

ITF Young Workers Committee - International Trade Union History Workshop Report

June 8th 2022, Tunisia

GLI Manchester has launched a programme on the history of the international trade union movement, funded by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES). The project includes a book to be published in late 2022, accompanied by education projects to be undertaken with national and international unions. As part of the project, GLI Manchester was invited to run a pilot education event at the International Transport Workers' Federation's (ITF) Young Transport Workers' Committee in Tunisia on 8th June.

The session opened with a short introduction to the history of workers' internationalism. This included an exploration of why and how workers have historically organised across borders – through parties, unions, education bodies, and even sports leagues.



Participants were then split into breakout groups. In groups, participants were asked to imagine that the ITF did not exist and that they were responsible for founding a new international federation.

They were asked to consider three key questions:

1. **What are the principles of this new union?**
2. **What issues are the most important to organise around immediately?**
3. **Which other groups of workers do you want to connect with?**

In the subsequent plenary discussion, the following ideas emerged:

Key principles of the new union included:

- The need to fight for equality and social justice;
- The importance of building an organisation based on common needs and concerns;
- To look out for fellow workers under attack or facing exploitation and to build solidarity.

Important issues included:

- Equalising the wages of workers in different countries and defending social security;
- Ending the poor treatment of women and young people in their workplaces;
- Organising within international supply chains;
- Resisting privatisation'
- Development more sustainable transport systems;
- Defending democracy and resisting attacks on the right to organise;
- Engaging with and understanding new technologies and platforms.

Groups of workers to connect with included:

- Organising workers in connected lower-wage economies;
- Local trade unions sharing similar principles and priorities;
- To not exclude anyone from the union and encourage as broad engagement as possible.

Following this, GLI gave a presentation highlighting that many of the concerns and priorities that had been identified in the discussion were akin to those of the workers who founded the ITF. Participants

were shown one of the first leaflets that the ITF produced in 1896, announcing the creation of the new union and the reasons for it. These included:

- Supply chains now extend across the world, so too must unions;
- To stop attacks on the conditions of workers across many countries;
- To end unequal working conditions between countries;
- The need to create a world where workers have a greater say and greater equality.

Based on the discussion, three reasons for workers uniting across borders were identified, and examples given of where these factors had inspired different types of international organising:

1. **Connections made between workers by international capitalism.**

The example was given of the journeymen who had traversed Europe in the 1700s and 1800s.



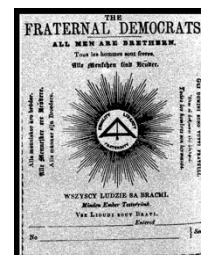
2. **The response of workers to seeing others in similar conditions to their own.**

The example was given of Polish soldiers who mutinied against French imperial forces when ordered to crush the Haitian Revolution.



3. **Political ideas which emphasise that we are all part of a common class with common issues.**

The example was given of groups of political refugees forming socialist groups in London in the 19th century and who declared that 'All men are Brothers.'



The session ended with a discussion on how programmes on the history of labour internationalism might be useful for trade unionists now. Participants from the Belgian Union of Transport Workers (BTB) highlighted that their union has been able to develop and strengthen political and industrial identity amongst members by developing a course focused on the history of their union, its struggle against fascism, and fight for labour legislation. Participants from the Transport Workers Union of Australia (TWU) raised the question of whether the history of unionism should just be a source of pride, or whether there needs to be a reflection on the failures of the union movement. GLI Manchester noted that the GLI History Book explores both the successes of the union movement, as well as moments in which it has failed to deal with important questions of social and political equality.

GLI Manchester and the ITF Young Workers Committee are expected to continue this relationship. The ITF has asked for another workshop to be delivered at their upcoming summer school in Sheffield. GLI has sent participants a copy of the draft text (available at: tinyurl.com/glihistory). The four-chapter text will be completed in late summer. The ITF is now intending to engage with the joint ITUC-GUF youth committee about the role of historical education in their work and has invited members of this committee to an upcoming online panel on the project.