

CHAPTER 2: WHY DOES LABOUR ORGANISE?: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

UNIT 4: GERMAN SEAFARERS' RESISTANCE TO THE NAZI DICTATORSHIP

Author: Jonathan Hyslop, Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Africana & Latin American Studies

KEY READING:

GERMAN SEAFARERS' RESISTANCE TO THE NAZI DICTATORSHIP

The relationship between trade unionism and political campaigns is a difficult one. On the one hand, unions have to be inclusive of workers of a range of political views (as well as of different cultural, religious or ethnic loyalties). But unions also can't avoid politics, because state policies affect the basic rights and interests of workers. And once unions enter the field of politics, they are also faced with the question of which political parties and social groups to ally with. In thinking about this question, examples from past history can be important reference points. No two historical situations are the same, but we can make useful comparisons with the problems that labour organizations have faced before, and that can help in seeing a way into the future. One such possible reference point is the struggle that confronted unions around the world in the 1920s and 1930s, when their very existence was threatened by the Fascist movements, parties which aimed to impose authoritarian rule based on extreme racist and nationalist ideas and policies, and to destroy labour rights and democratic rights. Today, around the world, we are seeing a return of similar right wing and authoritarian movements, so the history of the ways in which working class activists sought to defend themselves back in the first half of the Twentieth Century takes on a new relevance. The resistance of that era became known as anti-fascism, and it is no accident that today many people are interested in discussing that history. This article looks at one example of an 'anti-fascist' struggle, which while taking place in a very different situation from that of today, does have relevance for the present.



In the mid-1930s, Germany was under the brutal rule of Hitler's Nazi dictatorship. Trade unions were banned, political parties suppressed, and leading political opponents of the regime, including labour organizers, socialists, communists and liberals, imprisoned in jails and concentration camps. Yet despite these terrible circumstances, on more than three hundred ships of the German merchant fleet, a network of trade union activists secretly sought to organize the seafarers. They worked out of the port of Antwerp in Belgium, and were helped by the Netherlands-based headquarters of the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF). The seamen organized secret political meetings of crews on board ship and in harbour taverns. They circulated a clandestine news sheet containing accounts of the sailors' struggles and statements on political issues. They also, quite successfully, encouraged crews to defy Nazi officials and pro-regime officers by boycotting parades and displays of the Nazi swastika flag. When war broke out in Spain, between a progressive government on the one side, and fascist army commanders backed by the Nazis on the other, the Antwerp group supported the government forces. When their ships visited Spanish ports, they organized the collection of intelligence information to be transmitted to the Spanish authorities, and a few of the group even went to Spain to fight.

The aims of the Antwerp group and the ITF in this heroic resistance were political. Although the Nazis did create a fake union, the activists knew that in the circumstances, collective bargaining or normal trade union activity was impossible. But they believed that they could adapt to the situation, and prepare secretly for the downfall of the dictatorship. They were hoping that a political crisis would cause the regime to crumble, and that this would give the working class the opportunity to rise up and to shape the political future. To that end, they prepared to sabotage ships. Of course, we now know that the Nazi rule did not collapse until the German military defeat in 1945. Yet the sailors were not being wholly unrealistic. There were severe crises in the government in the 1930s, with senior military officers preparing to overthrow Hitler, and the outbreak of war in 1939 was extremely unpopular in Germany. The Antwerp groups could well have got the opportunity that they sought, if events had panned out differently.

In order to understand the context in which these seafarers were working, it is necessary to know a few things about the history of the German labour movement. In the years between



1880s and the start of the First World War in 1914, despite state repression and an unfair electoral system, German workers developed some of the world's strongest unions, and the world's most powerful socialist party, the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany). However, when the First World War broke out, the left movement split , with the majority of the SPD supporting the war, and other factions opposing the war effort. One of these dissident groups evolved into the revolutionary Spartacus League. When, in 1918, Germany was defeated in the war, the radical left, led by the Spartacus supporters, attempted a revolution, while the majority of the SPD entered the government, and allied with the army to impose law and order. The result was the defeat of the Spartacus League, who then aligned themselves with the revolutionary Communist government in Russia (later known as the Soviet Union) and formed the German Communist Party (KPD). During the 1920s, the SPD was often part of the German government and was able to carry out many progressive social reforms which improved working class living conditions. The KPD, which turned into a huge mass movement, saw these reforms as merely superficial changes, and continued to advocate for revolution. But, as Joseph Stalin rose to power within the Communist leadership in the Soviet Union, the KPD became increasingly closely controlled by the Soviet leadership, through the global organization known as the Communist International, or Comintern. The KPD became more and more an instrument of the Stalinists, and in its policies, the interests of the international working class were subordinated to Soviet national interests. The Comintern now equated the ideas of socialism and internationalism with absolute obedience to its commands.

In 1929, the world economy crashed and there was an explosive growth in Germany of the extreme right Nazi Party, with their armed militia, the 'Storm troopers'. The Nazis clashed with the SPD and the KPD on the streets and in elections, but the two big working class parties were unable to respond to the Nazis effectively because they did not trust each other. They did not come together to face the Nazi threat. Instead, the KPD, badly guided by the Comintern, underestimated the danger of the Nazis and saw the SPD as their main enemy, while the SPD hoped to keep the Nazis out of power by compromises with conservative political forces.

The Antwerp sailors' movement was inspired by two remarkable labour leaders, a tough German sailor called Hermann Knüfken, and an idealistic Dutch trade union official, Edo Fimmen.



Knüfken had gone to work on steamships at the age of fourteen, and had become a revolutionary activist after he was called up to the German navy at the start of the First World War in 1914. When, in 1918 'Red Sailors' initiated the revolution against the German government, Knüfken was freed by the rebels from a military prison and participated in street fighting against the conservative forces. Knüfken was attracted to the Communist KPD, and he had been an international activist in the seamen's organizations of the Communist movement. He had taken a prominent role in the Communists' International of Seamen and Harbour Workers (ISH) founded in 1930, with its headquarters in the German port of Hamburg. But Knüfken became increasingly frustrated with the Communist leadership of the ISH, and the ISH's blind following of the Communist political line. He was angered that instead of creating working class unity against the rising threat of the Nazis, the Communists focused their hostility on the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which made it all the easier for the Nazis to grow in strength. When the Nazis took power in 1933, the Communists mounted no effective response, claiming that Hitler would not last long. And the Social Democrats were equally passive. Many workers looked to the SPD and the powerful unions that they controlled to lead resistance to the Nazis; but no effective action was taken by the SPD in the face of the disaster. The ISH was taken by surprise, its Hamburg operations closed down, and its leaders were arrested or fled the country. Knüfken and a group of sailors around him decided to break away from the Communists and the ISH, and to develop their own, informal structure of activists, with an emphasis on worker self-organization. They fled to Belgium and started working in the port of Antwerp, a harbour at which many German ships called on their voyages. Feeling they needed broader support, the seamen contacted Fimmen of the ITF.

The ITF had first emerged in 1897, when unions of seafarers, dockworkers, railway workers and other related trades, initially primarily from Europe, had come together. They gradually built a formidable alliance, and in 1911 launched what was arguably the first truly international strike. This action, led by dockers and supported by other maritime workers was particularly strong in Britain, the Netherlands, and Belgium, where unions won considerable improvements in wages and conditions. Edo Fimmen, a clerical worker, had, at a young age, risen rapidly through the leadership structures of the Dutch trade unions. He was a genuinely original thinker with a



complex background of religious, anarchist and socialist ideas. Fimmen had played a key role in the 1920s in developing the ITF as a formidable alliance of trade unions; he was known for supporting the unity of all working class parties and rejecting sectarianism. He had been important in expanding the ITF globally, notably bringing in unions in Asia, and in colonized countries in general – which was an important contribution to countering racism amongst the European working classes. Like Knüfken’s sailors, Fimmen believed that the official Communist and Socialist movements had failed the test of the Nazi threat and that a new approach, stressing independent working class action was called for. Fimmen was enthusiastic for cooperation with the Antwerp group, and his support enabled the Antwerp activists to make connections with ITF militants in ports that their ships visited around the world. The ITF also used its contacts in the shipping industry, particularly in South Wales in the UK, to help provide ships and crews to support the forces fighting the fascists in Spain with transport of food and other supplies.

The Antwerp group did not try to set up new trade unions, but rather to build a flexible, decentralized network of worker activists from different countries. They would go on board ships in Antwerp and elsewhere and recruit ‘trusted men’ - effectively, informal shop stewards. These would organize sympathetic sailors on the ships. In their work, they would emphasize both the grim social conditions under Hitler – a favourite joke was to refer the Nazi swastika symbol as “the Hunger Hook”, a play on the German word for it, which means ‘hooked cross’ – but also engage workers in thinking about the political future. They emphasized the need for workers to organize for the downfall of the regime, while avoiding subjecting their interests to those of any political party. The Antwerp group seem to have achieved quite a lot of success in gaining the sympathy of the seamen. For instance on one ship, in 1937, on a voyage out of Hamburg, a sailor reported that amongst the forty crewmen, ‘from the first day a completely anti-fascist spirit prevailed’. The junior officers were Nazis, but the crew refused to return their raised-arm salutes or sing the Nazis’ official song, or contribute to party funds. The Antwerp group held political discussions in the canteen and living quarters.

The Antwerp Group and the ITF activists of the time shared a sense that the most important task for trade unions was a political one: the fight against fascism. Fascist regimes like Hitler’s



Germany and the Italy of the dictator Benito Mussolini, which denied the rights of collective bargaining, union organization and political expression, needed to be brought down, and the threat of such regimes spreading to other countries needed to be countered. And they saw it as necessary to use this anti-fascist movement to develop a future political system which elevated working class interests. They put their faith primarily in worker self-organization rather than in political parties. And they were strongly internationalist: if workers in Germany and other countries under authoritarian rule were to continue their fight, they needed the support of the labour movement in countries where workers were in a stronger position. Here, Fimmen had special expertise. In 1919, a military dictator, Admiral Horthy, had seized power in Hungary, bloodily suppressing a leftist revolution. Fimmen, at that time, had organized an international trade union boycott campaign against the Hungarian regime. This was, arguably, the first modern political campaign of international working class solidarity, creating a template, which many were later to follow. Fimmen also led an action in 1920 by the ITF in which transport workers refused to help in the supply of arms to Poland for use in its war with the Soviet Union. Under Fimmen's guidance, the ITF continued that tradition. Right from the time of Hitler's seizure of power, while many trade unionists and left parties were disoriented by the disaster in Germany, Fimmen put anti-fascism at the centre of the ITF's work. The organization produced a magazine called *Fascism*, with editions in multiple languages, which carried the anti-fascist message across the world; organized an underground network of railway worker activists in Germany; and raised support for refugee trade unionists. A notable feature of the political agitation of both the ITF and the Antwerp group was that it was strongly anti-colonial, with a great deal of attention being given to Mussolini's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia and to the Japanese fascist government's invasion of China. This reflected the influence of Fimmen's far-sighted attempts to bridge the divisions between Asian and European workers. This is particularly notable because in the shipping industry European seamen had often been hostile to Asian seafarers, who they saw as cheap labour competition. An article in the Antwerp group's news sheet called for "class struggle, not race struggle".

An important facet of this history to understand, is the way in which particular industries have features which make it easier or more difficult to organize. At the time we are discussing (and



to a large extent still today) seafarers were hired by the voyage, with only limited numbers getting regular work on the same ships. In the 1930s, a large proportion of ships were 'steamers', with coal-fired engines, and much of the workforce worked in the 'stokehole', shovelling coal into furnaces or carrying coal to the furnaces in wheelbarrows. The temperature in the workspace were high, the dangers of burns and falls were great, and relations with foremen and officers were highly conflictual. Ships were loaded manually, with goods packed on pallets in small units lowered into the holds by the crew – a dangerous procedure involving high levels of industrial injuries. In foreign ports, the seamen were often exploited by boarding house keepers and forced into jobs in which they worked off their debts, rather than earning anything. Seafarers movement between ports and in and out of jobs, and made seafarers difficult to organize. But on the other hand, their same mobility meant that there were some opportunities to evade the authorities. And given their deep grievances, sailors were often very militant when drawn into organized activities. In the ships' crew quarters and portside rented accommodation and bars, German sailors found the space to organize against the Nazis, and showed great courage when they did so.

A key point to understand about the anti-fascist movement of the 1930s was that it was not, as it is sometimes caricatured to be, animated only by the Soviet-aligned Communist parties. Recent historical research has demonstrated that anti-fascism was a very broad movement with many different strands of politics involved, ranging through Social-Democracy, liberalism, independent Marxism, anti-colonialism, pacifism and anarchism. Fimmen and the Antwerp group were trying to develop a new kind of democratic and socialist politics, and at the same time to find ways to ally with other anti-fascist groups.

Ultimately, the Antwerp group did not succeed in their aims. Many of them were captured by the Nazis after the German invasion of Western Europe in 1940, and several were killed in prisons and concentration camps. Fimmen died in exile in Mexico during the war. Knüfken escaped to England. But some of the anti-fascist activists of Antwerp and ITF survived to play a role in trade unions and socialist parties in post-war Europe.

What might be learned from the story of the Antwerp and ITF activists? They certainly did not have all the answers, but some features of their politics surely remain relevant for the present.



Firstly, their bold decision to break away from the Communists reflects an understanding of the dangers of subordinating the interests of labour to those of a political party. Second, the co-operation of the ITF and the Antwerpens shows that internationalism is practical unionism; without the support of Fimmen's organization, the German sailors would not have been able to survive and reorganize so effectively in exile. Third, they understood how to adapt to the particular conditions of the industry in which they worked, organizing in a way which suited the the roving lives of the sailors, and seizing the particular opportunities it afforded to resist the state and management. And finally, their anti-fascist battle is a reminder that labour organization is necessarily connected to the political struggle for democracy; labour has an existential interest in legal rights and political participation. Fimmen and Knüfken and their comrades sought to define a new kind of socialist and democratic politics and to build alliances with others who sympathized with their aims. As we confront a new wave of extreme right wing movements around the world, they can still be an inspiration for the present.