

WFTU's second coming

At the 11th Congress of Cosatu the federation allowed its affiliates to join both the ITUC and WFTU if they so wished. **Peter Waterman** explores what has led to the WFTU's new lease of life.

INTRODUCTION

It is a decade or more ago that I wrote a piece about the communist World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). This was titled, in one version, 'A spectre is haunting labour internationalism, the spectre of communism'. I worked in Communist Prague for the WFTU, doing educational work with African trade unions, during the Prague Spring of 1968 but left it after the Soviet Winter of 1968 (brought by tanks and lasting some two decades).

I wondered then if this trade union international had not been fatally damaged by a couple of self-inflicted wounds. The first was when it abandoned its own secretariat's original condemnation of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The second was when, after the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the mass exit of its state-controlled union members/funders, and its major West-European Communist affiliates, the WFTU failed to reinvent itself as, for example, a Third World or Southern-based union international. But, then, even around 1994 in Lima, Peru, in Liverpool, UK and in Durban, South Africa I still found evidence of workers or unions identifying with this ghost of the spectre that had once haunted Europe.

SECOND COMING

Today, however, the WFTU is no longer to be laughed at or written off. After a congress in Communist

Cuba, 2005, it moved from Prague, where the major Czech union centre had, of course, broken with it, to Athens, where a communist union centre, PAME, was happy to host it. Under the leadership of its dynamic Greek general secretary, George Mavrikos, and considerable funding of unspecified origin, it has been reviving itself, promoting the unexamined myth of a revolutionary WFTU, and making a major play for Southern unions, such as the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), centres either un- or disenchanted with the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC).

AMBIGUOUS INTERNATIONALISM

Disenchantment with the ITUC and re-enchantment with the WFTU has been most dramatically demonstrated in South Africa. Cosatu has not once but twice sent open letters to the ITUC, one being about the bureaucratic way in which it manipulated the Israel-Palestine issue off the agenda at the last ITUC congress.

This is all the more striking given that Cosatu, along with other radical Southern unions – the South Korean KCTU and the Brazilian CUT – had, some years after the collapse of communism, all joined the ITUC. So had the major West European communist unions, the French CGT and the Italian CGIL, both previously stalwarts of the WFTU.

Such affiliations have, however, had no visible impact on the ITUC's social-liberalism and Eurocentrism. Indeed, the ITUC does not even bother to publicly respond to Cosatu's public criticism. Cosatu's Leftist and Southern union friends remain – so far – silently within the ICFTU, suggesting continued dependence on what remains, admittedly, by far the largest international union body.

Actually, the South African unions had never been publicly disenchanted with the WFTU, even if it they had historically had more practically-useful relations with the ITUC's forerunner, the ICFTU, with its members in major Western capitalist countries. The banned and exiled South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu) had, during apartheid times, been informally affiliated with the WFTU and had a representative resident at its HQ in Prague. This was veteran Sactu leader, Mark Shope (who I only much later discovered was rather more heavily involved with the ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, than with WFTU).

The South African unions, post-1989 or post-1994, were involved in various attempts to create Leftist or Southern trade union alliances, but these have been without significant effect on the world union or social-movement stage. So it should not be too surprising that, at least for some major South African union affiliates,

the hot-and-cold relationship of Cosatu with the ITUC should lead them to look for an alternative international affiliation.

As for Cosatu itself, its positions at two significant events in 2012 suggest its continuing ambiguity concerning its international affiliations.

The first, a WFTU council meeting held in South Africa, on 12 February, was organised to celebrate the affiliations of a number of major Cosatu affiliates to WFTU. Here the Cosatu representative declared that it shared 'similar ideological perspectives on what should be the solution to almost all the political and economic challenges confronting the world today'. At the same time he expressed the hope that WFTU and the ITUC would somehow get together. Some Western communists have been praying for this since the major WFTU-shocks of 1968 and 1989!

The second event, on 16 May, was the Cosatu International Policy Conference. The initial statement to the event produced a socialist analysis of and attack on capitalist globalisation and neo-liberalism, but produced a mixed bag of ILO/ITUC social-liberal and WFTU-type state-socialist policy proposals, at one point endorsing the proposal of Hugo Chavez for a Fifth International – a proposal that had actually been abandoned three years earlier by Chavez, soon after launching it in 2009!

Whilst the Cosatu statement was frankly self-critical about the international work and its member unions, it was stated that, 'Cosatu stands for the unity of the working class. How best should we use the space we occupy and the moral high ground we are standing on to advance that objective more effectively? It would be a fatal mistake to leave the ranks of majority of workers and isolate ourselves purely on the basis of shared ideological foundations and common history.

This somewhat oracular formulation suggests the difficulties Cosatu is having in opting for the Old West (social-liberal), Old East (state-socialist) or a New Southern internationalism (Chavezian?). A well-informed South African tells me that the conference considered four possible scenarios:

- 1) continued affiliation to the ITUC;
- 2) abandoning the ITUC for the WFTU;
- 3) joint membership of both the ITUC and WFTU; and
- 4) autonomy from both.

Apparently option 3 was the best favoured one and the one that was adopted in one of the resolutions. This option would be the kind of 'peaceful coexistence' proposal favoured by communists during the Cold War. As far as the Western unions are concerned, this cold war actually began with the Russian Revolution in 1917, and the creation of violently opposed Communist and Social-Democratic union internationals. Whether, however, an option cast as a choice between two 20th century behemoths would be relevant to a globalised, neo-liberalised, complex and computerised capitalist (dis) order is another matter.

There are, of course, major Southern unions affiliated to the WFTU. They include the General Federation of Trade Unions of (North) Korea and others subordinate to authoritarian regimes of the Left. And there can be little doubt that the WFTU is highly interested to affiliate with the Chinese ACFTU despite the traditional 'transmission-belt' role it plays, and despite the waves of labour protest that occur despite this state-controlled body, outside it or against it.

GLOBAL DISORIENTATION OF UNION LEFT

What we therefore seem to be confronted with today is considerable disorientation amongst Left unions internationally. Cosatu itself has a working relationship with the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Centre. This

has been vehemently attacked in the USA by activists working to expose the AFL-CIO's 'labour imperialism'. Given the breakdown of distinct understandings of internationalism, of international affiliations and identities, the question that has to be posed is whether, or in what possible sense, the WFTU is or could be an 'alternative' to the ITUC.

It was such during the Cold War, when it was the Eastern and Communist alternative to the Western and Social-Democratic predecessor of the ITUC, the ICFTU. At that time the WFTU exercised a considerable attraction to Third World trade unions either under colonial/white domination, or allied with (or subordinate to) radical-nationalist/socialist regimes or parties, often of authoritarian tendency.

This self-identification of international confederations with warring states or competing blocs was only part of a deeper, if not immediately visible, identity. This is that each of them, then and now, assumes, explicitly or implicitly, that the unionised/unionisable working class has a vanguard position in either reforming or restoring welfare capitalism past (the ICFTU/ITUC) or in a state-socialist alternative to such. The WFTU, in so far as it favours a socialist alternative has never distanced itself from communist state/ism.

Now, the traditionally-defined working class is no more than 15% of the world's working people. Previously this 'other' 85% have been given a capitalist liberal economic designation, the 'informal sector'. Today they are increasingly given a class-like name, the 'precariat'.

The traditional union internationals were created under and/or against the old national, industrial(ising), colonial/anticolonial order. This capitalism has been, as suggested, surpassed by a globalised, computerised, rapidly-moving, outsourced and aggressive neo-liberal order.

RHETORICAL INTEREST

The growing South African union interest in the WFTU seems to be primarily ideological. This does not necessarily mean that the most communist-identified unions in Cosatu are necessarily the most pro-WFTU (disorientation within or amongst Left unions operates also nationally). What I mean is that such pro-WFTU orientation as exists is based on the anti-imperialist and/or anti-capitalist rhetoric of that organisation. Examination of the WFTU website, however, shows it to be also promoting an incremental social-reform strategy. Thus in a call for a day of protest, 2011, it stated that: 'The main slogans for the International Action Day that will be heard and projected in all action all over the world are: social security for all, collective bargaining - collective agreements, trade union and democratic freedoms, working week of seven hours a day, five days a week, 35 hours per week, better salaries, solidarity with the Palestinian people, freedom to the five Cubans.'

Of these slogans only the last two might be problematic for the ITUC. But whilst the WFTU repeatedly reveals and even exclaims its communist identity, one can find nowhere on its website that it is even socialist! Rather does it disguise such under the strange device: class oriented, uniting, democratic, modern, and independent?

How the WFTU can be simultaneously identified with communism and claim to be 'uniting, democratic, modern and independent' is a mystery. The communism rules it out for influence amongst the mass of workers who suffered for generations under such regimes (and in communist-capitalist China continue to do so).

Whilst WFTU might claim to identify with the autonomous Occupy movements, the WFTU general secretary expresses his hostility to 'forums' (which can only mean the World Social Forum, of which Cosatu is a prominent



Left: the author; Centre: Mark Shope, Sactu representative to the WFTU, outside the Kremlin, on an official visit to the Soviet Union, 1967.

and sometimes vocal international committee member!). The 'democratic' element seems to still allow for WFTU to enforce decisions on its nominally independent Trade Union Internationals (TUIs), as revealed by the Australian union leader of one of them when he had orders imposed on him by Mavrikos.

WFTU has anyway always spoken with two distinct tongues, depending on the purpose or audience. In so far as South African motives for joining WFTU are primarily ideological, the question must arise of which part of WFTU's contradictory ideology is here being identified with, the communist or the uniting?

Even if positively favouring the communist identity, of which communisms? In 1945 there was only one. By the mid-1960s there were at least three - Soviet, Yugoslav and Chinese. After 1968 and then again after 1989, communism fractured into numerous competing tendencies. In South Africa the Communist Party is linked with Cosatu and therefore with unions formally independent from the state, and often in conflict with it. In Belarus, a WFTU member, the official union federation continues the Soviet model of self-subordination to the authoritarian state.

The South African desire for

affiliation, is based, moreover, on a highly selective historical account, that minimises or dismisses decades of WFTU identification with anti-popular and anti-worker regimes in the communist world. The South African unions that favour WFTU affiliation, have not remarked upon the fact that the WFTU does not even make public a list of its members far less any financial report!

One can only speculate that this is because the members are few in comparison with the ITUC. Or because of possible embarrassment when Southern workers rise up - as in the Arab world - against state-subordinated unions that had previously been members of, and even possibly funded, the WFTU! Nor does there seem to have been any public consideration in South Africa of the implications of such a WFTU affiliation for those major leftist and/or Southern unions still affiliated to ITUC.

Cosatu must have consulted with its old ITUC allies, the Brazilian CUT and the South Korean KCTU. But, if so, this has been behind closed doors, something that has more to do with state-diplomatic lobbying and politicking than with the openness that international union solidarity requires in the age of Occupy, Real Democracy, The Indignants and Wikileaks. ^{LB}