

The Free Trade Unions and Democracy

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In a number of decisions and resolutions adopted at its present Congress in Stockholm, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions has shown that it wants to give support and to bear arms on behalf of civic rights and political democracy. On Thursday the Congress made a particularly significant decision: to have an investigating commission determine the facts of the strikes and demonstrations that occurred in East Berlin and East Germany on and about June 17th. It seems improbable, if not incredible, that the Russians will permit the investigators to extend their activities to the Eastern zone. In rejecting the investigation, the Russians will once again be demonstrating that the propaganda of appeasement and real softening of oppression are two separate categories. But even if they cannot penetrate the Iron Curtain, the unionist-investigators ought to be able to get at the essential facts and then give the workers of the free world an authoritative account of what happened.

The nature and aims of this organization can be read in its title. The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions includes only unions — or more accurately, combined unions of nationwide scope — which stand free in relation to their central Governments. This does not necessarily restrict membership to unions in the democracies, but that is an inevitable consequence of the present world situation. For the enemy of democracy in our time is the dictatorship or tyranny which narrowly concentrates all power to the state, and which transforms even interest organizations into tools for its purposes. With a praiseworthy consistency, the ICFTU has repudiated national groupings that are no more than building blocks in the totalitarian structure; on the outside looking in are not only the countries of the Eastern bloc, but also Spain, the Argentine and Yugoslavia, to name a few. A few sceptical voices have occasionally been raised against this hard-and-fast policy; for example, the American trade unionist Mr. Irving Brown — whose devotion to democracy is above suspicion — hinted the other day that it would be better to distinguish between absolute tyranny and relative freedom, rather than between freedom and tyranny. However, the prestige and influence of the ICFTU are based on its sharp and uncompromising stand toward semi-Fascist regimes.

According to the latest annual report, this impressive organization now covers 72 countries, with a combined membership of 54,000,000. This figure, however, includes a number of sub-organizations in exile, and some of the countries listed are entered separately for reasons of pure courtesy. By far the largest member organizations come from the United States, Great Britain and West Germany. There are 15,000,000 organized American workers, of whom the greater part belong to the American Federation of Labor (8,400,000) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (6,200,000). No less than 8,000,000 workers are organized in Britain, and more than 6,000,000 in West Germany. In looking back at the inter-war

period (before Hitler), one is chiefly amazed at the rapid growth and new orientation of labour unions in the United States. These doubled their membership several times over while Franklin D. Roosevelt was President. At one time the American unions were distrustful of international cooperation, but today they belong to the most active and initiative-minded members of the ICFTU.

It is not surprising that several differences of opinion have come to light during the present Congress. The tension that exists between British and American foreign policies — which hitherto has not seriously hampered Anglo-American cooperation on most essential matters — has been carried over into the field of inter-union relationships. And although they have been kept under the surface, there are also differences of outlook on domestic policy. In general, the Americans champion the relatively unrestricted form of free enterprise under which they have become the world's most prosperous working class. Most of the Western Europeans in the ICFTU, on the other hand, more or less clearly support nationalization measures and increased government intervention.

The important and valuable thing, however, is that collaboration has been established between the labour groups, as between the free peoples and governments of the world. Earlier, the American organizations narrowly confined themselves to purely economic demands within their own country. Today they are aware that freedom is the basic condition of betterment; they realize that democracy is in danger and that solidarity among the free peoples is necessary to save it. In Europe persisting Marxist illusions have made many trade unions inclined to underestimate the value of democracy for themselves. Under the aegis of the ICFTU, these large national groups are now meeting on a common ground for the defence of our democratic freedoms. As the work of co-operation proceeds social and economic doctrinarism inside the trade unions ought to decrease. In any event, the unionists could well pause to consider this point: when a certain point of nationalization and concentration of government power is reached the internationally accepted meaning of a free trade-union movement becomes an absurdity.