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The Marshall Plan and the Split in the International Trade Union Movement

The Marshall Plan not only divided opinion in the international trade union movement, but was also used as the issue with which to divide it institutionally. As the battle lines were drawn between communist and anti-communist trade unionists, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and other national centres used the process of developing a combined response to the Marshall Plan as an opportunity to establish a new, temporary, international trade union body, the European Recovery Programme Trade Union Committee (ERPTUAC), and to withdraw from the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). This new organization shaped the response of the non-communist trade union world to the Marshall Plan and to the developing cold war. The result of this was to cut off British trade unionists on the far left from their main form of international support. Meanwhile, the ERPTUAC not only provided a massive pro-Marshall Plan propaganda programme, shaping the union response to the Marshall Plan across Europe, but also paved the way for a new, permanent international body, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. In this way, the domestic and international impacted upon each other to a very significant extent, as the TUC used the international split to further entrench its own leadership in Britain.

6.1 The World Federation of Trade Unions

The WFTU, established in 1945, became one of the first sites of cold war tension due to the division in the trade union world over the Marshall Plan. However, many accounts of this organization see its demise as inevitable, even without the intervening factor of the cold war. This was because of the inherent differences between the ideological
outlooks of the unions involved, and between the centralism of the Soviet trade unions and the (relative) de-centralization of Western unions, which meant that ‘the cohesion of the WFTU in its existing form was doomed.’¹ MacShane, for example, argues that the split in the WFTU came from within, and that,

Instead of seeing the WFTU fall victim to global power politics, diplomatic chicanery, or the Cold War it would be better to admit that it was set an impossible task – that of expressing international working class interests at a moment when these were being most effectively asserted in the national context.²

Accounts that do not see the WFTU’s split as inevitable come from the far left, and tend to see it as a victim of national government cold war politics enforced from above.³ Studies of the WFTU are more deeply divided over the aims of the various trade unions involved in this organization, and of their respective governments. While some see the WFTU as a genuine attempt at world trade union unity, others argue that the Soviet Union planned to use the WFTU to gain access to the industrial working class in Europe, and ‘until it split in 1949, the WFTU was the most substantial of the postwar Communist “front” operations.’⁴ Certainly the Foreign Office perspective was that ‘the Soviet authorities’ were ‘conducting an active foreign policy’ through the WFTU.⁵ Arthur Deakin, the British anti-communist President of the WFTU, felt that the changing venues of the various WFTU Executive Bureau meetings across Europe were designed to bolster Soviet policy, given that the Bureau would take the opportunity to address mass trade union demonstrations. At the June 1947 meeting in Prague, communist and non-communist WFTU executive members supported a communist mass trade union rally. Deakin was later to believe that this was in fact a ‘full-scale dress-rehearsal’ for the communist coup in February 1948.⁶ As Vic Allen points out,

The presence of Deakin and other non-Communist trade union leaders at the demonstration helped to give credulous masses the impression the Communists wanted to convey to them – that the cause was an internationally supported one. To this extent Bevin’s warning to Deakin [against holding office in the WFTU] was correct.⁷

Whatever the interpretation of the activities of the WFTU, it is clear that it was the issue of the Marshall Plan that caused the actual split