countries threaten the ordinary people caught in the middle. New technologies and connections between producers and consumers which should make life easier only seem to make working harder.

This text was written because we believe the international labour movement can play an important role in changing the world. We have important and potentially very powerful organisations which we can take part in. Yet many activists, trade unionists, and ordinary people are unaware of them, why they were created, or what made them the way they are today. They do not know the history of the campaigns, conditions, and ideas which helped to shape them.

This book emphasises the importance of organising internationally. We want to make it clear that it is a very important part of working class history and show you some of the different ways that people have done it. Despite the importance of internationalism, many trade unionists and activists have few connections to, or knowledge of, the international structures of our movement and the histories behind them.

We hope that this book can provide you with a guide to some of the different important organisations, campaigns, and ideas within the international labour movement and show how these have developed over time. By looking at the history of the working class movement across the globe, we believe that labour activists can be better equipped to discuss, debate, strategize, collaborate, and ultimately transform the world to create a system that works for all of us.

‘What Have the Unions Ever Done for us?’

The trade union movement is the first, and often the last, line of resistance that workers have to defend themselves. It is the most representative organisation in civil society: it exists in every country in the world except in the most extreme dictatorships. Wherever groups of people have worked together, they have organised together to ensure that their rights are not trampled on, and their needs are met.

Historically, trade unions are an important part of a broader labour movement created by workers to defend their interests. These include workers’ political parties, as well as a range of institutions such as co-operatives, education associations, schools and labour colleges, health and welfare associations, cultural institutions (theatres, choirs, book clubs, and sports societies), women’s organisations, youth groups, anti-racist campaigns, solidarity, and defence organisations (including armed militias), radio and TV stations, newspapers, book publishers, bookshops and much more. All of these, taken together, form the historical labour movement.

It is rare for these institutions and organisations to have existed all at the same time in any one country. These institutions are not only meant to improve workers’ pay and conditions, but to help workers share knowledge and exchange ideas, offer ways to support one another’s struggles, and build connections between different groups of workers – they constitute an alternative society and a counterculture. The labour movement is a multi-faceted social movement with a cause and with a vision of how society should be.

The power of trade unionism is shown by the resilience of the international labour movement, which has survived the wars and totalitarian dictatorships of the 20th century, even when it has been specifically targeted for destruction. In the face of violence and repression, the labour movement has

continued. At times it has gone underground and even formed the backbone of resistance movements to dictators and undemocratic regimes. Whenever the opportunity presents itself, the labour movement re-emerges, showing great hardiness and flexibility in an ever-changing world.

Unions are not just important in the workplace, but in wider society. Trade unionists have led struggles for democracy, peace, inclusion, and equality. It is a global tradition that we can take great pride in.

The Many Faces of National Trade Union Organisation

Across the world, there are many different ways that different trade unions coordinate at the national level. In most countries, unions are separated by political, religious, ethnic differences or leadership rivalries. Clusters of individual unions which may represent workers of a particular industry, or company, or even an individual workplace, will coordinate through a ‘national centre’, which may be attached to a particular political party or follow a particular ideal, or represent workers mainly of a particular religious or ethnic grouping.

In India, for example, there are 14 officially recognised national trade union federations, each affiliated to, or supporting one of the many various socialist, communist, Hindu nationalist, or Gandhian parties and movements. This is in addition to a huge array of regional or state-wide union organisations based on occupation, sector, religion, ethnicity, or caste.

In some countries, such as Germany, there are several national centres, with one functioning as the *de facto* centre. Germany’s main trade union centre – the DGB – is often well-represented on companies’ works councils, plays an active role in shaping industrial conditions at national level negotiations, and helps shape public services such as vocational training/education systems.

In a smaller number of countries – for example, Britain, the Nordic countries, Jamaica, Botswana, and Australia, to name but a few, there is also a single national centre. Individual national unions in these countries may compete for members but are rarely organised around an explicit political affiliation. There may be several teachers’ unions, with different views on how to organise and what tactics are best, but there is not, for example, a social-democratic teachers’ union, a communist teachers’ union, a liberal

teachers' union, or so on. That is not to say that there are no political differences within these movements, but these differences are often contained within shared unions. In a trade union meeting or on a May Day demonstration you will often find members of many different parties, and non-affiliated activists, working or marching together.

In some countries, an organisation claims to be the sole national centre, but it is actually an arm of the state. One prominent example is in China, where the All-China Federations of Trade Unions (ACFTU) is under the control of the Communist Party and all independent unions are outlawed. These types of organisations are unions in name only – workers are often compelled to join them, and they exist to make workers more productive rather than to represent their interests against their employers. These organisations sometimes try to improve the lives of their members and even criticise employment conditions in some circumstances, but their lack of independence and political freedoms means that they must do this in very limited ways.

Our Political Heritage

As trade unions emerged, grew, and developed throughout history, a range of political ideas and movements were important in shaping their tactics, strategies, and demands. At the same time, the experiences of ordinary people who wanted better treatment helped to shape and develop political ideas. People found themselves living in very different circumstances to one another, in situations where ideas developed in another time and place, for a different set of people, did not seem to apply.

In many European countries, socialist political parties and groups were responsible for setting up the first trade unions, giving them a distinct political character. This meant that groups of workers who did not adhere to those ideals would often establish their own new trade unions, in many cases attached to other political parties, be they Christian democrats, nationalists, or (in the years after the Russian Revolution) communists. In Southern Europe, trade unions were often established by syndicalists (people who wanted trade unions, not political parties, to fight for change through militant strike action, and to become bodies through which workers could run society). In Britain, the early growth of industries and large-scale towns and

cities meant that modern trade unions were set up before the growth of the socialist movement in the late 19th century, giving them a different political character.

Within countries that were colonised or taken over by (largely) European and North American empires, labour movements faced a particularly hostile response. Trade unions in these countries often had to fight the imperial system to have any chance to improve conditions, meaning that they often partnered with anti-colonial political groups, playing a key role in the end of empires. Many labour movement activists were inspired by anti-racist ideas which challenged the belief that they could not control their own countries, and played active roles in movements such as Pan-Africanism, which in turn helped to shape their organisations. Throughout the 20th century, new social movements, such as feminism, gay liberation, and environmentalism grew in strength. Their activists sought to influence existing trade unions, drawing on longer-standing traditions within the union movement to argue for the compatibility of their beliefs. In some cases where they met resistance from trade union leaders and memberships, they established new unions to reflect their viewpoints.

There are many differences of opinion amongst trade unionists about how to organise, what political parties and policies to support, and what a better world for the working class looks like. This is a sign of a healthy movement. There have always been some trade unionists who have said (and still say) that we should ‘de-politicise’ trade unionism, and that our organisations should focus solely on collective bargaining, improving pay and conditions, and lobbying for industrial regulation. But debating and defining common political values has been a feature of trade unionism since the birth of the movement. An absence of debate does not mean that everyone agrees, or that there are an absence of political values guiding the movement, just that they are swept under the carpet. We hope that this book encourages readers to take part in a growing movement to bring political debate and discussion back into the heart of trade unionism.

What are Union Values?

The labour movement is one of the oldest social movements seeking to transform society in the name of universal values, with the objective of creating a society that meets the needs and aspirations of all human beings. While there are many different political groupings within trade unionism, a shared set of values has often come to the forefront.

These fundamental values include **equality** (all human beings are of equal worth and therefore should have equal rights); **justice** (it is unacceptable that, because of the way power is distributed, some should enjoy wealth and privilege while many others should be consigned to poverty, starvation, and early death) and **freedom** from exploitation and oppression. These are the values that have driven countless movements of resistance throughout history and continue to drive the modern labour movement.

What makes the modern labour movement different from many earlier liberation movements is that it is international in nature. Since the development of capitalism, the world has shrunk. New ways of communicating (the telegraph, the telephone, the internet) and new means of transport (from steam-powered rail to the advent of air travel), along with big changes in the way that trade works, have allowed the development of truly global companies and truly global workforces. With many workers on different sides of national borders working in the same industries, in similar conditions and companies, it always made sense to organise together.

The **internationalism** of the labour movement is further rooted in the fact that workers are an international class with a common cause. Whether you were born in, or live in, Poland, India, the UK, or Senegal, you are denied control over what you produce and how it is produced. People are overworked, underpaid, and alienated the whole world over. What's more, when workers' conditions are attacked in one country, it has a knock-on effect for workers around the world. If tin miners in Peru are forced to work for poverty wages, tin mine owners in Australia will seek to pay their workers less to stay competitive.

The workers' movement has also fought for **independence**. Many have tried to control our institutions from the outside – imperialist powers used their spy organisations to create unions which did their bidding; Stalinists took over unions and turned them into arms of their repressive states; Mafias and violent gangs have tried to turn unions into tools to control industries