



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Special Issue: The WFTU and the Labour Movements of Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America during the Cold War

# China, the WFTU, and Communist Internationalism: Labour Diplomacy and Transnational Networks, 1949–1966

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## Abstract

Using a rich set of multilingual sources, this article traces the underexplored history of China's involvement in the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) from 1949 to 1966. It details the WFTU's role in providing an institutional infrastructure for China's international activism and documents the All-China Federation of Trade Unions' engagements with socialist internationalism and people's diplomacy.

After 1960, against the backdrop of the Sino–Soviet split, the WFTU became a platform for Chinese dissent against pro-Soviet positions. After a decade of mutual collaboration, China's position changed dramatically and relations with the WFTU were eventually halted in 1966 due to developments in the international communist movement and the radicalization of China's internal and external politics. By focusing on the WFTU, the article highlights the possibilities (and constraints) presented by Soviet-backed international organisations for China's foreign relations, illuminating broader issues related to China's socialist internationalism, labour diplomacy, and transnational networks during the early Cold War.

## Introduction

In recent years, scholars have complicated the stereotype of Mao-era China as sealed off from the outside world. They have pursued new transnational approaches to the study of China's foreign relations, moving the focus from high diplomacy and politics to multi-levelled interactions and collaborations across blocs and with the Third World. This shift is part of a broader effort to overcome the long-standing emphasis on two superpowers and reframe the People's Republic of China (PRC) as an active player in the Cold War. The emerging scholarship has deepened our understanding of how China's state-controlled agencies engaged with diverse unofficial or non-state actors in Western countries, as well as with African-American transnational networks and Afro–Asian solidarity movements. Such studies highlight the importance of

transnational relations and cultural exchanges as part of the “people’s diplomacy” (*renmin* or *mingjian waijiao*) that the PRC extensively deployed during the early Cold War years to increase its prestige abroad, while also laying the groundwork for diplomatic relations with countries that had not recognized the Chinese communist government.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, questions have been raised about how we should conceptualize people’s diplomacy and transnational relations when dealing with one-party states like the PRC, given the fact that Chinese participants in these activities and organizations represented the interests of their government, as Barrett noted in his study of the Pugwash Conferences.<sup>2</sup>

Our understanding of the international role of the newly established PRC has also been furthered by recent studies on the Soviet-backed transnational organizations that appeared in the wake of World War II championing antifascism, peace, and democracy. The World Peace Council, the World Federation of Democratic Youth, and the Women’s International Democratic Federation have attracted some scholarly attention, with new perspectives being offered on China’s involvement in transnational networks and socialist solidarity movements, as reflected, for instance, in exchanges with specific foreign non-government groups and activists across blocs.<sup>3</sup> The World

<sup>1</sup>The literature is extensive. See, for instance, Matthew D. Johnson, “From Peace to the Panthers: PRC Engagement with African-American Transnational Networks, 1949–1979”, *Past and Present*, 8 (2013), pp. 233–257; Anne-Marie Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China* (Lanham, MD, 2003); Gordon Barrett, *China’s Cold War Science Diplomacy* (Cambridge, 2022); Emily Wilcox, “When Folk Dance Was Radical: Cold War *Yange*, World Youth Festivals, and Overseas Chinese Leftist Culture in the 1950s and 1960s”, *China Perspectives*, 1 (2020), pp. 33–42; Amanda Shuman, “Friendship is Solidarity: The Chinese Ping-Pong Team Visits Africa in 1962”, in J. Simon Rofe (ed.), *Sport and Diplomacy: Games Within Games* (Manchester, 2018), pp. 110–130; Sofia Graziani, “The Case of Youth Exchanges and Interactions between the PRC and Italy in the 1950s”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 51:1 (2017) (within the Special Issue edited by Angela Romano and Valeria Zanier, *Circumventing the Cold War: The Parallel Diplomacy of Economic and Cultural Exchanges between Western Europe and Socialist China in the 1950s and 1960s*); Laura De Giorgi, “Alle radici della diplomazia culturale cinese. L’interesse per l’Europa occidentale negli anni Cinquanta”, in Carla Meneguzzi Rostagni and Guido Samarani (eds), *La Cina di Mao, l’Italia e l’Europa negli anni della Guerra fredda* (Bologna, 2014), pp. 119–146.

<sup>2</sup>Gordon Barrett, “China’s People Diplomacy and the Pugwash Conferences, 1957–1964”, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 20:1 (2018), pp. 143–144.

<sup>3</sup>Elizabeth B. Armstrong, *Bury the Corpse of Colonialism: The Revolutionary Feminist Conference of 1949* (Berkeley, CA, 2023); Elizabeth Forster, “Bellicose Peace: China’s Peace Signature Campaign and Discourses about ‘Peace’ in the Early 1950s”, *Modern China*, 46:3 (2020), pp. 250–280; Yasser Ali Nasser, “‘To Defend the Peace of Asia’: The Chinese Peace Committee and Visions of Asian History, 1949–60”, *Cold War History*, 25:4 (2023), pp. 1–23; Guido Samarani, “Song Qingling e le attività del Comitato cinese per la pace nei primi anni Cinquanta”, *DEP. Deportate, esuli, profughe*, 54 (2024), pp. 186–195; Laura De Giorgi, “Esperienze e percorsi delle donne italiane nella Cina di Mao. Tracce per una ricerca”, *DEP. Deportate, esuli, profughe*, 33 (2017); Rossella Roncati, *Chasing Sisterhood: Transcultural Sino-Italian Networks in Global Women’s Activism (1949–1963)*, (Ph.D., Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia, 2025); Sofia Graziani, “International Political Activism in the ‘50s: The World Federation of Democratic Youth and Bruno Bernini’s Encounter with Mao’s China”, in Guido Samarani, Carla Meneguzzi Rostagni, and Sofia Graziani (eds), *Roads to Reconciliation: People’s Republic of China, Western Europe and Italy during the Cold War Period (1949–1971)* (Venice, 2018), pp. 197–219.

Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) has been only marginally treated in the literature on Sino–Soviet relations.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the WFTU has received limited attention in research dealing with anti-imperialist solidarity movements and China’s engagement with formerly colonized Asian contexts.<sup>5</sup> Recent reinterpretations of trade union internationalism in the Third World have illuminated the possibilities that were opened up for multi-levelled transnational solidarity networks in the 1950s. Vanessa Hearman, for example, has shed light on the communist-linked trade union federation in Indonesia and its involvement in global Cold War politics through participation in the WFTU.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Rachel Leow’s 2019 study provides the first attempt to investigate Chinese trade union activism and contacts with other Asian unions during this period, looking at trade union education and focusing on how the Cold War and decolonization play out on the ground.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, research on personnel exchanges during the Cold War has reflected upon Chinese labour diplomacy, as deployed in socialist countries such as Mongolia.<sup>8</sup> As a result, China’s participation in the WFTU during the Cold War is still largely under-researched, despite its relevance for understanding the country’s role in post-WWII international processes.

As this article demonstrates, China’s participation in the WFTU predated the founding of the PRC, enabling Chinese communist trade unionists to travel abroad and engage in international activism after World War II. However, in the wake of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s victory in the civil war against the Nationalist Party (GMD), Chinese involvement in the WFTU took on a new significance, as the country that had suffered under and defeated colonialism was now a full-fledged member of the socialist world. The establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949 strengthened the position of Chinese trade unions within the Federation, with China becoming central in building Asian trade union networks and advancing the visibility and influence of the WFTU in the region.

While the PRC’s relationship with the WFTU was rooted in socialist internationalism and solidarity, the Federation also provided opportunities for China to articulate its positions, particularly towards the formerly colonized world with which it identified. Throughout the 1950s, Chinese activism reflected a desire to shape the Federation’s work and its orientation on key issues pertaining to the non-Western world. At the

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<sup>4</sup>See, for instance, Lorenz Lüthi, *The Sino–Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, NJ, 2008); Shen Zhihua and Yafeng Xia, “Leadership Transfer in the Asian Revolution: Mao Zedong and the Asian Cominform”, *Cold War History*, 14:2 (2013); Li Danhui and Yafeng Xia, *Mao and the Sino–Soviet Split, 1959–1973: A New History* (Lanham, MD, 2018).

<sup>5</sup>Nasser, “To Defend the Peace of Asia”.

<sup>6</sup>Vanessa Hearman, “Indonesian Trade Unionists, the World Federation of Trade Unions and Cold War Internationalism, 1947–65”, *Labour History*, 111 (2016), pp. 27–44.

<sup>7</sup>Rachel Leow, “Asian Lessons in the Cold War Classroom: Trade Union Networks and the Multidirectional Pedagogies of the Cold War in Asia”, *Journal of Social History*, 53:2 (2019), pp. 429–453.

<sup>8</sup>Jikun Gu, “The Intertwining of High-Level Interactions and Low-Level Exchanges”, *China Review*, 19:3 (2019), pp. 93–122; and Christian Sorace and Ruiyi Zhu, “The Short-Lived Eternity of Friendship: Chinese Workers in Socialist Mongolia (1955–1964)”, in Ivan Franceschini and Christian P. Sorace (eds), *Proletarian China: A Century of Chinese Labour* (London, 2022), pp. 251–264. Studies on the topic have also researched the Chinese workers involved in the Tazara Railway – see Matthew Galway, “Building Uhuru: Chinese Workers and Labour Diplomacy on the Tam–Zam Railway”, in Franceschini and Sorace, *Proletarian China*, pp. 416–425.

same time, the WFTU offered networks that allowed transnational mobility and connections within and beyond the Soviet bloc, crucial at a time when China's isolation made gaining international visibility and respect a priority for new regime. Yet, from 1960 onward, the WFTU served as a space for China to voice its dissent with the Soviet Union and, after a decade of mutual collaboration, China's position in the WFTU changed dramatically. In 1966, relations were interrupted as a result of developments in the international communist movement and the radicalization of Chinese politics. It is argued that the WFTU provided the institutional infrastructure for China's international activism, unveiling the All-China Federation of Trade Union's (ACFTU) agency in the realm of socialist internationalism and people's diplomacy. As such, this article also emphasizes the role of trade unionists as international activists supporting both the WFTU's activities and the PRC in the foreign policy realm.

Further research into China's involvement in WFTU activities is necessary, and a more nuanced understanding of this issue will only be possible once the PRC eases restrictions on archival access. Bearing these limitations in mind, this article offers an account of China's interactions with the Federation from the late 1940s until the rupture occurred in 1966, illustrating how China initially capitalized on, and subsequently moved away from, Soviet-led transnational structures. The analysis draws upon a variety of multilingual sources including, among others, Chinese memoirs and archival material, WFTU publications, and documents kept in the Gramsci Foundation (Rome) and National Historical Archives of the Italian General Confederation of Labour (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro, CGIL; the largest trade union federation in Italy after World War II and part of the WFTU since its inception). Where relevant, the study integrates Russian archival files on Sino-Soviet relations, translated into Chinese and published in the twelve-volume *Selected Declassified Russian Archives on Sino-Soviet Relations*, edited by prominent Chinese historian Shen Zhihua.<sup>9</sup> By focusing on the WFTU, the article reveals the possibilities (and constraints) presented by Soviet-backed transnational organizations for China's international activism, illuminating broader issues related to China's socialist internationalism, labour diplomacy, and transnational networks during the early Cold War.

### China's Early Contacts With the WFTU

The WFTU was founded in October 1945, soon after World War II and against a backdrop of overall solidarity and accord among trade unions. This unity was short-lived: internal conflict soon developed over different views of communism and four years later anti-communist trade unions withdrew from the WFTU, later forming the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) along Cold War divisions.<sup>10</sup> This had the consequence of making the WFTU a "front organization" where a very high percentage of the membership came from the Soviet Union and Soviet bloc

<sup>9</sup>Shen Zhihua (ed.), *Eluosi jiemi dang'an xuanbian. Zhong Su guanxi* [Selected Declassified Russian Archives on Sino-Soviet Relations] (Shanghai, 2015).

<sup>10</sup>Anthony Carew, "The Schism within the World Federation of Trade Unions: Government and Trade Union Diplomacy", *International Review of Social History*, 29:3 (1984), pp. 297-335; Victor G. Devinatz, "A Cold War Thaw in the International Working-Class Movement? The World Federation of Trade

countries.<sup>11</sup> In 1949, after the split, the WFTU comprised delegates from a variety of national and international organizations obedient to Moscow. Delegations from more than sixty countries attended the Second World Trade Union Congress, held in Milan in July 1949, when the Italian Giuseppe Di Vittorio was elected president. From then until the 1960s, this position would be held by Italians (Agostino Novella became president in the late 1950s, followed by Renato Bitossi), while the role of secretary general went to the French.

Leading figures in China's trade union international work in this period were, among others, Liu Changsheng, vice-president of the All-China Federation of Trade Union and secretary (from 1953) and then vice-president of the WFTU (1957–1967); Zhu Xuefan, who in the 1950s and early 1960s served as vice-president of the All-China Federation of Trade Union and member of the General Council of the WFTU (after having been its vice-president before 1949); and Liu Ningyi, a member of the WFTU Executive Committee and Bureau, who served as one of its vice-presidents from 1949 until 1957.<sup>12</sup> Since the birth of the PRC, both Liu Changsheng and Liu Ningyi played an important part in the CCP's overseas international work, representing China both in the WFTU and the World Peace Council and serving as top CCP officials in Chinese people's associations designed to augment the nation's presence on the global stage (such as the Association for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and the Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee). While serving as deputy director of the powerful CCP International Liaison Department until 1966 (when he was appointed acting director in place of Wang Jiaoxiang), Liu Ningyi also served as vice president and president of the ACFTU, respectively from 1948 to 1957 and from 1958 until December 1966. Given his experience engaging with workers on behalf of the Party since 1925, Liu was named secretary of the CCP Committee for the Labor Movement in 1946, whereupon he dedicated himself to the unification of the Chinese labour movement. In 1948, he became head of the International Liaison Department of the China Federation of Labor (then renamed ACFTU), soon emerging as one of the most important leaders of the Chinese trade unions and a prominent international activist for the Party.<sup>13</sup>

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Unions and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, 1967–1977”, *Science and Society*, 77:3 (2013), pp. 342–371.

<sup>11</sup>US Office of International Labor Affairs, *Directory of the World Federation of Trade Union (WFTU)*, June 1955, p. 1. Available at: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiug.30112068944070;view=1up;seq=13>; last accessed 5 February 2026.

<sup>12</sup>Zhonggong zhongyang zuzhibu, Zhonggong zhongyang dangshi yanjiu, and Zhongyang dang'anguan (eds), *Zhongguo gongchandang zuzhishi ziliao 1921–1997* [Documents on the history of the CCP organization 1921–1997], vol. XIX (Beijing, 2000), pp. 15–18, 283–284; Gao Aidi, “Zhu Xuefan yu quanguo gongren yundong de tongyi” [Zhu Xuefan and the National Labor Movement], *Gonghui lilun yanjiu*, 6 (2011), p. 3; US Office of International Labor Affairs, *Directory of the World Federation of Trade Union*, pp. 4–5, 9.

<sup>13</sup>On the biographies of Liu Changsheng and Liu Ningyi, see Wolfgang Bartke, *Biographical Dictionary and Analysis of China's Party Leadership 1922–1988* (Munich, 1990), pp. 123–124, 131; Zhang Heng (ed.), *Zhonggong zhongyang zuzhi renshi jianming tupu* [Brief Atlas of Central Committee Organizational Personnel] (Beijing, 2003), pp. 104, pp. 207–208, 110; Wang Zhaoguo, “Zai jinian Liu Ningyi tongzhi 100 zhounian zuotanhui shang de jianghua” (7 December 2007). Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200430164213/http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64172/85037/85038/6629496.html>; last accessed 5 February 2026.

As the early experiences of Liu Ningyi illustrate, the first contacts between Chinese communists and the WFTU precede the establishment of the PRC, indeed dating back to the organization's founding. Soon after the end of World War II, at a time when CCP started to resume its activities in the labour movement in the communist bases, while also seeking to build ties with organized labour in the GMD-controlled areas, a number of Chinese trade unionists took part in liaison work abroad and acquired expertise in the international trade union movement.<sup>14</sup>

The period between 1945 and 1946 was marked by GMD–CCP negotiations and reconciliation attempts aimed at preventing the outbreak of a civil war. In this context, the CCP established the Preparatory Committee of the Trade Unions of the Liberated Areas and revived base areas' unions' affiliation with the China Association of Labor, an agency originally backed by the GMD government. During the Sino–Japanese war, this association had become a CCP–GMD united front organization, leading the Nationalist government to endorse a joint representation at the September 1945 meeting of the WFTU in Paris. The delegation was led by Zhu Xuefan, leader of the CAL since 1939, accompanied by Deng Fa, in charge of the Preparatory Committee of the Trade Unions of the Liberated Areas.<sup>15</sup> Yet, the China Association of Labor, whose programme was based on the unity of all Chinese workers irrespective of their political orientations, was the sole Chinese national organization to be recognized by the WFTU,<sup>16</sup> with Deng Fa the only communist in the delegation to Paris.<sup>17</sup> According to Chinese sources, the decision resulted from both internal and external pressures. Soviet, Italian, French, and British trade union leaders had urged joint representation and conveyed this request to the Nationalist government. Meanwhile, Zhu Xuefan (who had discussed with Zhou Enlai the importance of a unified and inclusive trade union delegation) put pressure on the GMD authorities, making the China Association of Labour's participation conditional upon the inclusion of a representative from the liberated areas.<sup>18</sup>

In the following months the CCP tried to increase its influence in the China Association of Labor as many members of the organizations, including Zhu Xuefan, became increasingly alienated from the GMD government due to its

<sup>14</sup>Lee Lai To, *Trade Unions in China, 1949 to the Present: The Organization and Leadership of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions* (Singapore, 1986), p. 28.

<sup>15</sup>Shi Shaoqing, “Zhongguo gongren yundong tongyi jinchengzhong de Liu Ningyi yu Zhu Xuefan” [Liu Ningyi and Zhu Xuefan in the Process of Unifying the Chinese Labor Movement], *Bainian chao*, 10 (2020), pp. 58–65; and “Liu Ningyi. Zhongguo gongren yundong de jiechu lingdaoren” [Liu Ningyi: Prominent Leader of China's Workers' Movement], *Gongyun shihua*, 10 (2021), pp. 22–25; Gao, “Zhu Xuefan yu quanguo”, pp. 3–6; S. Bernard Thomas, *Labor and the Chinese Revolution: Class Strategies and Contradictions of Chinese Communism, 1928–1948* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1983), pp. 215–262.

<sup>16</sup>*Rapport d'activité de la Fédération Syndicale Mondiale (15 Octobre 1945–30 Avril 1949)* (Paris, 1949), p. 52, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

<sup>17</sup>Shi Zhaoqing, “Shouwei canjia shijie gonglian dahui de zhonggong dangyuan” [The first Chinese Communist Party member to attend the World Federation of Trade Unions Congress], *Gongyou*, 12 (2021), pp. 48–51.

<sup>18</sup>Lu Xiangxian and Liu Songbin, *Zhu Xuefan zhuan* [Biography of Zhu Xuefan] (Beijing, 2005), pp. 197–198. See also Liu Mingkui and Tang Yuliang (eds), *Zhongguo gongren yundongshi (A History of China's Workers Movement)* (Guangzhou, Guangdong renmin chubanshe 1998, vol. 6, pp. 104–108.

anti-communist policies and repressive responses to labour unrest and strikes in major urban centres.<sup>19</sup> With Deng Fa's death in April 1946, Liu Ningyi took over his work in the WFTU (under instruction by Zhou Enlai), joining Zhu Xuefan (then serving as one of the Federation's vice presidents) as a spokesperson for Chinese labour at the international level. By then, the WFTU had emerged as a key international macrostructure enabling transnational mobility and encounters. In the eyes of the CCP, it was the means of publicizing the "liberated" areas' trade unions to a broader audience and expanding their international influence, while offering networks that facilitated connections with the overseas Chinese community in Europe.<sup>20</sup> With this in mind, Liu began to travel extensively across Europe (visiting six countries between 1947 and 1949) to carry out international activity on behalf of the CCP. He attended all the European meetings of the WFTU,<sup>21</sup> often accompanied by interpreter Yuan Baohua, who had lived in France and was fluent in French (the official language of the Federation).<sup>22</sup>

In June 1947, at Zhu Xuefan's request, the WFTU Executive Bureau in Prague adopted a resolution on China, calling for the creation of a unified national trade union organization.<sup>23</sup> A year later (August 1948), amidst civil war, the CCP-sponsored Sixth National Labor Congress, held in Harbin, led to the re-establishment of the ACFTU (originally founded in the early 1920s). The decision about its revival was based on a joint proposal that included the China Association of Labor, which now became an affiliated organization of the CCP-directed trade union national federation (it would then be disbanded in late 1949). Zhu Xuefan, who had defected to the Communists, went to Harbin to join the Congress, indicating his full support of the CCP in the anti-GMD struggle and gaining the post of vice-chairman of the ACFTU (together with Liu Ningyi and Li Lisan).<sup>24</sup> On 26 August 1948, after the closing of the Sixth National Labor Congress, Zhu Xuefan and Liu Ningyi wrote a letter to WFTU Secretary General Saillant to inform him of the establishment of a unified national trade union federation. The message indicated that, from that moment onward, the ACFTU (no longer the China Association of Labor) would represent Chinese labour in the WFTU.<sup>25</sup> With the China Association of Labor folded into the ACFTU, the latter became the WFTU's sole Chinese affiliate. The shift coincided with a moment of heightened internal tensions within the WFTU, in which an organizational split seemed inevitable.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Thomas, *Labor and the Chinese Revolution*, ch. 8; Lee Lai To, *Trade Unions in China*, pp. 26–27.

<sup>20</sup>Shi Shaoqing, "Liu Ningyi. Zhongguo gongren yundong de jiechu lingdaoren", pp. 22–25.

<sup>21</sup>Liu Ningyi, *Lishi huiyi* [Historical Memories] (Beijing, 1996), pp. 74–128; Bartke, *Biographical Dictionary and Analysis of China's Party Leadership*, p. 131; US Department of State, *The Potentials of World Communism: International Agencies. Part II: The World Federation of Trade Unions*, OIR Report No. 4909.1, 1 August 1949, p. 12, NO. US2004817, East China Normal University Center for Contemporary Historical Documents' Archive.

<sup>22</sup>Yan Mingfu, *Yan Mingfu huiyilu* [The Memoirs of Yan Mingfu] (Beijing, 2015), part 1, p. 168.

<sup>23</sup>"Résolution sur la situation syndicale en Chine", CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio internazionale, file 96, folder 56.

<sup>24</sup>Thomas, *Labor and the Chinese Revolution*, ch. 8; Israel Epstein, "Main Directions in Chinese Labor", *Science & Society*, 13:4 (1949), pp. 323–325; Lu and Liu, *Zhu Xuefan zhuan*, pp. 199–306; Zhonggong Zhongyang Zuzhibu et al., *Zhongguo gongchandang zuzhishi ziliao*, vol. XIX, pp. 15–16.

<sup>25</sup>Lu and Liu, *Zhu Xuefan zhuan*, pp. 304–305.

<sup>26</sup>Devinatz, "A Cold War Thaw in the International Working-Class Movement?", p. 348.

## Towards the Asia–Australia Trade Union Conference (Beijing, 1949)

Even though China's participation in the WFTU crossed the 1949 divide, the birth of the PRC ushered in a new phase of China's international trade union work, with the ACFTU playing an important role (as Yan Mingfu, the Chinese interpreter who worked for several years in the organization would later recall).<sup>27</sup> The ACFTU had just been revived as a Party-controlled mass organization staffed by officials of the CCP and designed to monopolize union activities and serve as a "transmission belt".<sup>28</sup> Its affiliated workers numbered 2,373,000 in 1949 and membership expanded dramatically in the early days of the PRC,<sup>29</sup> reportedly totalling 12,450,000 workers by 1955, when the ACFTU accounted for 80 per cent of all members of the WFTU in Asia.<sup>30</sup>

The "New China" was greeted with applause within the WFTU, being celebrated as a key country whose importance for the future developments of the international workers' and trade union movement could not be underestimated. The epochal change in a country that had for long suffered imperialist oppression and underdevelopment was seen as a new hope for the international working class, guided by the USSR, and a source of inspiration for oppressed nations worldwide.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, the potential for hundreds of thousands Chinese workers to join unions also accounted for the importance the newly established PRC assumed for the international trade union movement.

The Asian–Australian Trade Union Conference, held in Beijing in the fall of 1949 (just one month after the PRC was proclaimed) was a watershed moment: the first international trade union meeting hosted by the New China and the first large international gathering with a focus on Asia to be organized in the newly established PRC. A few weeks later, a second large gathering focusing on Asian issues, the Conference of Asian Women sponsored by the Women's International Democratic Federation, took place in Beijing, both conferences serving to stress the importance of China's revolution for international socialism and to inaugurate Chinese participation and leadership in such international organizations.<sup>32</sup>

Preparations for the Asian–Australian Trade Union Conference began as early as 1947. Meeting in Paris, the Executive Bureau of the WFTU appointed a commission to organize a Pan-Asian Trade Union Conference (to be held in Calcutta in 1948) with the goal of expanding the organization's reach in the region.<sup>33</sup> However, it took almost two years for any meaningful steps to be taken, and the planned conference

<sup>27</sup> Yan Mingfu, *Yan Mingfu huiyilu*, part 1, p. 167.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Harper, "The Party and the Unions in Communist China", *The China Quarterly*, 37 (1969), pp. 84–119. On relations between the CCP and the ACFTU after its revival, see also Ivan Franceschini, *Lavoro e diritti in Cina. Politiche sul lavoro e attivismo operaio nella fabbrica del mondo* (Bologna, 2016), pp. 69–93.

<sup>29</sup> Lee Lai To, *Trade Unions in China*, p. 48.

<sup>30</sup> US Office of International Labor Affairs, *Directory of the World Federation of Trade Union*, p. 23.

<sup>31</sup> See for instance "Manifesto della conferenza dei lavoratori nei paesi asiatici", CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio relazioni internazionali, file 98, folder 64.

<sup>32</sup> Nasser, "To Defend the Peace of Asia", p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> The commission included Zhu Xuefan, who then asked to be replaced by his assistant Liu Ningyi (CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio relazioni internazionali, file 97, folder 57).

was postponed.<sup>34</sup> In the meantime, Chinese representative Liu Ningyi was quite active in demanding acceleration of preparations for the Pan-Asian conference to be held in India so as to allow the WFTU to help workers facing repressions in the region. At the session of the Executive Bureau held in September 1948 in Paris, he explained that the social and political situation of workers in Asia (and particularly in China) was deteriorating, drawing the delegates' attention to the GMD's brutal repression (with the collaboration of American troops) of Chinese workers and trade unionists in various urban centres.<sup>35</sup>

By January 1949, the People's Liberation Army had entered Beijing and CCP victory was imminent. In the wake of the WFTU's internal split China was eventually chosen to host the long-awaited international conference. The issue was indeed revisited by the Executive Committee, which met in Paris between 22 January and 1 February 1949 and decided to appoint a new commission, led by Liu Ningyi.<sup>36</sup> Internal WFTU documents kept at the CGIL National Historical Archives suggest that the Executive Bureau met again on 2 February to weigh the option of sending a WFTU delegation to China in May 1949. The purpose of the delegation would be laying groundwork for the conference in light of the upcoming Second World Congress (to be held in Milan in late June that year).<sup>37</sup> Liu Ningyi was eventually tasked with bringing the project to the attention of his organization. While the Executive Committee originally considered having all members of the Executive Bureau travel to China for an official session in May, the idea was soon abandoned in favour of a smaller delegation to avoid attracting external attention. Holding an official meeting in China soon after the WFTU's internal split (which would make the organization mostly dominated by the Soviet Union) and so close to the Second Congress would have been politically dangerous, potentially providing ammunition to the WFTU's opponents. Liu Ningyi also sided with sending a small delegation but had reservations about the date and place of the Pan-Asian trade union conference given the uncertain political situation.<sup>38</sup> In early 1949, soon after the session of the WFTU Executive Bureau, Liu Ningyi stopped in Moscow on his return trip to China, where he met Soviet trade union leaders who wished for the Pan-Asian conference to be hosted in China. Liu was cautious and, after returning to China, he consulted with Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi, the latter persuading him that the conditions were not yet ripe, given the ongoing civil war.<sup>39</sup> A few months later, en route to Italy for the Second World Trade Union Congress, the Chinese delegation (headed by Liu) stopped in Moscow. Once again, Soviet leaders broached the issue of the Pan-Asian conference and put pressure on Liu Ningyi, insisting upon China as its host. As Liu later remembered, he felt he had no choice but to agree. Yet, Liu Shaoqi's opinion had shifted by the time of his return to China. Liu Shaoqi indeed reassured him that the

<sup>34</sup> *Rapport d'activité de la Fédération Syndicale Mondiale*, pp. 468–471. See Johanna Wolf's paper in this Special Issue for insights into why the decision took so long.

<sup>35</sup> CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio relazioni internazionali, file 97, folder 59.

<sup>36</sup> *Rapport d'activité de la Fédération Syndicale Mondiale*, pp. 470–471.

<sup>37</sup> The reference to the delegation's trip to China is also found in *Rapport d'activité de la Fédération Syndicale Mondiale*, p. 471, but it is not clear whether the journey actually took place in May.

<sup>38</sup> CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio relazioni internazionali, file 98, folder 61.

<sup>39</sup> "Guanyu zhaokai YaAo gonghui huiyi" [On the Convening of the Asia Australia Trade Union Conference], in Liu Ningyi, *Lishi huiyi*, p. 140.

situation had changed since the beginning of the year, and if the decision was made, China would certainly take international responsibility, hosting the conference, with Liu Ningyi in charge of the preparatory work.<sup>40</sup> It is not by chance that this stance was only adopted once China's foreign policy position had been defined, on the eve of the proclamation of the new state.

While Asia had been an important region for the WFTU since its early days, China was now its centre of attention, viewed as a crucial tool for increasing its influence and courting new member organizations in the region. Decolonization was a major theme at the Second World Trade Union Congress, held in Milan between the end of June and the beginning of July 1949. China was explicitly cited in the resolution adopted at the Congress: its war of liberation offered a "heroic example" to peoples of colonial and dependent countries that "aspire to free themselves from imperialism".<sup>41</sup> Liu Ningyi was not in attendance – he and his delegation had remained in Prague because the Italian government had denied them entry visas. His views were represented by a written report on the Asian labour movement, to be read at the Congress by the Australian delegate E. Thornton at the morning session of 7 July. The report stressed the importance of the planned Asian trade union conference and proposed holding it in Beijing in November. It also spoke in favour of establishing an Asian bureau within the WFTU.<sup>42</sup>

Yet, the Soviets' insistence that the Chinese host the conference at such a delicate moment should be seen not only as a reflection of the revolutionary changes in China but also as part of the new division of labour that characterized the nascent Sino–Soviet alliance. From the beginning of 1949, the Chinese and Soviet Communist parties had direct contacts. The secret visit of Stalin's envoy, Anastas Mikoyan, to Xibaopo in late January was followed by Liu Shaoqi's secret visit to Moscow in late June/early July (roughly contemporaneous with the WFTU's Second Congress in Milan). Liu Shaoqi's aim was to lay the groundwork for Moscow's diplomatic recognition of the PRC and set the stage for a strategic alliance (which was formally established in early 1950).

He had arrived at a crucial time for the Communist Revolution as it inched closer to victory – the People's Liberation Army had entered Nanjing in April 1949, Shanghai fell not long after, and Mao had accelerated the formulation of the foreign policy line to be taken by the new regime. The vision that emerged, while emphasizing national independence, territorial sovereignty, and anti-imperialism, adopted a stance of "leaning to one side" (*yi bian dao*), as expressed in Mao's famous 30 June essay "People's Democratic Dictatorship", implying a preference for the Soviet Union in the emerging Cold War context. Meanwhile, in Moscow, Stalin assured Liu Shaoqi that the Chinese

<sup>40</sup>"Guanyu zhaokai YaAo gonghui huiyi", pp. 141–142.

<sup>41</sup>"Résolution sur l'activité syndicale dans les pays d'Asie, d'Afrique, d'Amérique Latine, d'Australasie", p. 2 (CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio internazionale, file 65, folder 2).

<sup>42</sup>"Liu Ningyi zai 'Yazhou zhigong yundong' baogao zhong zhuzhang Zhong Yue Yinni deng di waiguo jundui bixu chetui, jianyi chengli shijie gonglian Yazhou ju" [In his report on the "Asian Labor Movement", Liu Ningyi advocated for the withdrawal of foreign troops from countries such as China, Vietnam, and Indonesia, and proposed the establishment of an Asian bureau of the WFTU], *Renmin Ribao*, 11 July 1949, p. 3.

would receive the assistance they needed for economic reconstruction and development. He observed that the centre of the revolution was shifting eastward, and that China, by virtue of its own history and revolutionary experience, would assume greater responsibility for supporting national revolutionary movements in colonial, semicolonial and dependent countries in the region.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the Soviet insistence that China host the Pan-Asian conference reflected more than mere endorsement of the revolutionary changes taking place in China. Rather, it heralded a new division of labour for the burgeoning Sino–Soviet alliance. This sharing of duties, as Chen Jian put it, gave the CCP new legitimacy in emphasizing the universality of its experience for the colonial non-Western world<sup>44</sup> and was also reflected in the way international labour internationalism was to be jointly carried out.<sup>45</sup>

It is against this backdrop that the Asian–Australian Trade Union Conference, organized by the WFTU, was held in Beijing from 16 November to 1 December, preceded by a meeting of the Executive Bureau (11–14 November). The conference was attended by delegations from thirteen countries, with a total of 117 participants.<sup>46</sup> China was represented by, among others, Liu Shaoqi, Honorary President of the ACFTU, and trade union leaders such as the ACFTU Vice Presidents Li Lisan, Zhu Xuefan, and Liu Ningyi. The main discussion items on the agenda were the tasks and orientation of the workers’ movement in colonial and semicolonial countries. The Chinese drew on their own historical experiences in their attempts to contribute to the discussion.<sup>47</sup>

In his opening remarks (16 November), Liu Shaoqi, a veteran of the Chinese workers’ movement who had been elected vice president of WFTU at its Second World Congress, presented the victory of the Chinese revolution as an integral part of a worldwide movement led by Moscow. As he explained, China provided the “best model” (*zuihao de banyang*) for national liberation movements in other colonial and semicolonial countries: “To fight for national independence and people’s democracy is the supreme task of the working class in the colonial and semicolonial countries”. To achieve this, he argued, “it is necessary for the colonial and semicolonial people to unite together with the working people in the imperialist countries to fight against their common enemy – imperialism”.<sup>48</sup> As Chau notes, these words were imbued with political meaning, encapsulating the idea of an international united front that would

<sup>43</sup>See, for instance, Sergey Radchenko, “The Origins of the Sino–Soviet alliance”, *Rivista italiana di storia internazionale*, 2 (2019), pp. 189–208; Shen Zhihua, *ZhongSu guanxi shi*, pp. 102–107; Shen Zhihua and Yafeng Xia, *Mao and the Sino–Soviet Partnership, 1945–1959: A New History* (Lanham, MD, 2017), in particular pp. 27–33.

<sup>44</sup>Chen Jian, “Bridging Revolution and Decolonization: The ‘Bandung Discourse’ in China’s Early Cold War Experience”, *The Chinese Historical Review*, 15:2 (2008), pp. 215–217, especially p. 216.

<sup>45</sup>Leow, “Asian Lessons in the Cold War Classroom”, p. 433.

<sup>46</sup>Wang You et al. (eds), *Dangdai Zhongguo gongren jieji he gonghui yundong jishi (1949–1988)* [Account of Contemporary Chinese Workers and Trade Union Movement (1949–1988)] (Shenyang, 1989), pp. 4–5; Liao Gailong et al. (eds), *Shehuizhuyi baike youlan* [Encyclopedia of Socialism], vol. I (Beijing, 1993), p. 1064; see also Wang Jiachong (ed.), *Huoyue zai renmin waijiao wutai shang. Zhongguo gonghui guoji huodong de huigu* (Beijing, 1995).

<sup>47</sup>Kang Yonghe et al., “Zhuoyue de renmin waijiao huodongjia Liu Ningyi”, in Liu Ningyi, *Lishi huiyi*, p. 341.

<sup>48</sup>“Zai Yazhou Aozhou gonghui huiyi shang de kaimuci” (16 November 1949) in *Jianguo yilai Liu Shaoqi wengao* [Liu Shaoqi’s Manuscripts since the Founding of the PRC], vol. I (Beijing, 2005), pp. 162–164.

fundamentally restructure the world order,<sup>49</sup> thus establishing a profound link between decolonization and communist revolution.<sup>50</sup>

When it came to trade unionism, he suggested that national liberation and independence should be prioritized over trade union rights and the realization of the economic and social demands of workers. He gave prominence to the creation of a “united front” with all other classes opposing imperialism and engaging in “armed struggle”, which he described as an “unavoidable path” (*buke bimian de daolu*), as evidenced by the Chinese experience. The “Chinese/Maoist path” (*Mao Zedong de daolu*) was explicitly presented as an example for countries with conditions similar to China’s.<sup>51</sup> Because Liu’s speech was delivered not merely by a representative of the labour movement but also by a high-ranking CCP official (member of the CCP Secretariat and Politburo) holding important governmental positions (vice chairman of the Central People’s Government Council), it constituted a major policy statement, especially since it was given shortly after the founding of the People’s Republic. While referring to the CCP-guided “united front”, based on the collaboration between the working class (numerically marginal in such a context), the peasants, on whose support the Chinese revolution had largely relied, and all patriotic classes (including the national bourgeoisie) opposing imperialism and the Nationalist regime, the speech also alluded to the CCP’s post-1946 labour line. This line was based on capital-labour collaboration and mutual benefits, with its emphasis on waging primarily a multi-class political struggle.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, despite acknowledging China’s need to attend to domestic priorities before fully assuming any international responsibilities, he used the platform provided by the WFTU to anticipate China’s ambitions for the future: to take on a leadership role in the global communist movement by supporting national liberation movements in the so-called Third World.<sup>53</sup> As he stated in his second speech, delivered on 23 November:

If our difficulties can be overcome more rapidly, if our nation’s production can be increased more rapidly, if our economy can recover more quickly, and if our victory can be consolidated rapidly, then we will be better able to shoulder our international responsibilities and more effectively inspire the oppressed peoples of the world to fight for their own liberation. These are things we can and should do.<sup>54</sup>

Yet, as Yasser Nasser has pointed out, the regional dimension of the Conference had a peculiar significance for the ACFTU’s leaders. By attributing to “Asia” specific political aspirations such as “vanquishing imperialism and foreign encroachment and welcoming in a new era of sovereignty and revolutionary possibilities” – and assigning to Chinese workers a key part in the struggle of Asian trade unions to achieve national

<sup>49</sup> Donovan Chau, *Exploiting Africa: The Influence of Maoist China in Algeria, Ghana, and Tanzania* (Annapolis, MD, 2014).

<sup>50</sup> Chen, “Bridging Revolution and Decolonization”, pp. 216–217.

<sup>51</sup> “Zai Yazhou Aozhou gonghui huiyi shang de kaimuci”, pp. 165, 167.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas, *Labor and the Chinese Revolution*, ch. 8.

<sup>53</sup> Chau, *Exploiting Africa*, p. 14.

<sup>54</sup> “Zai Beijing ge jie qingzhu Yazhou Aozhou gonghui huiyishang de jianghua” (23 November 1949), in *Jianguo yilai Liu Shaoqi wengao*, pp. 175–180 (quotation on p. 180).

independence, it made it possible to “recognize the importance of ‘Asia’ for contextualizing the Chinese revolution’s significance” and to “convince Chinese audiences about the importance of their work at home for the success of revolution abroad”. This also laid the foundation for later portrayal of the PRC leadership over the region and, eventually, across Africa and Asia more broadly.<sup>55</sup>

The documents and resolutions approved in Beijing reflected several areas of consensus. Conference participants agreed on urgency of combatting imperialist expansion, the necessity of safeguarding the unity of the workers’ movement, and the need to strengthen relations both among trade unions in Asia and between Asian trade unions and the WFTU. However, according to Liu Ningyi’s memoirs, the opinions of attendees diverged on two major issues; the discussions required to resolve these disagreements extended the conference into December.<sup>56</sup>

The first point of contention concerned the emphasis Liu Shaoqi’s speech had placed on supporting national independence movements (and its implications for the direction to be taken by the workers’ movement in colonial and semicolonial countries). Liu had stressed the subordination to the struggle for national liberation and the inevitability of armed struggle. The audience was divided on where national liberation fit into the overall programme of the workers’ movement. Liu’s stance garnered the support of delegates from Asian and African countries, but was initially firmly opposed by the French and Soviets. The latter camp, whose perspective was informed by the European experience, thought that trade unions should chiefly involve themselves in the fight for democratic rights and the improvements of the economic and social conditions for the working class, rather than in political struggles.<sup>57</sup> As Shen and Xia have pointed out, many participants found it “inappropriate to publicize political slogans such as seizure of power by armed force”, given that delegates from a few capitalist countries<sup>58</sup> were also attending the conference. When Stalin (who had previously agreed on a strategic division of responsibility and had hoped not to embarrass Mao on the eve of his visit to Moscow) intervened, however, things changed.<sup>59</sup> Cabling the Soviet delegate, Stalin indicated that the failure to back Liu Shaoqi’s speech would be a grave political mistake; Liu’s opinions, Stalin asserted, was “correct and timely”.<sup>60</sup> With this intervention, a final consensus was reached. The resolution approved on 1 December explicitly recognized the significance of China’s revolutionary experience as offering lessons that could be studied and assimilated by other revolutionary movements in the region.<sup>61</sup> Stalin’s action also allowed for the subsequent publication of Liu’s speech in *Pravda*,

<sup>55</sup>Nasser, “To Defend the Peace of Asia”, pp. 5–6.

<sup>56</sup>“Guanyu zhaokai YaAo gonghui huiyi”, pp. 143–144.

<sup>57</sup>Wang, *Huoyue zai renmin waijiao wutai shang*, pp. 47–50; and “Guanyu zhaokai YaAo gonghui huiyi”, pp. 143–144.

<sup>58</sup>I did not find evidence that proves the participation of delegates from the Italian CGIL.

<sup>59</sup>Shen Zhihua and Yafeng Xia, “Leadership Transfer in the Asian Revolution”, pp. 202–203.

<sup>60</sup>“Guanyu Sulian daibiaotuan zai YaoAo gonghui Beijing huiyi biaoqian de cailiao” (January 1950, document no. 13808), in Shen Zhihua, *Eluosi jiemi dang’an xuanbian*, vol. II, p. 206.

<sup>61</sup>“Résolution de la Conférence syndicale des pays d’Asie & d’Australasie sur l’action de la FSM pour aider les syndicats de ces pays” (Beijing, 20 November 1949) and “Résolution de la conférence syndicale des pays d’Asie & d’Australasie sur les rapports des centrales syndicales nationales de ces pays” (Beijing, 1 December 1949), CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio internazionale, file 98, folder 64.

which was probably meant to indicate to Mao the goodwill of the Soviets towards the CCP, despite their difficult past relations.<sup>62</sup>

The Asian–Australian Trade Union Conference thus supplied the PRC with its first opportunity to put forward publicly its vision for the orientation of the workers’ movement in the colonial and semicolonial countries with which China identified itself.<sup>63</sup> As Liu Shaoqi put it at the end of his opening speech: “I think that the struggle against imperialist oppression and feudalism, for the sake of national independence and people’s democracy, should become the most important objective of our trade union meeting”.<sup>64</sup>

The second cause of debate pertained to the proposed establishment of a China-based regional office to coordinate and liaise with the WFTU. This topic had been broached at a meeting between Liu Ningyi and Soviet leaders ahead of the Second Congress of the WFTU (June 1949) and was raised again by the Soviet delegates in Beijing. As Liu Ningyi noted in his memoirs, Liu Shaoqi had initially replied that there was no need (his reticence perhaps due to cognizance of the internal difficulties the New China was facing, challenges he had underscored in the aforementioned 23 November speech). When the proposal passed, however, the Chinese trade unions had little choice but to go along with it, agreeing to set up an office in Beijing staffed by officers from the USSR, Australia, and India, and headed by the Liu Ningyi (representing Chinese trade unions). Representatives from Indonesia, Korea, and Japan would later join the office.<sup>65</sup>

### The Establishment of the Asian–Australasian Liaison Bureau and the Beginning of the PRC’s International Labour Diplomacy

The Asian–Australasian Liaison Bureau (*YaAo lianluojū*) had the stated objectives of promoting the workers’ movement; fostering connections among Asian trade unions and between national trade unions (both affiliated and non-member organizations) and the WFTU; producing knowledge in the form of publications for local audiences; and collecting information on the development of the trade union movement in the region (ultimately expanding the power and reach of the WFTU in Asia).<sup>66</sup> According to the Resolution adopted in December 1949, the office was to be set up in Beijing

<sup>62</sup>“Guanyu Sulian daibiaotuan zai YaoAo gonghui Beijing huiyi biaoqian de cailiao” (January 1950), cit., p. 206.

<sup>63</sup>Chen Yu *et al.*, “Liu Shaoqi dui guoji gongyun he Zhongguo gonghui guoji huodong de lishixing gongxian” [The Contribution of Liu Shaoqi to the International Workers’ Movement and the International Activities of Chinese Trade Unions], *Zhongguo gongyun*, 12 (1998).

<sup>64</sup>*Jianguo yilai Liu Shaoqi wengao*, pp. 167–168.

<sup>65</sup>“Guanyu zhaokai YaAo gonghui huiyi”, pp. 143–144. According to the “Résolution de la conférence des pays d’Asie et d’Australasie sur la création du bureau de liaison de la FSM en Asie”, the Liaison Office was staffed by four members: a representative of the Chinese ACFTU (who headed the office); a representative of the Pan-Indian Congress of trade unions; a representative of the Soviet trade union; and a representative of the Australian trade union. See “Résolution de la conférence syndicale des pays d’Asie et d’Australasie sur la création du bureau de liaison de la FSM en Asie” (1 December 1949), CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio internazionale, file 98, folder 64.

<sup>66</sup>See “Résolution sur la création des bureaux de liaison en Asie et en Afrique” (November–December 1949); “Résolution de la conférence syndicale des pays d’Asie et d’Australasie sur la création du bureau de liaison de la FSM en Asie” (1 December 1949); “Manifeste de la conférence syndicale des pays d’Asie

in January 1950; however, the formal establishment of the Bureau was delayed by a couple months and operations only began in earnest in early 1952. The Bureau's activities ended six years later, in 1958, when it was abolished according to a decision of the WFTU Executive Committee. It had largely outlived its usefulness by 1955, having created what contacts it could between the WFTU and national centres in the region (and facing difficulties due both to the unstable political situation in Southeast Asia and internal divergences that hindered its work).<sup>67</sup> According to Brady, it functioned as an "offshoot of Cominform".<sup>68</sup>

With China taking over the responsibility of facilitating contacts with Asian trade unions via the WFTU Office, the country's commitment to trade union education surged, driven by both domestic demand and the need for appropriately trained cadres.<sup>69</sup> In the new circumstances brought about by the establishment of the PRC, China's trade unions faced two main challenges: the need to "go global" and contribute to the worldwide workers' movement, on the one hand, and the urgency of overcoming the lack of experience/training in international work, on the other. Participation in the WFTU provided a way to achieve both objectives – the relationship between China's trade unions and the WFTU was characterized, at least until the mid-1950s, by "mutual support" and "close collaboration".<sup>70</sup>

In its early days, the Asian–Australasian Liaison Bureau was particularly active in collecting documentation to permit the study of trade unions in different national contexts and promoting contact and exchanges of experiences between Asian trade unions. Chinese trade unionists travelled abroad (to Indonesia, Ceylon, Japan, and India, among other countries) as official representatives of the WFTU, gaining valuable experience. Liu Ningyi was no exception; he visited Burma, for example, to facilitate contacts between local trade unions and the Liaison Bureau.<sup>71</sup> Chinese delegates were also sent out on missions to represent the WFTU at international forums, such as the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific under the jurisdiction of the UN Economic and Social Council, particularly on issues involving colonialism, imperialism, or development. For the WFTU, the choice of delegates from non-Western countries likely had a strategic dimension, highlighting both the organization's anti-colonial stance and its global scope.<sup>72</sup>

Hence, as the Asian–Australasian Liaison Bureau's operations gained momentum, so too did the external activities of Chinese trade unions, starting in 1952. During these days, trade union federations such as the communist-linked All-Indonesian Trade Union Centre (SOBSI) came to enjoy a close relationship with the ACFTU.<sup>73</sup> In the

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et d'Australasie aux ouvrières et aux tous les travailleurs des ces pays" (Beijing, 1 December 1949), CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio internazionale, file 98, folder 64.

<sup>67</sup> "Guanyu zhaokai YaAo gonghui huiyi", cit., p. 144; Wang, *Huoyue zai renmin waijiao wutai shang*, pp. 50–53; Liao et al., *Shehuizhuyi baike youlan*, p. 1064.

<sup>68</sup> Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China*, p. 89.

<sup>69</sup> Leow, "Asian Lessons in the Cold War Classroom", p. 433.

<sup>70</sup> Wang, *Huoyue zai renmin waijiao wutai shang*, pp. 46–47.

<sup>71</sup> "Guanyu zhaokai YaAo gonghui huiyi", p. 144; Wang, *Huoyue zai renmin waijiao wutai shang*, p. 51.

<sup>72</sup> Mikuláš Pešta, "A Hub of Anti-Colonialism: Prague's International Organizations in the Transnational Socialist Network and Global Cold War", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 59:3 (2024), pp. 492–513, 506.

<sup>73</sup> Hearman, "Indonesian Trade Unionists", p. 35.

same year, under the personal guidance of Liu Shaoqi, the first large-scale programme of inviting representatives of foreign trade unions to China for May Day got underway, targeting trade unions of different political positions, irrespective of WFTU affiliation, and focusing on Asian and North African countries.<sup>74</sup> More than 130 members of trade union delegations gathered in Beijing to celebrate May Day in 1952. Besides invitees from the USSR and people's democracies in Eastern Europe, delegations came from Korea, Mongolia, Vietnam, India, Australia, Burma, Indonesia, Ceylon, India, and Algeria, as well as Western Europe (Britain, Sweden, and Denmark). After a reception hosted by the Asian and Australasian Liaison Bureau of the WFTU on 6 May, representatives of the WFTU and foreign trade unions began a journey across China, accompanied by ACFTU leaders, on a tour designed to showcase the greatness of the New China, its success in national construction and industrial development, and its courage and strength in aiding Korea and resisting American aggression. Similarly to other experiences that began exactly in this period involving different sectors of foreign societies,<sup>75</sup> the journey was preceded by careful preparation in the form of "reception work" (*jiedai gongzuo*) by Chinese cadres and the foreign delegates were warmly welcomed and enthusiastically entertained by the Chinese people, as Chinese external propaganda material published that year highlighted.<sup>76</sup> Per their official statements, foreign left-wing delegates were favourably impressed. Members of the Australian Trade Union Delegation, for instance, praised the country's youths – a category that, at the time, was elevated domestically and described by socialist transnational propaganda as "builders of the New China."<sup>77</sup> In their words: "The youth of China is particularly energetic and enthusiastic in the life of New China. We saw this in Peking on May 4th Youth Day, but it has also been a noticeable feature at all centres visited."<sup>78</sup> After his return to Australia, T. Wright, a well-known left-wing trade union activist and head of the delegation, published a pamphlet entitled "Australians Visit the People's China: Report on the First Australian Trade Union Delegation to People's China" (1952), thus contributing to China's image abroad.<sup>79</sup>

The episode just described inaugurated what would become a common practice, through which China strove to cultivate its network of contacts by hosting foreign trade unions delegations for the May Day celebrations (including unions from outside the WFTU). It helped to reinforce China's sense of belonging to the broader "socialist

<sup>74</sup>Chen et al., "Liu Shaoqi dui guoji gongyun he Zhongguo gonghui guoji huodong de lishixing gongxian", p. 34.

<sup>75</sup>See, for instance, Julia Lovell, "The Uses of Foreigners in Mao-Era China: 'Techniques of Hospitality' and International Image Building in the People's Republic, 1949–1976", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 25 (2015), pp. 135–158 and Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China*, pp. 79–116.

<sup>76</sup>*Trade Union Delegations in China* (Beijing, September 1952).

<sup>77</sup>Laura De Giorgi, "The Happy Builders of the New China: Images of Chinese Revolutionary Youth in the 1950s. Italian Accounts of the People's Republic", *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 23 (2024), pp. 93–108.

<sup>78</sup>"Guanyu shijie gonglian ji ge guo gonghui daibiaotuan lai hu cangan de danwei liuxin dengjibiao" (May 1952), Shanghai Municipal Archives, C1-2-934-1 (microfilm, accessed in 2018).

<sup>79</sup>John Shields, "Wright, Thomas (Tom) (1902–1981)", *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University. Available at: <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/wright-thomas-tom-15654/text26849>; last accessed 2 September 2025.

family” (all the more evident in activities that involved the working class)<sup>80</sup> and integrate the country into global transnational circuits of socialist internationalism, with important repercussions in terms of identity building and CCP legitimacy.<sup>81</sup> As pointed out by Chen Yu and others, the May Day invitations were designed “to actively develop friendship and solidarity between Chinese workers and workers of other countries, enhance other peoples’ understanding toward the New China, help consolidate the newly established people’s regime and create a favourable international environment for national construction”.<sup>82</sup> As such, it was not only part of China’s responsibility to the international workers’ movement (led by the USSR), but it was also key in China’s campaign to improve its image globally at a time of relative diplomatic isolation. It thus fell within the overarching framework of people’s diplomacy, whose activities escalated after the end of the Korean War, targeting both Eastern and Western Bloc countries as well as the decolonizing and newly independent world.<sup>83</sup> While Beijing experimented with “proletarian diplomacy” (carried out at the level of workers’ lives) with other socialist countries,<sup>84</sup> it also promoted the development of bilateral links with trade union federations in capitalist countries like Italy.<sup>85</sup> As evidenced in recent studies, in the post-Korean War context China’s international standing increased, allowing it to expand relations and deepen contacts beyond the Socialist bloc. Trade union exchanges complemented wider efforts to build friendships at a non-state level with countries that had not yet officially recognized Beijing.<sup>86</sup>

### The WFTU’s Third World Congress and China’s Activism in the Mid-1950s

With the end of the Korean War (1950–1953), the completion of internal reconstruction, and the establishment of permanent institutions of the new socialist state (1954), the Chinese Communist leadership had left behind the years of emergency and was now ready to focus on domestic economic development (with the adoption of the Soviet-modelled First Five-Year Plan) and to reconsider the balance of global forces in a more stable international environment. The outcome of the Korean War was interpreted as a sign that the “forces of peace” were gaining ground vis-à-vis US imperialism, whose strength and prestige now appeared weakened.<sup>87</sup>

This led to the adoption of a more moderate and less confrontational international approach. While commitment to peace was part of the transnational movement led by Moscow (and went hand in hand with opposition to US imperialism), for the CCP,

<sup>80</sup> Yan Mingfu, *Yan Mingfu huiyilu*, part 1, pp. 167–224.

<sup>81</sup> Nicolai Volland, “The Socialist State: Cultural Exchange, National Identity, and the Socialist World in the Early PRC”, *Twentieth-Century China*, 33:2 (2008), pp. 51–72.

<sup>82</sup> Chen *et al.*, “Liu Shaoqi dui guoji gongyun he Zhongguo gonghui guoji huodong de lishixing gongxian”, p. 34.

<sup>83</sup> Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China*, p. 90.

<sup>84</sup> Sorace and Zhu, “The Short-Lived Eternity of Friendship”, cit.

<sup>85</sup> On Italian trade unions’ contacts with China, see Sofia Graziani, “Italians in Soviet-Sponsored International Organizations in China”, in Merle Schatz, Laura De Giorgi, and Peter Ludes (eds), *Contact Zones in China: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Leiden, 2020), pp. 97–109.

<sup>86</sup> Kang *et al.*, “Zhuoyue de renmin wajiaohuodongjia Liu Ningyi”, pp. 342–344. See also “Duiyu guoji huodong jige wenti renshi”, in Liu Ningyi, *Lishi huiyi*, pp. 169–173.

<sup>87</sup> Zhonggong Zhongyang dangshi yanjiushi, *Zhongguo gongchandang lishi*, vol. II, pp. 311–335.

peace and the desire for recognition by the international community were closely linked.<sup>88</sup> The idea of “peaceful coexistence” between different political and economic systems was now being promoted by Beijing, with the dual aim of crafting a new image of China and expanding its horizons beyond the socialist camp – that is, paving the way out of the diplomatic isolation imposed by the West. As Sino–Soviet relations entered a golden age after the death of Stalin, Beijing embarked on a more active and autonomous foreign policy. The first concrete expressions of this shift could be seen in the diplomatic actions of Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai at the Geneva Conference (1954) and the Bandung Conference (1955). These two international gatherings marked Communist China’s debut on the world stage and were a turning point in its foreign policy.<sup>89</sup>

The conference of Afro–Asian countries held in Bandung (Indonesia) gave Beijing the opportunity to rediscover its “Third-World identity” (alongside its socialist one) and to establish contacts with newly independent nations or those undergoing decolonization, providing the Chinese leadership with a unique platform to advocate Afro–Asian unity. This has been interpreted as the beginning of a new phase in Chinese foreign policy, characterized by a growing interest in Asian and African nations (seen as natural allies in the anti-imperialist struggle for peace) and by a redefinition of the principle of revolution as the cornerstone of foreign policy in response to the evolving decolonization process.<sup>90</sup>

Chinese activism within the WFTU increased. The WFTU held its Third World Congress in October 1953 in Vienna and for the Chinese trade union federation, the evolving international context lent this meeting particular significance. The importance of China was also recognized at the WFTU’s Executive Committee meeting held in February 1953. The report on the convening of the Third World Congress stated that:

The creation of the People’s Republic of China which, in its first three years of life, has realized radical transformations in the economy of the country and in the situation of the Chinese people, represented an important contribution to the cause of strengthening the camp of peace and democracy. Chinese trade unions have become a powerful force, strongly influencing the development of the progressive trade union movement in Asian countries.<sup>91</sup>

A few months before the Congress, at the request of the WFTU, the Chinese had proposed Liu Changsheng as their most suitable candidate for the Secretariat. Available biographical material documents his active work in the preparations for the Congress, during which the Chinese formulated their proposals under the guidance of Liu Shaoqi.

<sup>88</sup>Forster, “Bellicose Peace”; Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China*, p. 89.

<sup>89</sup>Shu Guang Zhang, “Constructing ‘Peaceful Coexistence’: China’s Diplomacy toward the Geneva and Bandung Conferences, 1954–55”, *Cold War History*, 7:4 (2007), pp. 509–528.

<sup>90</sup>See, for instance, Chen Jian, “China and the Bandung Conference: Changing Perceptions and Representations”, in Tan See Seng and Amitav Acharya (eds), *Bandung Revisited: The Legacy of the 1955 Asian–African Conference for International Order* (Singapore, 2008), pp. 132–159; Chen, “Bridging Revolution and Decolonization”, pp. 216–217.

<sup>91</sup>CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio internazionale, file 90, folder 33.

The first point that the Chinese would emphasize was that unity was essential – the WFTU’s reach could be broadened by inviting non-member trade unions, including those that had withdrawn from the WFTU in 1949 and those unaffiliated with any international organizations. Aware of the Cold War barriers affecting the international trade union movement, China hoped to make the WFTU more pluralistic and less isolated. Secondly, the Chinese would propose adding to the Congress’s agenda an item specifically addressing the trade union movement in colonial and semicolonial countries (a theme that had already emerged as particularly important to the Chinese, reflecting the responsibility they felt to care for the rights and interests of workers and trade unions in these contexts).<sup>92</sup> Here, political and national independence had to take precedence, as Liu Changsheng highlighted in his address to the 16th session of the UN Economic and Social Council held in Geneva to which he had been dispatched in mid-1953 as a WFTU representative<sup>93</sup> (the WFTU had, in fact, a consultative status as a non-governmental organization with the UN body).<sup>94</sup>

The number of countries represented and total attendance at the WFTU’s Third World Congress in Vienna significantly surpassed that of the 1949 meeting (252 delegates from 61 countries): 819 delegates and observers coming from 79 countries across all continents were present, including 342 representatives from non-member trade unions.<sup>95</sup> According to the Italian journal *Mondo Operaio*, the geographical distribution was as follows: 46 delegates from the African continent, 21 from the Near and Middle East, 107 from Asia, 8 from Australia, 199 from the American continent (not including the US), and 382 from Europe (of which 273 were from capitalist countries and 109 from the USSR and people’s democracies).<sup>96</sup> Key themes were the struggle against imperialism, the defence of peace, and the fight for national independence and labour and democratic rights. Liu Changsheng was elected to the Secretariat, thus becoming a prominent figure in the Chinese trade unions’ international work.<sup>97</sup>

Discussions about the struggle in colonial and dependent countries ended with the approval of a resolution asserting that the “historical victory of the great Chinese people has brought a serious blow to the whole colonial system and has fundamentally changed the situation in Asia”; the PRC was seen as an agent of peace and friendship among peoples, and the armistice in Korea was construed as “a victory of the forces

<sup>92</sup>Zhong Xuesheng, *Zhongguo gongyun lishi renwu zhuanlue*. Liu Changsheng (Beijing, 2015), pp. 207–209; Chen *et al.*, “Liu Shaoqi dui guoji gongyun he Zhongguo gonghui guoji huodong de lishixing gongxian”, p. 34; Wang, *Dangdai Zhongguo gongren jieji he gonghui yundong jishi*, p. 75.

<sup>93</sup>Zhong, *Zhongguo gongyun lishi renwu zhuanlue*, pp. 206–207. See also UN Economic and Social Council Sixteenth Session (727th meeting), official records, 16 July 1953, pp. 156–157. Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/824573?ln=fr&v=pdf>; last accessed 5 February 2026.

<sup>94</sup>See the UN Economic and Social Council Sixteenth Session (705th meeting [opening meeting]), official records, 30 June 1953. Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/824595?v=pdf>; last accessed 5 February 2026.

<sup>95</sup>Wang, *Huoyue zai renmin waijiao wutai shang*, p. 54.

<sup>96</sup>“Il congresso sindacale mondiale”, *Mondo operaio*, pp. 8–9 (CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio internazionale, file 66, folder 3a).

<sup>97</sup>Wang, *Huoyue zai renmin waijiao wutai shang*, pp. 55–56.

of peace over the forces of war and of reaction.”<sup>98</sup> Reinforcing this assessment, Liu Ningyi delivered a speech about peace and the easing of international tensions, albeit cautioning vigilance in the face of the “enemies of peace.”<sup>99</sup>

The Chinese delegation took advantage of the international platform provided by the WFTU Congress to make connections with representatives of different national trade union centres. While these outreach efforts centred on Asia, the delegation also hoped to open relations with African and Latin American trade unions (using friendship at a personal level as a first step) to lay the ground for further exchanges with both WFTU member and non-member organizations.<sup>100</sup> It was also following this Congress (and thanks to China’s participation in the WFTU) that bilateral contacts between Chinese and West European trade union leaders developed: for instance, Liu Ningyi (together with Liu Changsheng) travelled to Italy in 1956 to attend the Fourth National Congress of the CGIL, as reported in the *Renmin Ribao* (People’s Daily) on 17 February 1956. This suggests that the WFTU has been an important meeting place for member unions to expand their network of contacts and organize further trips and delegation exchanges.

However, despite the desire for unity expressed in the Congress’s statements and resolutions, opinions on what that meant and how to get there varied. Members of the WFTU had a range of views on the tasks, strategies, and orientation that the international workers’ movement ought to adopt. The proper relationship between the World Federation and national trade union centres was also subject to debate. This was particularly felt by the Chinese, who, shortly after the end of the Third Congress, drafted a document for internal discussion entitled “Some suggestions and opinions on the WFTU’s work” (*Dui shijie gonglian gongzuo de yixie jianyi he yijian*), with input from Liu Changsheng. The document was divided into ten points, mainly revolving around the necessity of fully recognizing the specific situations in each country and adhering to the principle of labour movements’ autonomy in determining their policy approaches in different areas of the world. It called for refraining from imposing uniformity based on the European experience. In particular, the document advocated for diversifying programmes between European and colonial/semicolonial countries. It likewise emphasized the united front and the role of peasants – issues that had also been central to the Chinese Revolution.<sup>101</sup> This was a matter Liu Shaoqi had raised in a speech to the Chinese delegation attending the Third World Congress, in which he critiqued the Federation’s working methods, centralized control, and the fact that the WFTU required its decisions to be strictly binding on member organizations.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, when Liu Shaoqi issued his instructions to the Chinese delegation, he is reported to have said that “the WFTU is only playing the role of beating gongs and sounding drums” (*Shijie*

<sup>98</sup> *Résolution sur le Troisième point de l’ordre du jour. “Le développement du mouvement syndical dans les pays coloniaux et semi-coloniaux”*, p. 2 (CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio internazionale, file 66, folder 3a).

<sup>99</sup> *Intervention par Liu Ning-I, 12 Oct. 1953, Vienne* (CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio internazionale, file 66, folder 3a).

<sup>100</sup> Wang, *Huoyue zai renmin waijiao wutai shang*, pp. 55–56.

<sup>101</sup> *Idem*, pp. 57–59; Zhong, *Zhongguo gongyun lishi renwu zhuanlue*, cit.; see also Wang, *Dangdai Zhongguo gongren jieji he gonghui yundong jishi*, p. 80.

<sup>102</sup> Wang, *Huoyue zai renmin waijiao wutai shang*, p. 55.

*gonglian zhishi qi qiaoluodagu de zuoyong*)<sup>103</sup>: that is, the WFTU was an essentially self-congratulatory organization.

To ensure that their proposals would be accepted, the Chinese representatives submitted the document outlining their suggestions to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) on 18 March 1954, keeping Soviet trade unions informed. A few days later, on 23 March, a session of the Executive Bureau was held in Vienna to discuss the WFTU work plan for that year. Liu Ningyi and Liu Changsheng gave a speech proposing some revisions based on the main points elaborated in the aforementioned document, with positive feedback from representatives of Italy's CGIL, the USSR's ACCTU, and Indonesia's SOBSI, among others. According to Chinese sources, on 12 April 1954, the CCP delegation attending Sino-Soviet party talks in Moscow was joined by trade union leaders such as Liu Ningyi and Liu Changsheng, who discussed the content of the Chinese proposals with their Soviet counterparts. The Chinese pointed out that the outline document was primarily concerned with the workers' movement in Asia, but included guidelines potentially applicable to Africa and Latin America.<sup>104</sup>

At the same time – and as China began to increasingly engage with Asian non-member organizations (regardless of their political affiliations) – the policy to be adopted towards autonomous non-aligned trade unions began to gain attention within the WFTU. During this period, China had established relations with several independent non-affiliated trade unions, such as the General Council of Trade Union of Japan<sup>105</sup> and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). Albert Monk, president of the ACTU and board member of the ICFTU, would lead a trade union group's visit to China in 1957, violating the ICFTU policy of non-interaction with communist-controlled trade unions.<sup>106</sup>

In point of fact, Stalin's death gradually paved the way for all communist front organizations to make a tactical shift. Albeit with varying degrees of success, they now attempted the move towards a more moderate and pluralistic approach, relaxing strict centralized control and providing for more autonomy (probably, as Cornell put it in relation to youth organizations, in deference to Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and Latin American groups from newly independent countries).<sup>107</sup> As such, new possibilities opened up for the Chinese to make their voices heard.

This context must be borne in mind when interpreting Chinese activism within the WFTU during the mid-1950s, characterized by an interest in shaping the Federation's work on issues concerning colonial and semicolonial countries. On the one hand, this demonstrated the importance China placed on the interests of colonial, semicolonial, and newly independent countries in the Third World, presenting its own historical experience as instructive for trade union movements in these regions. On the other

<sup>103</sup> Chen *et al.*, "Liu Shaoqi dui guoji gongyun he Zhongguo gonghui guoji huodong de lishixing gongxian", p. 34.

<sup>104</sup> Wang, *Huoyue zai renmin waijiao wutaishang*, pp. 59–60.

<sup>105</sup> *Rapport d'activité de la Fédération Syndicale Mondiale (Novembre 1953–Juin 1957)* (1957), s.1, p. 180.

<sup>106</sup> Devinatz, "A Cold War Thaw in the International Working-Class Movement", p. 353.

<sup>107</sup> Richard Cornell, *Youth and Communism: An Historical Analysis of International Communist Youth Movements* (New York, 1965), pp. 97–99.

hand, the call to account for the specific characteristics of these countries when devising a strategy for the workers' movement was closely tied to China's broader aspirations with respect to the extra-European world at a time of profound international change (marked, since 1954, by the acceleration of decolonization process). As such, it subtly revealed China's efforts to shape the agenda and carve out its own space of action vis-à-vis the USSR within the framework of the alliance, perhaps anticipating its subsequent desire to re-assess the traditional leadership role of the Soviet Union and assert itself as the standard bearer of the global communist movement.

### China's Re-Evaluation of Its Positions on the Backdrop of Sino–Soviet Divergences

After the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU (1956), Sino–Soviet divergences started to hinder collaboration, ending up in open disputes with significant repercussions – directly felt within the WFTU – for the world communist movement.

In 1957, war and peace had started to emerge as central issues in the unfolding debate, driving a wedge between Moscow and Beijing. Radical changes in China's domestic policy gradually led to a shift in foreign policy towards "revolutionization".<sup>108</sup> Ultimately, this approach would draw the country into isolation and irrelevance on the international stage despite its growing confidence, in the 1960s, in the capacity of maoism to inspire and guide revolutions worldwide.<sup>109</sup>

At the Moscow conference of World Communist Parties (November 1957), a turning point in Sino–Soviet relations, Mao expressed his reservations about the policy of "peaceful coexistence" (and peaceful transition to socialism) then being promoted by the new Soviet leadership, pointing instead to the need for a firmer response to imperialism and the inevitability of war – a position that caused bewilderment among the delegates.<sup>110</sup> Disagreements on fundamental theoretical issues would intensify over the following years not just with the Soviet leadership, but also with the leaders of other European Communist parties, including the Italian one.<sup>111</sup>

The radicalization of Chinese domestic politics, heralded by the launch of the Great Leap Forward and the search for a more autonomous road to communism, went in tandem with Mao's growing sense of moral superiority. He sought for China a more authoritative status within the "socialist family", eventually viewing the USSR (having given up on class struggle) as unfit for this role.<sup>112</sup> As Sino–Soviet relations deteriorated,

<sup>108</sup>Niu Jun, "The Transformation of Chinese Foreign Policy and Its impact on East Asia: International Patterns in the 1950s", in Uyama Tomohiko (ed.), *Empire and After: Essays in Comparative Imperial and Decolonization Studies* (Sapporo, 2012).

<sup>109</sup>John Garver, *China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China* (Oxford, 2016); Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History* (London, 2019).

<sup>110</sup>Shen Zhihua and Xia Yafeng, "Hidden Currents during the Honeymoon: Mao, Khrushchev, and the 1957 Moscow Conference", *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 11:4 (2009), pp. 74–117; Odd Arne Westad, *Restless Empire: China and the World since 1750* (New York, 2012), p. 330.

<sup>111</sup>Guido Samarani and Sofia Graziani, "The Communist Party of Italy and People's China: Political Ties and Exchanges", *Lengzhen guoji shi yanjiu*, 19:20 (2015), pp. 5–29; Alexander Hobel, "Il PCI nella crisi del movimento comunista internazionale tra PCUS e PCC (1960–1964)", *Studi Storici*, 46:2 (2005), pp. 542–555.

<sup>112</sup>Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, pp. 145–162.

reaching a point of no return in 1960, China's foreign policy took a militant posture, attempting to counterbalance its growing international marginality with increased activism toward the Third World, which became the terrain of ideological competition between Beijing and Moscow.<sup>113</sup> Concretely, the Sino-Soviet dispute led China to seek new support and allies (both inside and outside the international communist movement) and to more energetically position itself as an example for revolutionaries around the world, the only true representative of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. Bolstering the communist parties and rebellions ("wars of national liberation") in Asia, Africa, and Latin America was a key part of this evolving strategy.<sup>114</sup>

Amidst worsening relations, Soviet-sponsored international organizations became outposts of the struggle between the two Communist parties. Chinese and Soviet representatives within the International Union of Students and the World Federation of Democratic Youth, for instance, took opposing positions. A good example of the widening Sino-Soviet gulf is provided by the contrasting views on peace articulated at the IUS meeting held in Beijing in September 1958.<sup>115</sup> Simmering disagreements on colonialism and national independence movements reached a boiling point when in the early 1960s, the Chinese urged active struggle for national liberation and openly attacked the Soviet representatives for prioritizing instead the maintenance of peace and disarmament as a way to achieve national independence and remove imperialist and neo-colonialist dominance.<sup>116</sup>

These tensions became evident at the 1960 WFTU General Council meeting in Beijing, the main themes of which were international developments, the current tasks for the labour movement, and workers' struggle against colonialism.<sup>117</sup> A crucial moment in Sino-Soviet relations,<sup>118</sup> the meeting also signalled a new chapter in the history of China's WFTU participation, as serious contrasts (especially over the issue of peace and the policy of peaceful coexistence) emerged and gained strength within the Federation in the following years.<sup>119</sup>

Peaceful coexistence was not the only area of disagreement in the WFTU around this time, as the WFTU's Fourth World Congress, held in Leipzig in 1957, made apparent. The Congress, in which many independent organizations from Africa and Asia had participated as observers, saw important divergences emerging on the issue of the unity of the international workers' movement, with different opinions on the policy to be adopted towards autonomous non-aligned trade unions. In his

<sup>113</sup>Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015), pp. 115–131.

<sup>114</sup>See for instance, Peter Van Ness, *Revolution and Chinese Foreign Policy: Peking's Support for the Wars of National Liberation* (Berkeley, CA, 1973).

<sup>115</sup>Gongqingtuan zhongyang guoji lianluobu (ed.), *Bulage de huiyi. Canyu guoji xuelian gongzuo ershinian, 1947 nian–1966 nian* [Prague's Recollections: Participation in the International Union of Students, 1947–1966] (Beijing, 2008), pp. 99–100.

<sup>116</sup>Cornell, *Youth and Communism*, pp. 128–135.

<sup>117</sup>*11th Session of the General Council of the W.F.T.U. Peking – June 1960 Reports and Resolutions* (London), International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

<sup>118</sup>Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*; Shen Zhihua (ed.), *ZhongSu guanxi shigang* [Historical Outline of Sino-Soviet Relations] (Beijing, 2011), pp. 298–303; Li and Xia, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Split*.

<sup>119</sup>Devinatz, "A Cold War Thaw in the International Working-Class Movement", pp. 357–364.

speech, Liu Changsheng had stressed the importance of overcoming the divisions in the international trade union movement, by strengthening dialogue with groups of various political tendencies as well as autonomous trade unions that emerged in Asia and Africa as a consequence of the awakening of the national liberation movement and the development of a political trend towards neutrality at the international level.<sup>120</sup> This call was apparently in line with the positions of the Italian Confederation of Trade Unions (including both communist and socialist unions) and would set the WFTU on new course, despite resistance from the Soviet and French representatives.<sup>121</sup>

Preceded by the traditional May Day celebrations (which had brought to China the largest number of representatives from trade unions in Africa and Latin America to date),<sup>122</sup> the 1960 Beijing WFTU meeting took place between 5 and 9 June. It was attended by 120 delegates with a range of political backgrounds hailing from more than fifty countries, including many Italians.<sup>123</sup> Besides Liu Ningyi (then president of the ACFTU), Liu Changsheng was among the members of the Chinese delegation. He would later be remembered not only for his prominent role in the struggle against modern “revisionism”, but for voicing the Chinese trade unions’ position on the question of war and peace. Undermining the “peaceful coexistence” and disarmament endorsed by the USSR, he spoke critically of the “illusion of peace”.<sup>124</sup>

Similarly to Liu Ningyi, whose remarks on unity implied a sharp and uncompromising break from imperialist forces (old and new) and singled out US imperialism as the main enemy of peace,<sup>125</sup> Liu Changsheng stated that while China had always valued peaceful coexistence between nations, it was imperative to distinguish between different kinds of war before deciding on an approach to the issue. He reiterated that while imperialism endured, so too would the inevitability of war.<sup>126</sup> Liu Changsheng’s speech thus expressed disagreement with the content of the draft resolution emphasizing the

<sup>120</sup>“Intervento di Liu Chiang Cen”, in *Per l’Unità sindacale mondiale*, Quaderni CGIL, Editrice Lavoro [Fondazione Gramsci, Archivio Novella, mf. 0153, pp. 0184-0195, in particular pp. 0193-0194]. The Chinese text appeared in *Renmin Ribao*, 8 August 1957, p. 6 (“Liu Changsheng zai shijie gonghui daibiaodahui shang hu gongtong nuli cujin guoji gonghui tuanjie”).

<sup>121</sup>CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio internazionale, file 69, folder 4. See Siracusano’s paper in this Special Issue for an analysis of the CGIL position.

<sup>122</sup>A document kept in the Shanghai Municipal Archives reports exceptionally broad African and Latin American representation (Shanghai Municipal Archives, C1-2-3461-76).

<sup>123</sup>Wang, *Dangdai Zhongguo gongren jieji he gonghui yundong jishi*, p. 229; “Guanyu jiedai shijie gonglian dishiyi ci lishi huiyi waibing de zongjihua, mingdan, richengbiao, zhuyishixiang, zongjie deng wenjian” (Shanghai Municipal Archives, C1-2-3468). According to another document from the Shanghai Federation, it seems that attendance was broader, with 212 participants from 60 countries (Shanghai Municipal Archives, C1-2-3468-112).

<sup>124</sup>Liu Xiao *et al.* “Zhongguo gongren jieji de jianqiang zhanshi – Huainian Liu Changsheng tongzhi”, *Shenqie huainian Liu Changsheng tongzhi*, s.l. e.s.n. (1979), pp. 14–21, in particular pp. 18–19.

<sup>125</sup>Liu Ning-I, “Working Class Must Wage Firm Struggle against Revisionism, Workers’ Movement Should Stand in the Anti-Imperialist Front”, *Peking Review*, 24 (1960), pp. 10–13.

<sup>126</sup>Fondazione Gramsci, Archivio Novella, mf. 0153, p. 1356. A summary of his speech “On the Question of War and Peace” was published in English in the 14 June edition of *Peking Review*, 24 (1960).

principle of peaceful coexistence. It was met with the warm applause and support of several delegates from Asian, African, and Latin American countries.<sup>127</sup>

As Lorenz Lüthi states, the Chinese took advantage of the momentum of the U-2 incident and the abortive Paris meeting to advance their ideological agenda. Their radicalism, aimed as it was at forcing the Chinese line into the WFTU and bringing Sino–Soviet disagreements out of party-to-party relations, triggered widespread alarm and anger, especially among the Soviets (who would retaliate at the subsequent Romanian Party Congress in Bucharest and decide to recall the Soviet advisers in China in July).<sup>128</sup>

Problems arose even before the work of the General Council began, when, as noted by Yan Mingfu (the Chinese interpreter who witnessed the entire event) the Chinese tried unsuccessfully to present their views to the Soviets and other representatives of communist and workers' parties behind closed doors. When the attempt failed, the Chinese launched an active campaign to contact representatives of a variety of foreign trade unions to propagate their views,<sup>129</sup> finding support among the Indonesians and a few other unionists.<sup>130</sup> In his remarks at a 6 June banquet organized for all WFTU delegates, Premier Zhou Enlai lambasted proponents of “peaceful coexistence”, asserting that “peace can never be obtained by begging the imperialists for it”.<sup>131</sup>

Novella later reported that the Chinese delegation took issue with the WFTU draft report prepared by the General Secretary and awaiting the approval of the General Council: the Chinese delegates not only criticized the possibility of avoiding the war and the policy of disarmament but also expressed their reserve on the policy of Western aid to developing countries. Specifically, they wanted a statement on the inevitability of the war to be added to the text. Novella had many other discussions with the Chinese delegates, including a private talk, probably with Liu Ningyi. On one such occasion, Novella was indirectly accused of protecting “revisionism” when he lodged complaints about China’s position.<sup>132</sup> Although a compromise was eventually reached thanks to the intervention of moderate CCP leader Wang Jiaoxiang (then director of the International Liaison Department), which allowed China to vote on the final resolution, the meeting ended on a bad note.<sup>133</sup> To ease tensions (and given the fact that the trade union meeting was not a Communist Party gathering but involved delegates with diverse political backgrounds), after the closure of the WFTU Council meeting, Zhou Enlai held a banquet in the Great Hall of the People, inviting all delegations on a

<sup>127</sup> Shen, *ZhongSu guanxi shigang*, p. 300; and Yan, *Yan Mingfu huiyilu*, part 2, p. 555.

<sup>128</sup> Lüthi, *The Sino–Soviet Split*, pp. 167–168, 177.

<sup>129</sup> Yan Mingfu, “1960 nian shijie gonglian Beijing huiyi qinli ji” [Personal Account of the 1960 World Federation of Trade Unions’ Conference in Beijing], *Bainian chao*, 6 (2007), pp. 21–26 (in particular, p. 24).

<sup>130</sup> Hearman, “Indonesian Trade Unionists”, p. 40.

<sup>131</sup> “Premier Chou En-lai’s Speech at Banquet In Honour of W.F.T.U. Delegates”, *Peking Review*, 24 (1960), p. 9. Also quoted in Shen, *ZhongSu guanxi shigang*, pp. 299–300.

<sup>132</sup> “Intervento di Novella” (Fondazione Gramsci, Archivi PCI, Verbali direzione, 24 June 1960, mf. 024).

<sup>133</sup> Lüthi, *The Sino–Soviet Split*, p. 168.

tour of China.<sup>134</sup> An offer that would bring a handful of delegates, mainly from Africa and Latin America, to Shanghai.<sup>135</sup>

The foreigners in Beijing found themselves in a tense and dramatic atmosphere, as articles about and interviews with participants appearing in Italy soon after their return attest. An internal document of the Shanghai Federation of Trade Unions about the reception of the foreign guests records an unstable situation: it used the term “chaos” (*hunluan*) to describe their ideological makeup, noting that “there is distance between them [foreign guests] and us with regard to peace, the army, coexistence, anti-imperialism and modern revisionism”.<sup>136</sup>

Yet, the Chinese press coverage of the 1960 meeting was positive. The CCP newspaper *Renmin Ribao* dedicated numerous articles to it, impressing upon domestic audiences its importance and depicting it as a success for the Chinese position. Through such coverage and widely circulated speeches, the CCP used the WFTU meeting to convince the Chinese public of the value of struggling against US imperialism and modern revisionists, described as “new tools of imperialism” who “do not distinguish between socialism and capitalism”, thereby “wearing down the revolutionary spirit of the working class, paralyzing its revolutionary will, and dismantling its spiritual armament”.<sup>137</sup> The meeting was also used to convey the message that “peaceful coexistence” between oppressed people and imperialism was impossible and to call for solidarity with the colonized world. Reporting the contents of the speeches of delegates from colonial countries, a *Renmin Ribao* article of 8 June 1960 concluded with a statement attributed to a foreign delegate: “China is an increasingly powerful force for world peace, and for colonized countries and peoples who have not yet achieved independence, China is a guarantee of victory.”<sup>138</sup> The newspaper thus linked China’s prestige to the struggle of oppressed peoples and projected its aspiration to guide revolutions abroad – this at a time when the Chinese foreign policy vision was moving beyond Cold War bipolarity and CCP leadership (Mao in particular) was becoming increasingly anxious about sustaining the revolution at home.

### Toward the Abandonment of the WFTU

As Sino–Soviet polemics intensified from 1963 onward, China’s attacks escalated, winning the support of the Albanians and few others. The Federation itself soon came under harsh criticism for acting as a tool of Soviet foreign policy.<sup>139</sup>

Meanwhile, small WFTU delegations continued to visit China for May Day celebrations, providing Beijing with opportunities to cultivate personal ties and repeat

<sup>134</sup> Yan, “1960 nian shijie gonglian Beijing huiyi qinli ji”.

<sup>135</sup> Shanghai Municipal Archives, C1-2-3468-75. Many delegates, including a few Italians, did not participate, leaving China soon after the end of the WFTU meeting as a sign of protest against the Chinese attack [Laura De Giorgi and Gilda Zazzara (eds), *Giuseppe Regis, Diario cinese 1957–1961* (Venice, 2025), p. 114].

<sup>136</sup> “Guanyu shijie gonglian dishiyici lishi huiyi waibing qingkuang”, 7 July 1960 (Shanghai Municipal Archives, C1-2–3468-1).

<sup>137</sup> See *Renmin Ribao*, 8 June 1960, p. 1.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>139</sup> An approach that clearly emerged in accounts of Italian trade unionists visiting China at that time (“Note di Francisconi sulla visita in Cina”, 1964, Fondazione Gramsci, Archivio Novella, mf. 0154).

their call for unity and joint anti-imperialist efforts. In May 1963, a two-member delegation led by Ibrahim Zakaria – then WFTU secretary and a member of the Sudanese Communist Party – visited Beijing and Shanghai. Local trade unions were informed that despite Zakaria's general alignment with the Soviet Union, his views were strongly anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist and on certain issues diverged from Soviet positions.

Although officially a routine visit meant to project a façade of unity and friendship, the Chinese considered it important. As secretary responsible for African affairs, Zakaria was to assess China's approach and could potentially influence activities among Asian, African, and Latin American representatives. The ACFTU therefore issued guidelines to the local cadres tasked with receiving the delegation: they were to focus on Zakaria's anti-imperialist positions, avoid contentious matters, and treat him as they would any foreign guest – despite his earlier “uneasiness” towards the Chinese.<sup>140</sup>

At a moment when anti-colonialism was becoming increasingly central to the WFTU, China used the Federation to gain the political support of delegates from the “Third World” as part of its broader effort to dominate Afro-Asian affairs by “taking advantage of nationalism and even racism among Afro-Asian people”.<sup>141</sup> In June 1963, as the CCP's African networks were also expanding via alternative platforms like the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization (AAPSO), the party issued its *Proposals concerning the general line of the International Communist Movement*, criticizing the CPSU for disregarding the historical significance of anti-imperialist struggles in Asia, Africa, and Latin America and for aligning with the interests of imperialism.<sup>142</sup>

This perspective came across clearly during a consultative meeting convened in July 1963 by the WFTU Secretariat and involving affiliated trade union organizations from Africa and Asia. The meeting was aimed at discussing an Afro-Asian trade union conference to be held in Jakarta at the initiative of the Indonesians (SOBSI). The Soviets had not been invited to the preparatory committee, and tensions ran high. Chinese delegate Liu Changsheng strongly supported the Indonesian initiative and implied that the Soviets sought to obstruct the revolutionary struggles of the peoples of Asia and Africa. The hostility reached its peak when the Chinese delegate, invoking the shared history and the common suffering of the peoples of Asia and Africa under colonial oppression, stressed that the priority for workers in these regions was the anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist struggle for national independence. He stated that:

for many years, the imperialists have slandered us, saying that we are uncultured, ignorant, and backward – that we must live forever at the dependence of the ‘aid’ from advanced countries [...]. And now, [...] instead of expressing sympathy and support for the demands of the peoples of Asia and Africa, some people have spoken in a tone similar to the imperialists.

<sup>140</sup> Shanghai Municipal Archives, C1-2-4362-24

<sup>141</sup> Li and Xia, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Split*, p. 218.

<sup>142</sup> Joshua Eisenman, “Comrades-in-Arms: The Chinese Communist Party's Relations with African Political Organizations in the Mao Era, 1949–76”, *Cold War History*, 18:4 (2018), pp. 6–11.

His words were interrupted by Secretary General Saillant, who called them a scandal and requested that they be kept unrecorded.<sup>143</sup> A year later, at the 1964 General Council meeting in Budapest, Saillant criticized both the Indonesian members of SOBSI and the Chinese for advocating the replacement of peaceful coexistence with “confrontation to defeat the imperialists”.<sup>144</sup>

The Sixth Congress of the WFTU, held in Warsaw in 1965 (8–22 October), offered the Chinese trade unionists’ delegation, led by Kang Yonghe, another opportunity for advancing their views; an opposition bloc comprising the Chinese, Albanian, Indonesian, and Korean delegations coalesced.<sup>145</sup> Kang Yonghe, who had entered the Executive Committee of the WFTU a few years before and would soon ascend to the vice presidency of the ACFTU,<sup>146</sup> commented on the favourable development of the international situation, citing the wave of national revolutions in Asia, Africa, and Latin America and stressing the importance of the workers’ struggle for defeating US imperialism. He criticized those upholding the “peaceful coexistence” line for “downplaying the historical scope and role of the national liberation movements” and “opposing armed struggle of the people of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.” After pointing out the two diametrically opposed positions within the WFTU (that is, the pro-China and pro-Soviet camps),<sup>147</sup> he asked the Congress to reaffirm that class struggle was the only path to victory for the cause of the international working class – in vain.<sup>148</sup>

As Italian communist trade union leader and former WFTU president Novella remarked upon his return to Italy, contrasts with the Chinese on the questions of American imperialism, armed struggle, and peaceful coexistence remained significant, as evidenced by the Chinese delegation’s vote against the final documents of the Congress and their request that decisions be adopted by unanimity rather than by majority vote (which they polemically described as a method of imposing decisions on them). Similar observations are recorded in a note by the CGIL International Office.<sup>149</sup>

The “rupture” in the relationship between Chinese trade unions and the WFTU finally materialized at the Sixteenth Session of the General Council, held in Sofia between 6 and 9 December 1966. China was by then in the midst of the Cultural Revolution. The ACFTU’s leading organs would soon fall under attack by revolutionary rebels, and its activities would be formally suspended in January 1967.<sup>150</sup> During

<sup>143</sup> CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio internazionale, file 100, folder 72.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> Devinatz, “A Cold War Thaw in the International Working-Class Movement”, p. 359.

<sup>146</sup> Zhonggong Zhongyuan zuzhibu *et al.*, *Zhongguo gongchandang zuzhishi ziliao*, vol. 19, p. 18; Wang, *Dangdai Zhongguo gongren jieji he gonghui yundong jishi*, p. 314.

<sup>147</sup> He schematically divided them into two groups: one in favour of anti-imperialism and class struggle and the other prioritizing peaceful coexistence, defined as an “erroneous” capitulation to imperialism.

<sup>148</sup> *VI Congrès Syndicale Mondiale. Compte-rendue des travaux Varsovie 8–22 octobre 1965*, Fédération Syndicale Mondiale, pp. 295–302, 300 (CGIL National Historical Archives, FSM VI Congress, file 73, folder 6a).

<sup>149</sup> See CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio internazionale, file 75, folder 6b and 6d; *VI Congrès Syndical Mondial. Compte-rendu des travaux, Varsovie 8–22 octobre 1965*, pp. 52–53 (CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio internazionale, file 73 folder 6a).

<sup>150</sup> Lee Lai To, *Trade Unions in China*, pp. 110–119; Zhonggong zhongyuan zuzhibu *et al.*, *Zhongguo gongchandang zuzhishi ziliao*, vol. 19, p. 283.

the course of the meeting, the Chinese representatives were barred from speaking and attending, and China eventually severed ties with the WFTU.

According to the report prepared by Novella,<sup>151</sup> the Chinese delegation was composed of thirteen people (of which only one member, Han Haiya,<sup>152</sup> had been elected at the Sixth Congress, in 1965). The others were all unknowns in the world of organized labour. They were likely assumed to have been plucked from the ranks of the Red Guard organizations that had been established starting in the summer of that year (by which time, news had arrived that Liu Ningyi was under attack by the Red Guard in Beijing).<sup>153</sup> Indeed, according to the report, the delegation claimed to represent the Red Guard Movement and the Cultural Revolution.

The meeting was occasioned by open conflict between the Chinese bloc and the pro-Soviet leaders. The Chinese delegates soon levied what Novella described as an “unprecedented accusation”, denouncing the “revisionist clique that runs the USSR and is in cahoots with the US imperialists”. At this point, the chair resorted to procedural rules to remove the Chinese delegate from the floor – but the delegate persisted, forcing the president to adjourn the session. Work resumed after an hour’s intermission and Chinese delegate Han Haiya remained at the forum, stating that he would continue to speak. When President Renato Bitossi attempted to bring the comments to a halt by calling Italian trade unionist Lama to speak, a “violent collision” ensued. The next day, the Chinese delegation proposed what was seen as an “untenable line”, namely a revision of the statute that would sanction a transformation of the WFTU into an organization dedicated to armed struggle.

In view of these attacks on the USSR and controversial positions, on 7 December, the WFTU presidency instructed the secretariat to look into the reasons behind the Chinese delegates’ attitudes and clarify their membership status. The Chinese delegates were suspended the next day, losing their right to representation at the General Council due to their inappropriate behaviour.<sup>154</sup>

The decision to strip the Chinese of their right to participation was not, however, unanimous. The Chinese delegates challenged the validity and legitimacy of the ruling and gained the support of the Vietnamese, North Korean, and Indonesian representatives.<sup>155</sup> The Cuban, Romanian, and Venezuelan delegates also voted against the

<sup>151</sup>Agostino Novella, “Riassunto delle fasi più importanti della crisi che si è verificata nel consiglio generale della FSM con la delegazione cinese (Sofia, 6–9 Dicembre 1966)”, 20 December 1966 (CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio internazionale, file 86, folder 18).

<sup>152</sup>He was probably referring to Han Hsi-Ya, who is mentioned among the alternate members elected at the 1965 Congress (CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio internazionale, file 73, folder 6a).

<sup>153</sup>According to Bartke, Liu Ningyi was attacked by the Red Guards and later purged, being labeled a “counter-revolutionary revisionist” (Bartke, *Biographical Dictionary and Analysis of China’s Party Leadership*, p. 131). Yet, other sources reported that he was a staunch follower of the Maoist revolutionary line and appeared to be a member of the CCP CC Secretariat in 1967. He was most probably attacked in early 1968 (Harper, “The Party and the Unions in Communist China”, p. 118).

<sup>154</sup>“Decisione del Consiglio Generale FSM”, 7 December 1966, CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio internazionale, file 86, folder 18.

<sup>155</sup>Devinatz’s brief account based on the ICFTU sources does not mention the Indonesian trade union. Devinatz, “A Cold War Thaw in the International Working-Class Movement”, pp. 360–361.

resolution, fearing that the suspension would threaten the WFTU unity. The exclusion of the Chinese delegation incited immediate conflict; the Albanians launched a protest, were forcibly removed from the conference room, and refused to attend the afternoon session.<sup>156</sup> The work of the General Council thus resumed the day after without the Chinese. Moreover, according to Devinatz, while the Chinese delegation did travel to Budapest a few days later for the WFTU World Economic Conference (14–17 December 1966), they chose not to attend the meeting as a sign of protest.<sup>157</sup> The rift between China and the WFTU reached its point of no return with a letter of protest sent by the ACFTU on 31 December. Attached was a “declaration”, dated 30 December, which denounced the 16th session of the General Council of the WFTU (accused of being controlled by “Soviet revisionists”) for the illegal decision to exclude the Chinese delegation. Chinese trade unions had always fought against both US imperialism and the modern revisionism represented by the USSR, the document continued, and supported the struggles of oppressed nations and peoples for emancipation worldwide. Meanwhile, the document alleged, Soviet trade union leaders had long sought to divide the international labour movement and make the WFTU the docile instrument of a foreign policy of collaboration with the US, aimed ultimately at world domination.<sup>158</sup>

On 4 January 1967, as news of the dissolution of the ACFTU reached Europe, WFTU Secretary General Louis Saillant gave an interview. He pointed to such developments in China as justification for the position arrived at in the sixteenth session of the General Council, and observed that Chinese trade unions were in the midst of “a very serious crisis”: “Should the news of the dissolution of the Federation of Trade Unions of China and the closure of its headquarters prove to be true, the WFTU will protest energetically against this brutal attack on trade union rights in the People’s Republic of China.”<sup>159</sup> According to French trade union leader Benoit Frachon, the dissolution of the ACFTU was “so extraordinary, so contradictory to the norms of life and politics of a socialist country [...] a profound mistake”. Recalling the Sofia meeting, he relayed the general impression that the Chinese representatives (who were mostly unfamiliar faces to the members of the WFTU) had left on the rest of the attendees: “a Red Guard commando”, lacking knowledge of the labour movement.<sup>160</sup>

Conversely, according to a *Xinhua* dispatch in Italian (12 December) received by the CGIL, the Chinese delegation had “triumphantly returned to Beijing”, “after having rejected the attacks against the great Chinese working class and the people of China from Soviet revisionists”, being warmly welcomed by more than one thousand workers and trade unions leaders. The *Xinhua*’s dispatch reported the speech made by Ma Chunchu (Ma Chungu), a trade unionist sent to Prague in 1957 to work as secretary for the WFTU and who had served as vice president of the ACFTU from 1962.<sup>161</sup>

<sup>156</sup>Novella, “Riassunto delle fasi più importanti”, cit. Chinese sources also include Japan and Ceylon among those that opposed the proposal (see Wang, *Huoyue zai renmin waijiao wutaishang*, p. 139).

<sup>157</sup>Devinatz, “A Cold War Thaw in the International Working-Class Movement”, p. 361.

<sup>158</sup>CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio internazionale, file 86, folder 18.

<sup>159</sup>“Louis Saillant exprime l’inquiétude de la F.S.M sur la situation des syndicats en Chine”, *Huma*, 5 January 1967 (CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio internazionale, file 86, folder 18).

<sup>160</sup>“Après la dissolution de la Fédération de syndicats chinoise. Une interview de Benoit Frachon”, *Huma*, 21 February 1967 (CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio internazionale, file 86, folder 18).

<sup>161</sup>Wang, *Dangdai Zhongguo gongren jieji he gonghui yundong jishi*, p. 171.

The dispatch contended that the split within the WFTU and “the development of new waves of anti-China hysteria” had made it increasingly clear that the Soviets were, at their core, “renegades and traitors, anti-China, anti-communist, anti-people, and counter-revolutionary”. It extolled the “firm proletarian attitude” and the “courageous and indomitable fighting spirit” displayed by the members of the delegation during the “struggle” and then quoted the following words of Ma Chungu: “Perhaps all this will force the Chinese working class to refrain from the struggle against imperialism and revisionism? No, a thousand times, ten thousand times no! We are convinced that the international working class will ‘purify’ its ranks and throw this handful of renegades and traitors into the dustbin of history.” Finally, the dispatch relayed the words of the head of the delegation: during the “victorious struggle against modern revisionism”, the Chinese delegation had drawn strength from the “invincible thinking of Mao”.<sup>162</sup> The *Xinhua* dispatch was probably intended to inspire the Italian pro-Maoist groups active in the translation and circulation of Chinese propaganda materials in Italy.<sup>163</sup> In any case, it is emblematic of contemporary Chinese “propaganda of internationalism”, characterized by stories highlighting Mao’s and the Red Guards’ global impact, often featuring references to Mao’s detractors, and meant to simultaneously propel the revolution domestically.<sup>164</sup>

In the throes of the Cultural Revolution, as Mao pushed his revolutionary with unprecedented energy upon audiences both in China and abroad, the dramatic distance that had emerged between the Chinese and the majority of leaders affiliated to the international communist workers’ movement became undeniable. This was a process that had been underway since the early 1960s, when the Chinese attack of Soviet “revisionism” went hand in hand with upheavals at home and a new revolutionary activism abroad. This new activism entailed forging ties with nascent radical Maoist groups in Western countries, propagating the Maoist model worldwide, and sustaining communist parties and rebellions in the Third World. In such a context, the conventional infrastructures of socialist and communist internationalism had lost all significance for Mao’s China and its ambitions.

## Conclusions

During the Cold War, socialist-leaning international organizations became hubs in a heterogeneous transnational socialist network that was both global and anti-colonial. As Mikuláš Pešta has pointed out, they provided privileged spaces for a variety of non-state actors (though the relationship of member organizations to their states varied depending on the national context) across blocs and from the “Third World” to interact, articulate their positions, and promote their respective agendas, despite generally adhering to the Soviet stance.<sup>165</sup> Chinese groups and activists participated in

<sup>162</sup>“Giunta a Pechino la delegazione cinese alla riunione del consiglio generale della FSM” (CGIL National Historical Archives, Ufficio internazionale, file 86, folder 18).

<sup>163</sup>See, for example, Tiziana Lioi, “People and Words: Spaces of Circulations and Political Encounters in the Experience of Edizioni Oriente (1963–79)”, *Annali di Ca’ Foscari. Serie Orientale*, 61 (2025), pp. 97–130.

<sup>164</sup>Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History*, pp. 142–143.

<sup>165</sup>Pešta, “A Hub of Anti-Colonialism”, pp. 492–513.

these internationalist structures from their early days, leaving a mark on the agendas and discussions they hosted and contributing to the construction of transnational networks.

This article has considered the international space of labour, tracing the history of Chinese trade unions' involvement in the WFTU from the early phase of mutual collaboration to the later deterioration in relations and recontextualizing labour diplomacy as a crucial component of the PRC's international activism during the early Cold War. In doing so, it has highlighted Maoist China's agency in the international trade union movement and its perspective on anti-colonial movements and the struggle against imperialism. The article therefore seeks to contribute to improved understanding of the PRC's foreign relations and socialist internationalism and to challenge the Eurocentric perspective that has long dominated scholarship on international "front organizations" and the Cold War.

Although Chinese communists engaged with the WFTU from its founding, it was the Asia–Australia Trade Union Conference in 1949 that marked the beginning of China's active participation and rise to regional leadership. This event testified to the ACFTU's significance for the WFTU's expansion in the region and the opportunities that participating in the Soviet-led international trade union movement offered for the New China's integration into transnational socialist networks and contribution to global agendas. Relations with the WFTU then passed through Moscow and were reinforced by the burgeoning Sino–Soviet alliance, developing in the name of socialist solidarity and proletarian internationalism.

The "golden years" ended abruptly in June 1960, when the WFTU became entangled in tensions between the CCP and the CPSU. The Federation was transformed into an outpost of Sino–Soviet ideological conflict and a platform for Chinese dissent. Both matters of principle and international political developments increasingly prompted Chinese leaders to re-evaluate their position, while gradually intensifying their efforts to shape the WFTU's agenda for the Third World, leveraging their historical experience and China's post-colonial identity. As the Sino–Soviet split deepened and decolonization accelerated, the working environment of the WFTU and the conceptualizations of socialism to which it played host evolved. "Third World" delegates gained influence and China promoted its alternative interpretations to gain the backing of Afro–Asian representatives.

Yet, as time progressed, the PRC became increasingly isolated, eventually severing ties with the WFTU in 1966 at the height of the Cultural Revolution. The revolutionization of Chinese domestic politics and foreign policy led to the hardening of Chinese positions and the recognition that China's ambitions to guide the global workers' movement could not be realized within the Soviet-backed WFTU. The decline of Chinese participation in the WFTU was thus linked to broader ideological shifts in the PRC and to the Sino–Soviet split, which found expression in disagreements about decolonization and the fight against imperialism. This, however, made the WFTU a useful outlet for propaganda, with international meetings exploited as tools for the domestic revolutionary agenda. China's involvement in the organization during this period thus mirrored the twists and turns of its foreign policy, in which domestic needs and concerns played a prominent part.

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