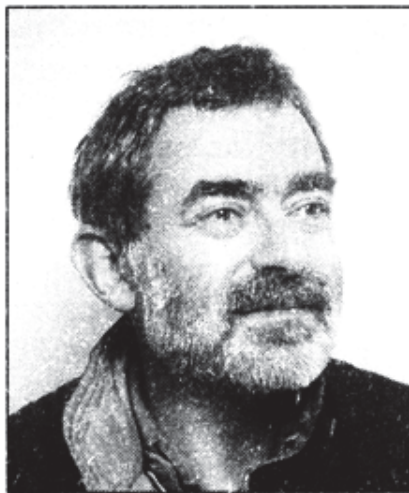




# The ICFTU in SA: *admissions, revelations, silences*

It is not so long ago that the only affiliates of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions in South Africa were white racist unions supporting the apartheid regime (Webster 1984). And that non-racial unions and their supporters were castigating the ICFTU and its major affiliates for 'trade-union imperialism' (Thomson and Larson 1978). The LABOUR BULLETIN interviews of ICFTU delegates, in 'The ICFTU in South Africa' (Vol 17 No 1, Jan-Feb 1993, 67-71), provide fascinating insights into both the changes and the continuities in that organisation.



by Peter Waterman\*

It is evident from the size of the delegation, and the interviews themselves, that the ICFTU is wooing the South African unions. It is just as evident that COSATU needs the support of the ICFTU, or at least its major 'First World' members (von Holdt 1993, MacShane 1993). Now, extensive information and ideas about COSATU, other South African unions, their history and policies, is available to the ICFTU. But the opposite is not necessarily the case. So it may be well worthwhile looking critically at the admissions, revelations and silences in these interviews.

## Admissions

This is the first time, in the 20 or more years I have been following ICFTU development, that I have ever seen an admission by an

ICFTU General Secretary that union financial assistance has gone into the pockets of dictators – or even supported dictatorships more generally – in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Or that it has hardly challenged the

\* Peter Waterman, of the Institute of Social Studies in the Hague, Netherlands, is currently completing a book entitled 'From Labour Internationalism to Global Solidarity'.

World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Or that criticism of its past association with undemocratic unions in the South is legitimate.

Such admissions are not made in *FREE LABOUR WORLD*, the ICFTU monthly, where all that the ICFTU General Secretary says is that the ICFTU has 'throughout its history' supported democratic independent unionism (FLW, January 1993).

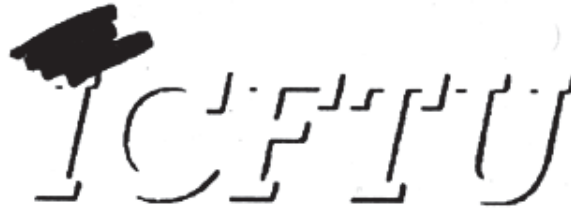
Perhaps the *BULLETIN* asks more pressing questions than does FLW. Perhaps the ICFTU is more interested in persuading the South African unions that it is turning a new leaf than its own members!

### Revelations

According to ICFTU General Secretary, Enzo Friso, COSATU is welcome to try and make the ICFTU 'more progressive'. The interviews suggest that there is more than enough room for this.

The three interviewees seem to share traditional Western liberal-reformist ideas about the economy, the state, the nation, development and human rights. There are, of course, worse international strategies than reformist liberalism – for example, the current neo-liberal destruction of jobs, welfare, social and union rights worldwide. But, given the impotence of liberal and even social-democratic reformism in the face of neo-liberalism, doesn't this framework require criticism, revision or replacement also?

'Development' for the ICFTU clearly means the development of capitalism, both nationally and internationally. The ICFTU spokesmen (no women!) also seem to have continuing faith in 1) the capacity of the nation-state to develop and protect national economies, 2) state willingness to help trade unions have access to the World Bank and IMF, and 3) the willingness of these inter-state institutions to meet worker needs. Such attitudes, seem more appropriate to the social-reformist Keynesian 1940s than the anti-social Thatcherite 1990s.



The failure of nation-states as developers/controllers of economies has been signalled by such developments as that of

the North American Free Trade Area (Canada, USA, Mexico – with Chile next?). This is talked of at length by the ICFTU interviewees, but they provide no ground for their expectation that the anti-union and anti-worker regimes of these three countries have any interest in helping unions bring pressure on the World Bank and IMF. Rather than trying to restore a past phase of capitalist development, shouldn't the world trade-union movement be deciding how to fight in the new one?

It's only five or ten years since US workers were venting their frustration at the loss of jobs by 'Toyota Bashing' – ritualistic public displays of anger at cheap, high quality, economic cars, imported from Japan. The globalisation of capital, paradoxically, is helping to liberate such workers from the illusion that they can rely on symbolic expressions of anger, on their employers or the nation-state to defend them from international movements of finance, production and labour. Globalisation is also helping to stimulate unions to surpass protectionist strategies that ally them with local capitalists and nationalist politicians who may actually be anti-labour. This is happening within NAFTA – with US, Canadian and Mexican (opposition) unions, workers, communities, women, ecologists and human-rights activists talking and working energetically together for almost the first time in living memory.

What would seem to be called for in the rising number of capitalist-promoted free-trade areas are some kind of labour, democratic and ecologically-friendly development plans for the regions concerned, and for the world – something not even hinted at in the ICFTU statements.

### Silences

Reading these interviews one could get the impression that the ICFTU was the expression of a growing number of the world's workers, enjoying the enthusiastic support of its member



unions, and devoted to international labour solidarity. It is actually something much more problematic (MacShane 1993). And this should be a matter of concern to all workers and unionists, whether inside the ICFTU or not. It should, indeed, be a matter of concern for all internationalists, even if they are not unionists or workers.

ICFTU-affiliated unions apparently support it, on average, with but one percent of their funds, keeping the rest for national purposes (such as persuading US consumers to 'Buy American'). Contrast this with Amnesty International, of which the Dutch affiliate pays 38.6 percent to the international office.

The ICFTU cannot even begin to compare its financial resources with the 'new social movement internationals'. It receives from the affiliation fees of its 113 million members only some GB£7m a year. The ecological international, Greenpeace, receives from its 4.3m members some £110m! Amnesty International receives from its one million or so members and donors, some £12m per year. We seem to have revealed here the difference between an organisation and a movement.

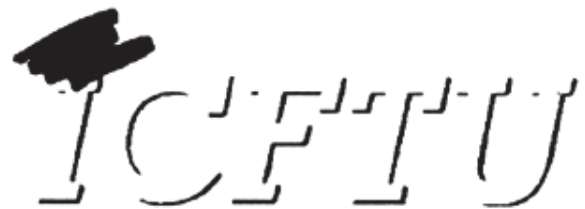
Thirdly, both the ICFTU and its major Western members have long been highly dependent, for their Third World activities, on capitalist state development-funding (Wedin 1974) – itself a highly-ambiguous activity. Some years ago the ICFTU was dependent on such funding for some 40 percent of its total income – thus acting as yet another 'channel' for top-down state development funding. Amnesty, on the other hand, has a principle of not accepting state subsidies. Unions and workers don't pay for most of this Third World activity and therefore don't care much about what it is used for (which is why, presumably, it could be channelled to corrupt unions and repressive dictatorships). This activity can be called 'international working-class solidarity' only by stretching this term into meaninglessness.

### **Implications**

So what is the ICFTU? I think it would be not unfair or inaccurate to characterise it as a Western-based and Western-dominated

international organisation of trade-union leaderships, most of these believing in the desirability or inevitability of the market system, being nationalist rather than internationalist, state-oriented or state-dependent, seeking to moderate or reform the worst economic and political excesses of the world capitalist system, and hoping to do so primarily by lobbying state or inter-state organs.

But the ICFTU is changing – sometimes in ways not indicated in the interviews. In the first place, it is growing dramatically in terms of affiliates and individual members, all of these from the ex-Communist or Third Worlds. In the second place it is taking a growing interest in human rights activities and 'PeaceWork' – conversion from military



production (FLW May 1993). In the third place, its leaders have, as the Friso interview suggests, been increasingly prepared to put their bodies on the line as well as in the lobby.

So the shortcomings do not at all mean that COSATU should avoid relations with the ICFTU, or even joining it (Waterman 1992). Any more than a post-apartheid South Africa should avoid joining a United Nations dominated by the US and the West (and that intervenes energetically in the Third World but seems incapable of doing so in Europe). On the contrary. The presence within the ICFTU of young, new, mass-mobilising unions, linked with wider social movements in their societies, having some new kind of socialist ideologies or aspirations, might renew the organisation. They might also remind it of its origins in a 19th century emancipatory tradition of militant labour internationalism. They might help make it a worthy partner for the new social movement internationals. And they might, finally, help it develop convincing and attractive alternatives to the New/Old World Order of an aggressive and destructive global capitalism. ☆