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

UNIT 4: GERMAN SEAFARERS' RESISTANCE TO THE NAZI DICTATORSHIP

Author: Jonathan Hyslop, Professor Emeritus, Colgate University

SCRIPT OF THE VIDEO LECTURE

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.

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.

At the core of this sailors' movement were two remarkable labour leaders, a tough German sailor called Hermann Knüfken, and an idealistic Dutch trade union official, Edo Fimmen. Knüfken had been an international activist in the seamen's organizations of the Communist movement, and took 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. Instead of creating working class unity against the rising threat of the Nazis, the Communists focused their hostility on the working-class based Social Democratic Party (SPD). This division amongst working class organizations 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. 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. 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. But like Knüfken's sailors, Fimmen believed that the official Communists 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 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 - 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 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. 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.

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.