



INTERNATIONAL

# “An international of the new world”

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BOB TOMKINS, general secretary of the International Graphical Federation (IGF), believes the new international situation presents the trade union movement with new opportunities and challenges. “I pray that the ICFTU will have the intellectual resources to respond to the challenge,” he said, warning at the same time that a policy of ‘non-alignment’ could leave COSATU isolated internationally. He was interviewed by KARL VON HOLDT.

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Tomkins visited SA in November last year at the invitation of COSATU’s Paper Printing and Allied Workers Union (PPWAWU). The IGF became the only international organisation of printing-workers when the WFTU-linked Standing Committee of Trade Unions in the Graphics Industry dissolved and its affiliates joined IGF. “This makes IGF an international of the new world, not of the old world,” says Tomkins.

The IGF has 71 affiliates in 58 countries, representing 1,75 million workers. Although IGF is an International Trade Secretariat (ITS) linked to the ICFTU “relations have been difficult in the past” because IGF was prepared to affiliate communist-led unions. The ITSs are not constitutionally linked to ICFTU, and they can choose how to relate to it.

In an interview with *Labour Bulletin*, Tomkins gave fascinating insights into developments in international unionism, particularly in Eastern and Central Europe, and

in the ICFTU. Many of his comments have a bearing on the international debates run in recent issues of the *Bulletin*, and should be carefully considered by SA unionists.

## **New world divisions**

Tomkins believes that the collapse of the communist regimes, and the end of the ideological divide between East and West, has exposed and clarified other divisions. “We are moving away from the world divided into the Eastern bloc and the Western bloc, to the reality of a North-South divide. There is a frightening prospect of the North walking away from its responsibility to the South, and it is very important for the international trade union movement to ensure this does not happen.”

At the same time the collapse of the East-West division “allows us to see the existing and constant division in all countries between capital and labour.” These new

conditions have created new opportunities in international labour organisations.

"Perceptions are becoming more uniform, and there is increasing ability to talk to each other." Tomkins says he hopes the ICFTU will have the capacity to meet the new challenges.

### **Fears about the ICFTU**

Does this mean that he has fears about the ICFTU? Yes, there is a danger that the international union movement could end up as "the last bastion of the cold war". He believes that cold war ideology is manifested in the ICFTU at a macro-level and a micro-level.

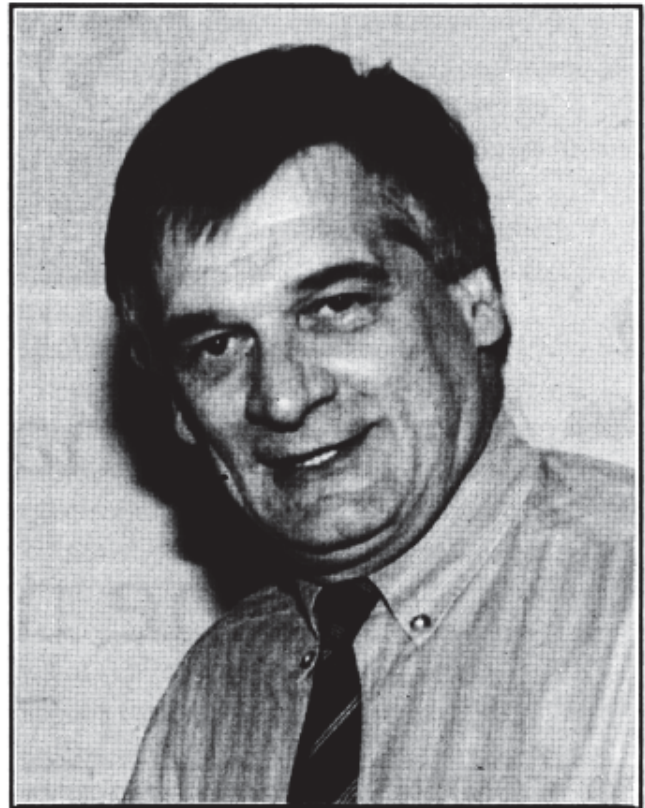
At the macro-level there is the old hostility between the ICFTU and WFTU. This is manifested within the ICFTU at present in "great suspicion towards the reformed unions in the former communist countries".

At the micro-level, there is still enormous hostility between ICFTU affiliates and communist-led unions in a number of countries, such as France and Portugal. "In France workers are still divided by a wall much higher than the Berlin wall." As a result, only 7% of French workers are members of trade unions. Relations are much better in Italy and Spain.

The IGF itself has had bitter experience of this in the past. In the early sixties it approved the affiliation of the printers union which is a member of the communist-led CGT federation in France. The CGT is affiliated to WFTU. The ICFTU-affiliated federation, Force Ouvrier, immediately complained to the ICFTU, which cut all relations with IGF. "Only now are relations between IGF and ICFTU being re-established - against the continued resistance of Force Ouvrier! In this way the old cold war within nations is still felt in ICFTU."

### **Eastern European trade unions**

While the ICFTU is suspicious of the reformed communist unions in Eastern Europe, IGF has accepted affiliation from reformed unions as well as newer unions which emerged as communism collapsed. "On our experience," says Tomkins, "some of the reformed communist unions have become more



*Tomkins during his visit to South Africa as guest of PPWAWU*

*Photo: Shariff/Labour Bulletin*

independent than the new unions, which are becoming official unions closely linked to government."

As an example he refers to Solidarnosc in Poland, which operated as a political movement and a trade union movement. "Now Solidarnosc is the official union, part of government and the ruling party. Workers are going back in their thousands to the old communist unions belonging to OPZZ. The printers union in OPZZ now has 18 000 members, while Solidarnosc has two to three thousand."

These workers are transforming the old communist unions and changing their constitutions. "These reformed unions are now funded by their members, their main task is protecting workers at the workplace, and their policy is decided by the members. These are the three principles applied by IGF. The OPZZ unions meet them, Solidarnosc does not."

### **'Active non-alignment' by unions**

What implications does the new international situation have for the policies of 'active

non-alignment' adopted by COSATU, NACTU and other militant federations in the South?

Tomkins points out that a policy of non-alignment when there are two opposing camps "can turn into isolation when one actor leaves the stage." He believes WFTU cannot survive in any meaningful way, and that "remaining non-aligned when there is only one organisation could be misinterpreted by comrades in the rest of the world."

However, Tomkins says PPWAWU must make its own decision in its own time on whether to affiliate to IGF, and the IGF will continue to work with it and support it. IGF is providing assistance to PPWAWU's legal department and shop stewards training. Six years ago, IGF expelled the SA Typographical Workers Union because it refused to amend its constitution to become a non-racial union.

### **SA and Southern African unions**

Tomkins was impressed with the quality of leadership and activists in COSATU and its affiliates. "In terms of sophistication, it ranks with any in the world."

However, he noted two problems. Firstly, Tomkins feels there is a danger of SA unions becoming aid-dependent. Secondly, "the comrades from South Africa are so advanced that it distances them from other unionists in the region - Zimbabwe, Mozambique and so on." This could pose problems for building regional unity.

This problem is linked to the question of 'non-alignment'. "For example, IGF wants to help establish a regional structure for printing workers - and it would be unfortunate if the South Africans excluded themselves."

Tomkins was also impressed by the ANC. "Clearly your organisations are not only organisations of gifted leaders, but organisations of the people."

His visit to Alexandra township - for many years the home of PPWAWU general secretary Siphso Kubheka - left him very angry. "It has an air of permanence - I've never seen anything like it. How do people survive there?"

### **Future prospects of socialism**

Tomkins is optimistic about the future prospects of socialism. "In most countries the conflict between capital and labour is crude - there is poverty and exploitation. This leads to clarity of perceptions." Out of this clarity "we can work out something good, something that will work." Whether it would resemble Sweden - "where the division between capital and labour is managed in a civilised fashion which is compatible with socialism" - or some other model, is not yet clear, he says.

But even in Eastern Europe there is a very real prospect of a return to some kind of socialist society. While the reforms were to be welcomed "they had no intellectual force or conception - they were driven by consumer fantasy."

Two years ago the biggest issue for trade unions in Europe was the formation of a single market in Europe. This would allow capital tremendous mobility in moving to areas where wages are lowest. Now capital will move to the East instead - workers are highly skilled, wages are low and factories are relatively well-equipped. In addition, workers often reject trade unionism.

It is a difficult situation because people have the same vocabulary - for example, 'international solidarity', and 'trade unions' - but the words mean something different. Eastern European workers "see trade unions as an integral part of the communist party-state system", explained Tomkins, adding, "If you want to offend someone, call him comrade."

Eighteen months ago, Tomkins addressed a meeting of Hungarian print-workers. The Hungarian printing industry has been bought up by Western multi-nationals, explained Tomkins, "so I told them about the struggles of our affiliates in Western Europe. Afterwards I heard that their response was: 'He's a bloody communist. We've just got rid of our communists, what do we want with that lot?'"

But now people in Eastern Europe are feeling let down, exploited. The western multi-nationals are moving in and "capitalists are so greedy and so stupid that it will open people's eyes." ☆