

**A Londoner who worked for
the Communist union
international remembers the
Prague Spring and Soviet
Winter of 1968**

**Workers of the
World, Forgive
Me!**

Peter Waterman

Notes:

Book Title: ‘Workers of the World, Forgive Me!’ is an imaginary inscription on the tomb of Karl Marx but also the title, I seem to recall, of a socialist collection of anti-Communist jokes.

Cover Illustration: The Author signs a protest against the Soviet invasion on the base of the King Wenceslas Monument, Wenceslas Square, Prague, August 22, 1968.

Czech/o/Slovak/ia: Czechoslovakia was a single state from 1918 to 1992, though of two closely-related peoples. I therefore make here no strict distinction between ‘Czech’ and ‘Czechoslovak’, though Prague is squarely in what is now called, I believe, Czechia. I have, however, used Czech spelling as seems appropriate – and in so far as I remember it. For those unfamiliar with the language, perhaps I need only to say that a *haček* (a ‘little hook’), as on the ‘c’, makes it soft. Thus č = ch, ř = rzh (tough one), ň = ny, š = sh, etc.

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Introduction

I have two motives for publishing this account of my experiences in Prague before, during and after the famous Prague Spring and the infamous Soviet invasion. The first, obviously, is that this is now the 40th anniversary of these events. The second is that it may provide readers, print- and online-publishers with a taster for the book-length autobio from which it is extracted. I hope to finish this book in 2008.

I spent the first 30 or so years of my life in the world of international Communism. Born 1936, into a British, Jewish, Communist family, I joined the Young Communist League in 1951, at the age of 15. And I spent a total of about five years in the Communist world.

From 1955 to 1958 I was the English Editor, and therefore *de facto* chief sub-editor of *World Student News*, the magazine of the Prague-based International Union of Students. I was 19 years old and completing a one-year course in journalism at Regent Street Polytechnic when the Communist Party of Great Britain nominated me for this exciting job in the international Communist movement.

Returning to the UK in 1958, I had to do my military service, got jobs on technical magazines, was involved with the *Youth Against the Bomb*, met and married my Dutch wife, Ruthie, had two kids, went to the union-oriented Ruskin College, was active as a student Communist, drove a Coca-Cola truck, got a degree from Oxford University, and then was again looking for a job. Since the British CP was by now less-interested in most of the Soviet-controlled international Communist organisations, this nomination came about through the WFTU (World Federation of Trade Unions) representative in London. Given my labour-movement orientation and education, at both Ruskin and Oxford, and given the routine union or labour education jobs available in the UK, we decided that a job in Prague, with an apartment attached, was an adventure to be undertaken. Whilst we were both critical of Communism and particularly of the Communist states, we also assumed that, having learned from its bad experiences, Communism was now reforming itself. Going to a land of pessimists, we were optimists.

As for the draft autobio from which this piece is drawn, it has been a long time cooking. It got a major shot in the arm - if this is not an unfortunate metaphor – around 2004 when I had a brief confrontation with the grim reaper. Although, it turns out, I had a ‘good’ cancer (as proof of which I am able to write about this in 2008), the incident stimulated me to work on my biography before someone else did. Or, worse still, didn’t.

Since I am also engaged with the ‘global justice and solidarity movement’ and World Social Forum, particularly in relation to labour, and since I seem to need the more or less instant gratification that such activity delivers, work on the autobio has suffered. This is regrettable since I am not only a great enthusiast for biographies and autobiographies (which I render often as ‘auto/bios’). I am also a propagandist for the auto/bios of ‘other ‘active bearers of internationalism’ (Waterman 2008). Of which, of course, I consider myself to be one.

I guess that this story, cut, edited and updated from Chapter 4 of my draft, is a little bit of instant -or not-quite-instant - gratification, along the way to completion of the book.

I do, finally, want to pay homage to the emancipatory inspiration of Marx (who cannot escape all responsibility for Lenin, Stalin and Brezhnev), to the people of Prague 1968 (some

inspired by Marx), and to the contemporary struggles for global social emancipation. These are rising again as I write. They can only have impact to the extent that they learn - if critically - from Marx and from Prague.

Optimism and pessimism

Why on earth did I return to Prague in 1966 for a second dose of state-socialism and Communist internationalism? A member of *the* international revolutionary party in Britain, I was clearly as convinced about the notion of historical evolution as any member of the kind of reformist socialist party that then predominated in Western Europe. Our idea of this forward march of history as requiring some kind of insurrectionary breach was fuelled by the creation of Communist regimes after World War II, the Chinese Revolution in 1949, the on-going struggles for the overthrow of colonial and neo-colonial regimes in Vietnam, Algeria and Latin America. But if I was an insurrectionary for the South, and a non-insurrectionary revolutionary for the West, I was a reformist for the Communist world. I was convinced that – despite the repression of uprisings in Eastern Europe and the bloody Sino-Soviet conflict – things would evolve in a democratic direction. I recognised that this would not happen without social protest of the kind we had seen in East Berlin, in Poland and Hungary. But – Hungary notwithstanding – I certainly thought that this would be a Socialist Evolution. In the East European distinction between the pessimist and the optimist, I was the optimist:

Pessimist: Things are inevitably going to get worse!

Optimist: It is impossible for things to get worse than they already are!

The day the Russians invaded Prague, Ruthie and I met Maria on our suburban housing estate. She, whilst welcoming the Prague Spring¹ that had provoked the intervention, had been predicting that the Russians would never let the Czechs get away with it. ‘What did I tell you?’ she cried, her accusatory and tear-marked face as white as if we had just run over her child. I was humiliated: the Czech Pessimist-in-the-Street had been smarter than we international Marxists-Armed-With-The-Weapon-Of-Historical-Materialism. The pessimists, I had to concede, had been the realists. What was true for the system appeared to also be true of the international Communist movement. I do not recall if I had then even heard of Gramsci’s ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’. But after my second dose of state-controlled and institutionalised internationalism, this was to become my *leitmotiv*.

I note another problem with writing about this period in Prague: that it seems not to have impressed itself as dramatically on my memory as the previous one. This may have been because it *was* the second time, because I was now older, because I was ensconced within a family. It may also have been because the invasion was so dramatic as to have wiped out – as it clearly overshadowed – much else that took place during this period. Finally, and curiously, I have been able to find fewer of the people Ruthie and I shared this second period with. This may have been because, whilst I was around 30 at this time, many of those others would have been in their fifties or sixties and therefore more likely to have died in the 40 or so years that have followed. Or maybe they have not left the printed memories of that earlier generation of Prague internationalists. Whatever the reason, it has required me to search harder, in more-limited personal and public archives.

¹ For a short account of the Prague Spring, the Invasion and its consequences, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prague_Spring. For two biographical accounts by people active in the reform movement even before this event, see Pelikán (1975: Parts 5-7) and the redoubtable Englishwoman, Rosemary Kavan (1988: Chs. 20-24). For a vivid autobiographical account by an apolitical Westerner, resident in Prague before, during and after, see Deitch (2002: Ch. 37).

The World Federation of Trade Unions: Trying to breath life into the golem

A golem is, or was (or is supposed to have been), a thing or creature, brought into life from the clay of the River Vltava (aka Moldau), to protect the Jewish community of Prague from its persecutors (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golem>). The golem, like Frankenstein's Monster, got out of the control of its creator. So it might have been just as well that I was unsuccessful in my feeble efforts to influence the WFTU, even in the specific area of my competence. After a brief indication of life following the Soviet invasion (see below), the WFTU turned back into a lump of clay on the banks of the Vltava. My efforts had no visible impact. I left Prague in 1969 with enough hard currency for a year of study, and with all my papers and notes.² But if I had had no impact on the WFTU, my experience within it largely determined the further direction of my life.

From 1966-69, I was a well-paid but lowly functionary within the significantly tiny Solidarity and Education Department of the WFTU. I had my background in the British and international Communist movement, my qualifications from Ruskin College and Oxford University, I had specialised on labour history, worked in journalism, spoke French, and had been recommended by the London representative of the WFTU, Tom McWhinnie.³ At this time, the British Communist Party was, however, concentrating its attentions on the national trade union movement and simultaneously reducing itself from global ambition to militant particular.⁴ The Party said neither yea nor nay to my appointment (although I suppose it *might* have privately cautioned the WFTU about my big mouth). My job was labour education in Anglophone countries of the Third World, in particular Africa. I was, however, clearly considered not entirely politically reliable, so had to submit myself to a two-month trial period before I was accepted and could be joined by my wife Ruthie, and kids, Danny (then around seven) and Tamara (around five).

The WFTU occupied some three floors of a pre-WW2 hotel, standing on one side of a square named after Marie Curie. This was an imposing if anonymous office, bearing, as far as I recall, no indication of what it served or represented. Even, if, however, it had been surmounted by a large coloured flashing neon sign, this would have communicated little to the workers of Czechoslovakia it also claimed to represent. The building was close to the centre of Old Prague, being at the end of Pařížská, which links the Old Town Square with a bridge over the Vltava. Náměstí Curieových was also directly opposite the high and steep bank on which

² I recall the less-fortunate experience of Eric, Marie and their son Kim. Eric had been a British Communist journalist before becoming a Maoist and taking up work in China, from where the couple sent back glowing letters, forwarded for my appalled consideration by our mutual friend, Jackie. On leaving China, and aware of Maoist paranoia, Eric concealed his British Maoist notes and documents behind a portrait of the Great Helmsman. This was discovered by the Chinese Maoists and the family spent two years under arrest in two hotel rooms, to be eventually released, after signing the customary untrue and humiliating confession - but without the offending materials. See Eric's account of their ordeal (Gordon 1972).

³ Tom was a working-class Scottish Communist, educated as I had been, at Ruskin. At the time of its foundation he had worked for the WFTU in Paris. He and his then wife, a French resistance activist, Anna, were friends of my family. When I got to know him, Tom was running the London office of WFTU, which produced the English edition of its monthly magazine, *World Trade Union Movement*. Many years later, after he had retired to Brighton, I begged him to produce some kind of memoir of his own WFTU experience. But I was clearly speaking to another Tom, or trying to get him to open a book he had long closed.

⁴ I paraphrase the Marxist social geographer David Harvey. But this reduction of British Communism to militant trade unionism is recognised by Samuel (1985) and demonstrated by Watters (1992).

there had once stood the world's largest statue of Stalin. Hereby hangs another Tale of the Vltava. By the time I returned to Prague, Stalin had been de-constructed by tiny night-time explosions that had deposited a rain of cement chips and a layer of dust on the international union organisation over which he, dead or alive, still loomed. My office, fortunately, faced not his empty plinth but Prague Castle, and the ever-changing sky above.

I had expected, on arrival, to find a large, efficient, international Communist bureaucracy. Large and bureaucratic, yes; efficient, no. I asked the African Department for access to their library and documentation on Africa. They offered me the three books written by Jack Woddis (1960, 1961, 1963). Woddis was currently Secretary of the International Department of the British Communist Party, a one-time WFTU employee. He was a self-educated working-class bloke of impressive energy and productivity. His Africa trilogy therefore represented a remarkable achievement. The books were highly readable and inspiring. But, given that Jack was an orthodox Communist, they had also been written in the heroic and optimistic mode, during the equally heroic and optimistic period of African independence struggles. They were hardly adequate for guidance to post-independence African unionism and a period of increasing complexity and difficulty. In any case, I had read them whilst still at Ruskin.

Given the lack of resources in the African Department, I asked my Department Head, a veteran Czech union and party *apparatchik*, Chleboun, whether I could purchase a dozen books from the West. Yes. Could I also order a complete set of the country labour profiles produced by the US State Department on Africa, Asia and Latin America? Of course not! Well, could we request them free, in exchange for the union educational materials we had done in French for West Africa? Absolutely and obviously not! But, I pleaded, these materials are anyway published and spread all over Francophone West Africa. If the CIA wanted them they could find them. But in no way was Chleboun going to be – or be held - responsible for any kind of relationship with the US State. Chleboun was, however, a secular Czech, rather than a religious Russian, and finally agreed that I could request these imperialist materials *indirectly* via my mother's address in the UK. So for the following couple of years, the basic WFTU information on Africa was provided free of charge, by the labour affairs section of the US State Department.

Here another distinction must be made between the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and the Soviet Union. Solzhenitsyn's book, *The First Circle*, is about a top-class gulag for scientist victims of Stalin's paranoia. They are set to work on some kind of telephone voice-scrambler. Their initial information comes from American popular science magazines. Every night, these magazines are taken away from the imprisoned scientists and locked in a safe, presumably to prevent their loss to imperialist agents. Not so my State Department materials at the WFTU. I was left in charge of them, day or night, and they were made available for consultation by any of my colleagues who wanted some information, admittedly US flavoured, about African labour law, conditions, industrial relations and trade unionism.



A party in a union office during the last African union course I organised, near Rome, 1969. The event was sponsored by the Italian Communist trade union centre, the CGIL, later to withdraw from the WFTU. I am the one with the *Rive Gauche* beard. To my left is our Italian interpreter and liaison officer. Photographer: Unknown.

During my two to three years at the WFTU I prepared one or two sets of English-language teaching texts, ran or contributed to three or four residential courses, died the death at four or five WFTU conferences. I felt grossly under-employed. But since my contract was confirmed after the trial period, and I was never called to account for my actual work, I think I must have been considered professional, productive and efficient. Actually, there was no standard or procedure within the WFTU by which such could be measured. I was excluded from all policy discussion, with the partial exception of my own department. The documents relating to WFTU solidarity funds were concealed from me. I was prepared, during the confusion following August 21, 1968, to resort to burglary, or at least borrowing, but these documents *were* locked in a safe - against the depredations of unreliable Communists, if not imperialist spies. As for the *educational work* of the WFTU and its East European affiliates, this now appears to me - certain obviously-ideological elements aside - not so different from that of the ICFTU and its Western affiliates.

In the International Union of Students (IUS), we had known each other, we had used first names, many of us lived, partied and criticised state socialism together. The WFTU was simply a big, well-funded, creaking, faceless and soulless bureaucracy, the bosses of which did not even know our names and barely greeted us. Louis Saillant, founding General Secretary, actually resided in France and visited just occasionally, arriving in his black Mercedes and then disappearing into the Secretariat offices.⁵ One fulltime French representative at WFTU was a

⁵ Saillant (1910-74), was originally a furniture worker. He became active as a socialist within the French Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) in the 1930s, was involved in street struggles, suffered beatings and imprisonment. As an active member of the underground movement during World War Two, he was co-responsible for the reunification of the previously-divided CGT. He was its representative in the National Council

boastful, loud-mouthed, empty-headed, one-time resistance fighter, who had been dumped in Prague to prevent him doing further damage to our French affiliate, the CGT. In his attitude to Francophone Africa he was also a French chauvinist, if not an open racist. My own department boss, Chleboun, spoke no French, although this was the official language of the organisation.

The main activity of the WFTU, throughout my time there, was the organising of conferences, which would end with a ringing, if predictable, declaration, and the decision to hold a follow-up conference. Amongst its educational materials I found texts on imperialism, on the history of the international trade union movement, on union organisation, on labour rights, the International Labour Organisation and collective bargaining. I translated some of these from French and added texts on African trade unionism and on labour education itself. These were based on books I had brought with me or could – with great difficulty and delay – purchase. One essential one was on African trade unionism, by Ioan Davies (1966), part of the remarkable radical series on Africa published at that time by Penguin Books in London.

WFTU's East German affiliate was more active, having a special interest in Africa and its 'non-capitalist path of development'. At the international school of the FDGB (*Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund*), Bernau, outside Berlin, a couple of earnest scholars were being sent out to do missionary work in Tanzania and other friendly countries. As customary with missionaries, they were also doing research – at least within the prescribed parameters.⁶ Political delegations were also sent out from the GDR, and one could trace their route by a chain of African union declarations on 'the peaceful solution of the German question'. I heard about this from my Czech colleague, Jarda, since a certain African union had begged him to undo the damage caused. Traveling to Berlin by train late-1968, I asked Jarda why there were so many more international solidarity banners to be seen there than in Czechoslovakia. 'Bigger banner-producing industry' came his laconic reply.

The publications of the WFTU, one of which, for my sins of omission and commission, I received for 30 years after – and with the traditional irregularity - were always late, always dull, always full of conference decisions, organisational declarations and ritualistic formulae. The only articles I recall that seemed to relate to real-life unions or actual workers, came from a correspondent in the USA. The reason for the turgid nature of the WFTU is explained below.

of the Resistance, of which he became President. He also gained a seat in the Consultative Assembly that recreated the French Republic. He was General Secretary of the WFTU, 1945-69, remaining resident in France and active in the CGT when the WFTU was obliged to move to Czechoslovakia. He received a number of French state and Soviet awards. Although not, apparently, a member of the Communist Party, he remained identified with Communist unionism and Soviet Communism till the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, which he, along with the overwhelming majority of the WFTU Secretariat, temporarily condemned. His eventual retirement one year later might have been because of this first disloyal act as well as a heart condition.

⁶ The two Africa specialists were Heinz Deutschland and Hubert Filipowsky. The kind of research they were doing – and its parameters - is suggested by Filipowsky (1972). For the nature of the FDGB see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_German_Trade_Union_Federation. Heinz survived the collapse of the German Democratic Republic and worked later as a bookshop manager and a labour historian. He was also long involved with a foundation concerned to preserve the Bernau College building, apparently one whose unique qualities I had myself had failed to recognise under the winter skies and long nights of 1968.

Not so much a spectre haunting as a shadow cast

There are several ways one could present the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). One would be to simply say that it was, with respect to workers what the International Union of Students was with respect to students.⁷ A second would be to recognise the specificity of the working class and trade unionism and therefore the specificity of any union internationalism. This would be a matter of recognising the centrality of the labour movement in left emancipatory thought and action, of the existence – even in distant Latin America and Asia - of long-standing unions and internationals. It would mean recalling the particular problem which the WFTU had in competing with the oldest union internationals - the International Trade Secretariats (ITSs) for different crafts and industries - dating back to the 1890s. Whilst the WFTU preferred to treat the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and ITSs as if they were children of the Cold War (in 1949), this rival international bloc actually continued a tradition going back to the Russian Revolution of 1917 and even the start of WWI in 1914 (MacShane 1992). A third way of looking at the WFTU would, obviously, be as I experienced it. Rejecting the first option as true but insufficient, this chapter deals with it in the two other ways.⁸

The Founding of the WFTU in Paris, 1945, was due to a wave of popular internationalism, of worker and union self-confidence following the defeat of Fascism in World War II (1939-45/6). It was equally due to the interests of the allied states (the UK, the USSR, the USA, and others) involved in that victory. Whilst the All Union Central Council of Trade Unions (AUCCTU, or, in Russian, VTsSPS) was self-admittedly a ‘transmission belt’ for the Soviet state, there had, in Britain and the US, been increasingly intense wartime collaboration between the unions, industry and the state. There was a definite assumption, in the international labour movement, that the unions would play a role not only in economic reconstruction but also in the establishment of liberal or social democracies in the liberated countries. There was a similarly widespread assumption that such national corporatism (the functional cooperation of labor, capital and state in economic and political modernisation) would be reflected in the new United Nations (1946). Even at the foundation of the WFTU, however, there could be seen traditional union divisions (Communist v. Social Democratic, Left v. Right, Political v. Economic, nationalist v. internationalist, imperial v. colonial). These were not yet reducible to a binary division. But there were also present elements of the overlapping divide between the Capitalist and Communist worlds that led to the manichean Cold War split in international unionism just four years later.

The founding congress of the WFTU took place in Paris, October 1945. It was much inspired by both union and state notions of a new world order, organised in the spirit of both the Comintern-sponsored Popular Fronts and the US New Deal of the later-1930s. Unions of

⁷ My experiences in the IUS, 1955-8, are in Chapter 2 of my draft autobio.

⁸ Unlike the IUS and its forerunners, the international trade union organisations have been extensively researched. For the WFTU, however, such research is mostly confined to its foundation and early years. I mention here a limited selection of the relevant literature, which will inevitably lead interested readers to a more extensive list (Carew 2000, Herod 1994, MacShane 1992, Tosstorf 2001, van Goethem 2000, Waterman 2002, 2004a, b,c). A book length ‘official history’ of the WFTU has been written by a one-time Indian officer of the organisation, Debkumar Ganguli (2000), who died shortly after. This account of conferences and resolutions is illustrated by photos of conferences and delegations, the latter often surrounding a head of state. The back-cover photo is here iconic, showing a crowd of WFTU leaders, including the author, paying their respects to the President of a (presumably capitalist) India, 2000. My account here has to therefore draw heavily on my own past writings.

the ‘colonial and semi-colonial’ countries were for the first time heavily represented at an international union conference. The Congress claimed to represent 90 percent of the world’s unionists. It declared itself against every form of Fascism, against war and its causes, for the right of self-determination, against colonialism, discrimination and racism. It favored the extension of union rights, the improvement of working and living conditions, the limitation and liquidation of monopolies. The word ‘socialism’ – which would have immediately split the organisation two or three ways – was diplomatically avoided. Sixty years later, it still is.

But by 1949, the international trade union movement was definitively split on the lines of Communist and Social Reformist ideology and the Cold War blocs:

There had been an irresistible wave of grassroots enthusiasm for a grand trade union alliance... But [t]he concrete achievements of the Federation were too limited to enthuse the millions of members. Relating exclusively to the labor movement at the level of national centres and above, it had no immediate relevance for the rank and file. Debates and arguments within the WFTU were the concern of a tiny elite of national leaders and officials. In such circumstances, the demise of the organisation would pass almost unnoticed [...] The essential weakness of the WFTU was that it failed...to develop a genuine trade union role. (Carew 2000:183).

This epitaph is true enough, even if the WFTU continues a shadow existence today, a decade or more after the collapse of the State Socialism to which it subordinated itself (see the banalities of one of its leaders before its 2000 Congress, *The Guardian* 2000). The epitaph, however, is not only applicable to the *Communist-dominated* union internationals of the later-20th century. The social-reformist internationals have also had increasing difficulty in uniting their members and impacting on the members of their members globally.

But another reference is essential here, this being to the Comintern’s own union international, the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU or Profintern, 1920-37). This front organisation had been turned both on and off at the arbitrary will of Moscow. During its short life the RILU went through strategic somersaults at the same behest. But it was both publicly socialist and revolutionary, it reached into the heart of the unions, and down to the shopfloor. It was led, both nationally and internationally, by experienced Communist union activists. And, uniquely for any union international I am aware of, it actually once produced a pamphlet on how to organise strikes:

It is incumbent upon the adherents of the RILU to study carefully every industrial conflict, to ascertain all difficulties and to find means of overcoming them... It is only the strength of a thorough study of the positive and negative experiences in the past industrial struggles that real progress can be made in regard to making our own ranks more fit and preparing the whole working class for the coming class struggles between Capital and Labour. (National Minority Movement 1932(?):7).

This document is, of course, marked by distinct features. Produced during the brief ‘Class against Class’ period of Comintern ultra-leftism, it is largely directed against the ‘reformists’ and the ‘trade union bureaucrats’ – with occasional swipes at ‘opportunism’ and ‘legalism’. And, curiously but significantly, it has only a meagre half-page on *internationalism*, here called ‘connections with brother organisations of other countries’! It is, finally, not so

much an analysis or strategy as a *directive*, this being clear in the tone of the passage above.⁹ The point, however, is that the WFTU never, to my knowledge or experience, ever produced anything so simultaneously mundane and crucial as the organisation of a strike. And it could never have given directives to its national affiliates. Born at a highpoint of ‘social partnership’ between labour and capital nationally and internationally, it became itself reformist (sometimes militantly), highly-bureaucratised, opportunistic (in its desperate attempts to influence or recapture the Western unions) and legalistic (with its cherished offices at the UN in New York and the ILO in Geneva). It had, in fact, become a Communist union shadow of an inter-state organisation.

Eventually there came the Prague Spring of 1968, preceded by some months of rumours and publicised changes within the leadership of the Czech Party and State. Czechs in our building actually turned themselves back from zombies into human beings - and activists. They organised. They became involved in wider movements or committees within society. Our coffin-faced chief accountant appeared, happily reminiscing about pre-war Communism, on television. Within the WFTU, the Western Communists either sympathised or identified with the reform movement, seeing a Communist regime once again re-establishing a dialogue with its citizens. Others (particularly from what was now beginning to be called the Third World) opposed, on the grounds that the movement was inevitably playing into the hands of the West and Imperialism.

On August 21st the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact army invaded Prague. They had evidently failed to first discuss this with ‘the class tendency within the international trade union movement’. Circumventing the areas of shooting and demonstrations, avoiding the roads blocked by Soviet tanks, I was the first staff member to enter the office that midday. Half an hour later I was joined by my Czech department chief, Chleboun, grey of hue. An immediate protest was made by those members of the WFTU Secretariat present. On August 28, the first full meeting of the Secretariat took place, declaring (World Federation of Trade Unions 1969:367) that

In fully approving this letter [of August 24], expresses its disapproval of the military intervention which contrasts with the fundamental principles that form the basis of the life of the WFTU and which are freely established by all the national centres affiliated to the WFTU.

It continued:

The Secretariat expresses its full solidarity with the workers and people of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and pays homage to their calm and composure.

⁹ For Marxist accounts with both a long historical view and theoretical concerns, compare Brecher (1972) and Hyman (1972). For a militant British handbook on strikes, which makes a thought-provoking contrast with the RILU one, see Montague (1979).



Czechs walking past a Soviet tank on a bridge which joined the square where the WFTU office stood to Letna, where the Stalin monument had once stood. The protestors were *not* coming to seek WFTU's solidarity. Photo: Author.

I never got to the bottom of this resurrection of socialist and democratic tradition, which I found rather more amazing than that of Jesus Christ after *his* crucifixion. The vote was certainly due to the hope for a revived Communist world and movement raised by the Prague Spring. It must have been influenced by memories and experiences of Nazi or imperial invasion and domination. In part it had to do with a particular composition of the Secretariat (the two East Europeans were from Romania and Czechoslovakia). Then there was the circumstance of isolation from parties/unions at home, and the necessity of taking a personal decision. It seems to be quite difficult for institutions to remove all traces of the movements they once represented, or even of the human beings that fill the functions within them. On the other hand, however, the Secretariat could not resist adding a routine gesture to the effect that

In the interest of trade union unity and proletarian internationalism at the same time it alerts the workers of the world against the present plans and machination[s] especially of those who until now have taken good care not to condemn the American imperialist aggression against the freedom and independence of the Vietnamese people.

But by September 17, *Pravda* was able to report that leaders of the trade unions of the six socialist countries, plus the French Assistant General Secretary and the Italian Chairman of the WFTU had

declared their resolution to contribute to the development and consolidation of fraternal relations and cooperation between the trade unions of the world on the basis of the principles of proletarian internationalism.

The reference by *Pravda* to the principles of proletarian internationalism was, of course, the kiss of death for any such thing.¹⁰

In December 1968 there was held a Council Meeting of the WFTU. This was in East Berlin, the concrete Communist dystopia. Somewhere, in a closed meeting room, there was sealed the Communist equivalent of a gentlemen's agreement - a comrades' agreement? This was, if I correctly recall, between the Italian delegation on the one hand and the Soviet one on the other. The Italians either had, or had wanted, to table a resolution endorsing the Secretariat's condemnation of the Soviet invasion. The Russians had said: if you do not table your resolution, we will not demand a *reversal* of the Secretariat's position. The Italians were relieved that they did not have to confront the Russians in public and could at the same time save their somewhat invisible faces. A Japanese Maoist union delegation was not consulted over this shabby deal. Their representative made a lengthy and forceful condemnation of the invasion. As we switched through the languages on our instantaneous translation gear, and gestured feebly towards the cabins, it dawned on even the more witless amongst us that the East Germans had simply pulled the plug on it. This was one of the many dubious contributions of that regime to international proletarian solidarity and democracy. During this same trip to Berlin I was told a sad little joke:

Teacher: Well, children, I want you each to tell me what you have done in this past month to help the construction of Communism.

Willi and Ilse (interrupting each other): Well we helped an old Czech lady to cross Unter den Linden. And the rest of the class helped us.

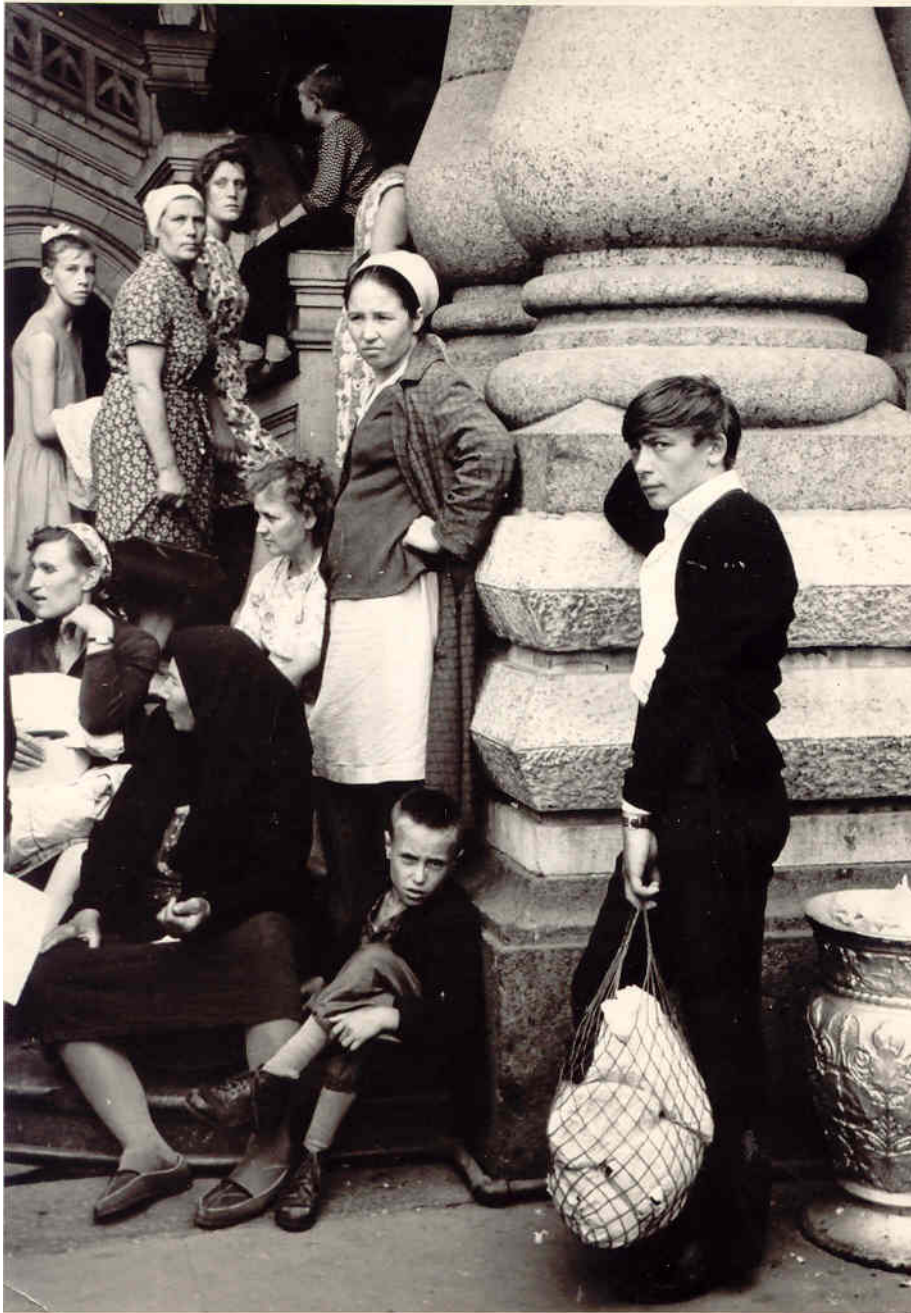
Teacher: Well that was nice. But why did it take so many of you? And what does this have to do with the development of socialism?

Willi and Ilse (simultaneously): Well, you see, she didn't want to go.¹¹

¹⁰ The WFTU has continued its self-limiting identification with authoritarian socialist or nationalist regimes for another 40 years. Still inhabiting a universe in which international unionism subordinates itself to conflict between states and blocs, it in 2006 congratulated President Lukashenko of Belarus on his re-election. Lukashenko is one of the authoritarian leaders of the post-Soviet states, and rather more pro-Soviet than the Russian Federation he would like to rejoin, or even lead. This message could be found on the WFTU website (<http://www.wftucentral.org/>), a significantly feeble gesture of the organisation in the direction of a globalised and networked capitalism.

¹¹ Here we have to remember that the German Democratic Republic was, with the help of Bertold Brecht, a respectable contributor to the culture of the Anti-Communist Joke. After the East Berlin Uprising, 1953, Brecht's Little Man was considering the breakdown of confidence between the working class and the state. 'Would it not be possible', he wondered, 'for the government to dissolve the people and elect a new one in its place?'

Disillusioned Tourist of the Exhausted Revolution



Russians at the entrance of the GUM department store, Moscow, 1967, Year 50 of the Revolution. This photo tells rather more about Russia than everything else we were shown on this trip. Photo: Author.

Before dealing with my own experience of the Prague Spring and Soviet Winter, I have to deal here with a Soviet summer that preceded it in more than chronological terms. My third visit to the Soviet Union was far less educative or interesting than my previous ones, made whilst I was at the IUS. In the first place this was because I was one member of an official WFTU delegation. In the second place it was because this was for a highly formalised and organised trip marking the 50th anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Since none of my 1957 friends were in town, I was deprived of personal contacts. Boredom was a major feature of this

trip. Another was confirmation of the backwardness of the Soviet Union. Thus, when Scandinavian building-worker unionists publicly raised the question of industrial accidents in the Soviet Union, they were given a short and hostile putdown by the representatives of Soviet building workers, who were, we heard, making their vital contribution to the construction of socialism, as well as of peaceful coexistence and national liberation.¹² Even more depressing was the memorial to the Battle of Stalingrad, held in a city called, curiously, Volgograd. Such attempts to rewrite an uncomfortable history by changing symbols left me more than cold. I had grown up with the memory, or myth, of the Battle of Stalingrad and I was damned if I was going to call this the Battle of Volgograd. Worse was yet to come: the memorial combined gargantuan socialist realism with Soviet sitting-room kitsch (itself dependent on memories of pre-revolutionary bourgeois style).



A WFTU delegation to Russia on the 50th anniversary of the Revolution, Red Square, Moscow, 1967. From the Left: Me (deliberately pissed-off since I had been finally shoehorned into the Lenin Mausoleum), an Indian, the customarily sombre Mark Shope of the South African SACTU, an Iraqi, and WFTU's Bulgarian archivist who was also a freelance labour bibliophile. Photographer: Unknown.

In desperation at the lack of human contact, I turned to our young interpreter. He was my age and we began by exchanging army experiences. He, as an educated young man, had been an officer. I, as a self-admitted Communist, had, of course, been in the rank and file. But,

¹² This falls into the Russian category of *vranya*. This is a combination of Irish blarney and state or nationalist propaganda. *Vranya*, if I have it right is not necessarily intended to be believed, even if the recipient is supposed to accept it. *Vranya* therefore functions more as a demonstration of the loyalty to the state by the one who utters it than to provide either useful information or credible ideas/values.

hey, an army is an army, and compulsory military service is an imposition wherever it takes place. I don't recall him telling me of the brutalisation of Russian conscripts that we have become increasingly aware of. Maybe officers were spared this treatment and left its application to the corporals and sergeants. But if he might be suspected of discretion on such matters, he was unconstrained when telling me of the horrors visited on his Ukrainian peasant family by firstly the invading Nazis and then the liberating Soviets.

Arriving back in Prague, I was summoned to his office by my boss, Chleboun, who asked me what I had been discussing with our interpreter. I told him. He then asked me what my impression of the Soviet Union was. I said: 'A developing country of the Third World, though probably with more uniforms in the streets'. Chleboun hid a smile behind his hand and dismissed me. I was appalled at being so denounced by one of our delegation members. Which one could it have been? I had and have my suspicions but I obviously have no evidence. The bad taste remains in my mouth to this day. I don't like to think about it. I only hope that our interpreter had not had a less tolerant boss than I. I cannot repress this memory because one year later this huge backward country, with its brute-force notion of politics, with its World War Two tanks and peasant conscripts, imposed itself on the tiny peaceful country of Czechoslovakia.

Prague: Abnormal Times

When Czechs referred to the past – to liberal-democratic capitalist republic of the interwar period - they talked of ‘normal times’. This term was not accompanied by any winks, nods, or other indications of irony or cynicism. But the dreadful implication, of course, was that the Czechoslovakia was living in abnormal times. How did we experience these?

Zahradní Město Západ means Garden Town West, and this is where we lived. The original suburb must have been idyllic in the Prague of the interwar years. It consisted of two-storey houses with front gardens. It was grey and rundown by the 1960s, but nicely sited between the centre, maybe 30 minutes by bus, and the public park and reservoir lake at Hostivař, 15 minutes further out. The West part was the new estate of multi-storey blocks, being built as we moved in. We had a first-floor apartment with two bedrooms, a kitchen/diner and a sittingroom. It was utilitarian and badly-finished, the wind whistled round the double windows. The main light in the sittingroom didn't work, simply because it had been wrongly wired and, evidently, untested. We found out because Ruthie had friends from her old kibbutz who had returned to Prague, Dana and Miki, and Miki was an electrician. As for the windows, you could either put your name down on a list and wait forever, or get them done privately, and illegally, which is what we did. It was the first new, real, apartment we had ever had and we were happy to have it. The rent was low and automatically extracted from my pay.

The estate itself must have looked good on paper. It had a nursery, primary school, a communal laundry, and it later got a shopping complex with a supermarket. But when we moved in, Xmas 1966, we had to wade through ankle-deep mud since the Czechs (or Communists?) believed in putting the roads in last rather than first. The communal laundry worked fitfully and then closed down, communally, forever. We were lucky to live on the first floor since the lifts repeatedly broke down. The supermarket was convenient but dreary, and infected by the customary Communist plague of shortages. *Není* and *nemáme* (there isn't any, we haven't got any) were two expressions easy to learn. When there was glass in the yoghurt, the people in the shop would say, ‘What's it got to do with us?’. On finding maggots in the flour, we decided to circumvent the monkey and go straight to the organ-grinder. Neatly-wrapped and accompanied by a letter of complaint (and the ridicule of our Czech translator), it was posted to the Ministry. There was no acknowledgement. Possibly the Minister had other problems on his mind than those of keeping maggots out of flour or satisfying consumers. When an increasingly deep hole developed in one of the new roads out of the estate, it remained for six months or longer, no one from the neighbouring allotment thinking of chucking a couple of spades of earth or stones into it. When everything belongs to the people, no actual person is responsible for anything.

The medical services varied from the elite clinic for foreigners (including foreign staff of the WFTU) to the extremely patchy public services. We had bad experiences calling for ambulances or emergency services.¹³ And a worse one when I came down with high fever and was eventually hospitalised.

Being in an ambulance turned out to be even worse than waiting for one. This one seemed to have no such suspension as we were accustomed to from bourgeois cars. And it

¹³ The Czechoslovak emergency services were to be immortalised in Miloš Forman's black comedy, *The Firemen's Ball*. My favourite scene is the one in which an aged and chair-bound victim of a fire is shivering in the snow as the firemen make desultory attempts to douse his burning home. When they become aware of his condition they pick up the chair to put him closer to the flames. Obviously a parable for state socialism more generally, it was not so understood by the national fireservice, or firemen, who tried to get it banned as libelous.

delivered me to an isolation hospital on a Sunday evening. Unfortunately, I had not packed the picnic Ruthie had prepared for me, along with a fruit knife. It was not yet night but I had arrived too late for a meal - or a doctor. When they rustled up something for me, there was no knife (the hospital apparently thinking that 'infection' implied murderous or suicidal implications: in my case they were right - even though I had no infection). I was freezing, then drenched in sweat and hallucinating. Fortunately the night nurse took pity on me and changed my sheets and blankets several times. By the time I eventually saw a doctor and had a blood test, they could find nothing. I was sent home. One month later I had a second attack. Our friends in Vienna had asked whether I hadn't maybe had a *malaria* attack. This time we drove straight to the hospital for a blood test, which confirmed the malaria. I could hardly blame the Czechs for not recognising the illness, with which they had no familiarity. And experiencing the medical services that the Czechs had to live permanently with was salutary. But the locals, as usual, could checkmate (no pun necessarily intended) any of our little horror stories. One young friend told of having to bribe a hospital nurse to get painkillers for her dying mother. And the customary private 'compensation' of the miserably-paid general practitioners was not only accepted by their patients but defended by the latter. Vladimir, our foreign-trade neighbour, was having severe problems with his son (or vice versa). But there was no such thing as child psychiatry or, for that matter, psychiatry in general (bourgeois? decadent? not in the Soviet example?). Vladimir was therefore confronted with the option of keeping his son at home or putting him in one.

Once we had an apartment, we needed to furnish it, to buy bed-clothes, and to return what had been kindly lent to us by colleagues or friends. We had shipped our books in the original Oxford apple-boxes, which were turned round to become our shelves. I had brought my tools and skills (having once worked on *Do-it-Yourself* magazine). I had even had the foresight to bring capitalist wallplugs. But, silly me, I had forgotten screws. Now, on the Malé Náměstí, in the Old Town, 15 minutes from the WFTU, there had just been re-opened a famous pre-war hardware store, Rott. Unfortunately it closed daily for lunch. This was not intended to prevent office-workers from buying anything during their lunch breaks. But there was clearly no profit in meeting customer needs. Every month, like all stores, it closed a couple of days for 'inventár' (stocktaking). Socialist Rott never had anything one needed: 'Není', 'nemáme'. Having heard our complaints, foreign visitors would say, 'but the shops are always full of goods and shoppers. 'Yes', I would reply, 'they are full of goods no one wants and people looking for things they don't have'. In this socialised version of a hardware store, it would often look as if it was the Month of the Electric Iron, or the Year of the Green 10 Liter Plastic Watering Can. Even when the shops did have something attractive that you wanted, the first thing you had to do on getting it home was to screw it together properly or glue it. One day I was in the private vegetable market that the regime had daringly permitted to open off the Old Town Square. My carrots were wrapped in pages of a catalogue from the prewar Rott hardware store. There were pages of differently-sized screws - of different kinds of metal! I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Jesus would have wept.

Meanwhile at least the youngsters in Prague were circumventing the 10-year-old dowdy fashions of the 1950s. The boys had long hair, both boys and girls were wearing jeans. This meant somehow or other obtaining them on the black market, getting them from foreign family or friends, or buying them off tourists.

Once our children had adapted to Prague, it was great having schools so close and the kids in them all day. This made it possible, after a couple of months, for Ruthie to get a part-time job, correcting or anyway improving the English in the WFTU bulletins. Since none of the

teachers spoke anything but Czech, Danny had a tough time at first, complaining to us pathetically that he couldn't tell the kids about the electricity failure that had stopped all the trams on Wenceslas Square. And the teaching was – as our Viennese friends later confirmed – done on some Austro-Hungarian rather than any existing or imaginable socialist model. It was not, in other words, intended to produce lively, creative children.

With our good joint salary, low living costs, and some hard currency from the WFTU, we could afford to buy a secondhand car. Accompanied by our Chilean friend, Hanns (see below) - no particular expert but a German speaker and car owner - we went to Nuremberg. We took with us handfuls of Czech three crown coins, which by accident or design were the exact size of one German mark. This was an excellent exchange rate and all we had to do in Nuremberg was 1) to purchase this big old Peugeot 304, and 2) raid the slot machines for chocolates, beer, tights, chewing-gum. A little high on this game, Ruthie and Hanns decided to take revenge for everything the Nazis had done to them or their families. They went shoplifting whilst I stood disapproving at the door. It didn't prevent me eating the stolen bananas. But having adapted myself earlier to Western Germany, it gave me no particular kick to go rollicking through the streets joining them in their jointly-excellent German, to sing 'The Whore of Nuremberg'.

The car enabled us to drive to Hostivař lake, summer weekends, up the Vltava to Slapy Dam, to go camping in picturesque Moravia with Ruthie's leftwing Danish friends, Hannah and Henning. They had four children, all with red hair, several with security blankets. Walking along the streets of some small Moravian town with these in tow, abandoning their blankets only to gulp from one-litre bottles of milk, gave the staid locals something to remember. Unfortunately, we lent our Peugeot to Pablo. He was a young Chilean student who had worked in Chile as a mechanic (he said) and worked as ours in Prague. Coming home pissed one night, he drove over the raised pavement of a tram stop, burst two tyres and severely dented two wheel rims. He replaced the tyres. And then we went with him one night to a suburban factory where we literally heaved the wheels over the fence to the friend-of-a-friend inside. The oil that smoothed the wheels of the state-owned anti-economy was provided by this kind of operation. Five years later, in The Hague, an exiled Czech philosopher told me that the only worse thing than the fetishism of commodities was fetishism without commodities. He said that Czechs spent a large amount of their working time and their creative energy in making three- or multi-cornered private deals between what they could provide and what they needed.

Our invisible friend fixed the wheels perfectly, and at reasonable cost. I can't remember whether he threw them back, but he certainly convinced me of the sterling technical capacities and entrepreneurial qualities of the Czech proletariat. The Peugeot went through other adventures that confirmed this confidence. Just before the Soviet invasion, I actually managed to fracture the Peugeot's engine block, driving too fast and too carelessly up a lane to the *Chata* of a retired colonel. During the invasion, my main personal worry was not so much 'escaping to the West' in principle but having enough oil to be able to reach the border in practice. We were eventually informed that the car either had to have a new engine or be considered a write-off. One way or another we sold it through to a couple of other bouncing Czechs. They came to visit us with it some months later. They had driven it to Plzeň, a historical centre of Czech industry (and Pilsener), where they had disassembled the car in someone's garage, built a furnace, and *welded* the engine together again. A pity, indeed, that these qualities didn't go into the production, distribution and exchange of the socialist Škoda. Czechs had no respect for their own cars, the Tatra (which looked and sounded like a V2 rocket and was reserved for the party/state elite) or the Škoda. In town one would see Czechs

bent over the latest Western car, murmuring, ‘that’s a model, man!’. Škoda, in Czech, means, unfortunately, ‘a pity’. When they were later exported to the UK, they became the butt of popular disdain:

Why do Skodas have a rear window wash wipe ?
To remove the flies that crash into them.

I had better conclude our car (mis)adventures here. Xmas 1968, we spent outside Copenhagen with Hannah and Henning. We here attended our best-dressed Anti-Vietnam-War demo ever: fur, or sheepskin, coats were *de riguer*. Temporarily carless, however, we had decided to buy a secondhand Saab, over the water in Malmö. I got one for \$400. The little two-stroke Saab, fitted out at the back with plywood supports so that you could put the back seats down and sleep in it, had for Czechs the allure of all that cars had once been and ought to be (even the artisan element appealed). I put our luggage in the car but – fortunately, as it turned out - sent Ruthie and the kids back to Prague by train. Halfway across the German Democratic Republic to Berlin, the phut-phut pattered out. My suspicion was that the guy at the petrol pump had been pissed off when I had paid him in East Marks rather than money, and filled me up with ordinary Eastern petrol rather than two-stroke. Here I finally realised the value of at least institutional internationalism. I contacted the International Department of the FDGB, which put me up in a hotel and later hauled the Saab to Checkpoint Charlie. This I had looked at with fascinated horror during the Berlin Youth Festival, 1951. It had later figured in one or hotter moments of the Cold War. It also turned up in the disenchanting spy novels of people like John Le Carré. Well, I literally pushed my Saab through the frontline of the Cold War. Then got it hauled to the Saab garage. All this had to be managed in the three months of German I had done in the British Army. I went back to East Berlin while they fixed it. Then I picked it up and tested it on the autobahn in West Berlin. It pattered out again. I sat down and howled like a dog. The police took me back to the garage, where the hard-faced West German proletarians expressed no visible solidarity, though they were prepared to haul it back to Checkpoint Charlie - for a price.

I won’t go into how, in two stages, I got it hauled back to Prague. Well, umm, OK. The FDGB hauled it to the border. And our new young English interpreter friend at the WFTU, Mike, hauled it, with his car, back to Prague. Nor will I detail the stressful wait whilst the one Saab garage in Prague ordered the spare parts and re-bored the engine. Nor even the complex operations by which Vladimir, from upstairs, eventually bought the car from us, but lost our friendship by laying immediate claim to it whilst Ruthie and the kids still had to be fetched from Dana’s *chata*. What I do however have to say is that the sale involved trusting that the corrupt intermediary, in the state-owned Tuzex corporation, was an honest crook (he was, he had a thriving business and a reputation to preserve). Vladimir had got a large amount of crowns from his collective farmer parents, who were just beginning to benefit from agricultural reforms and could not or would not spend the cash they had saved. Suffice it to say that for an investment of \$600, and several years off my life, we made enough money for the family to live on for one year in Birmingham whilst I did my Master’s in West African Studies. And later, of course, with such cosmopolitan experiences behind me, to become a specialist (if a sceptical one) on international solidarity.

Comrades, Friends and Fellow Workers

Soon after Ruthie's arrival at the end of 1966, we began building up a small circle of friends on the estate. Before she began at the ISS, Ruthie was doing private teaching of Dutch and English. This was how we met Maria, who had stopped having sex with her husband but had – like so many others – no other possible accommodation even had she wanted to separate from him. One of Ruthie's English students was Ludmilla, a middle-aged clerical worker, whose husband was dying at home. Our kids, of course, made their own friends. This began with the sleigh on a snow-covered path outside our block, where they learned their first Czech word, *pozor!* (watch out!). Then it was the two half-gipsy boys, living a couple of floors up, wild and noisy where the other Czech kids were quiet and well-behaved. The other was the just-mentioned Vladimir who worked for one of the state foreign-trade concerns. He was actually involved in official, if secret, Czechoslovak trade with Apartheid South Africa. Ostensibly it was with Botswana. On his return from this, his first-ever trip abroad, he defended the Czechoslovak breach of a trade ban the state officially supported, telling us how nice the whites were to the blacks in Johannesburg. 'When they get in the lift, they always say "Good morning John" to the lift-operator'. (Apparently all the lift-operators they greeted happened to be called John).

And then Ruthie found Choli whilst shopping on the estate. Hanns and Choli were Communist Jews from Chile. Hanns was of Sudeten Jewish origin and had fled as a child from the Nazi occupation. I suppose that his father felt (wrongly as it turned out) that Chile was as far away as one could possibly get from fascism. Hanns was a failed businessman who was training as a singer, and teacher of singing, at the academy in Prague. Choli was a journalist, now working on the Spanish section of Radio Prague. They had three kids, Vera who was in her awful teenager period, Pauli who was in the middle somewhere, and Carlita, who was the same age as Danny. Their flat was the same size as ours, and at one time they sublet one room to a Chilean student couple. Despite our shared ethnic and political background, they were, as Latin Americans, quite exotic to us. Their house was always full, noisy and messy, with drooping kids up all hours. Hanns and Choli had moved from left Zionism into Communism, and Hanns was some kind of senior Chilean Communist in Prague – at least in age. They were both multilingual, though Hanns complained that he spoke four languages perfectly, all with a Yiddish accent. Hanns was chubby, irreverent and extrovert, Choli thin, intellectual and intense. We were in and out of each other's houses, trading horror stories, Jewish and Anti-Communist jokes – not to speak of Jewish Anti-Communist ones. We introduced our Czech friends and foreign visitors to each other, shared meals and survived Communism together.

Things happened to Hanns. Thus, he went back to his hometown to look at the family house and factory. Here he met an old friend of his father who, over drinks, retailed the customary horror stories about life under Communism. Hanns, who had recently arrived in Prague, felt increasingly uncomfortable under this stream of complaint. 'Look,' he said, 'You know my father but you don't know me'. He then pulled out of his pocket his Chilean Communist Party membership card. 'Oh', said the man, pulling a Czech Party card out of his own pocket, 'I've got one of those too'. Not so funny was the occasion on which Hanns was looking after a veteran working-class Chilean Communist delegate, who he had had to deliver to the Party's hotel for foreign visitors. When Hanns picked him up the following day, the Chilean comrade told him he had changed a few dollars for crowns with the porter. Hanns then severely damaged the guy's faith in socialism by telling him that this was illegal. When he found out how crowns the Chilean comrade had got for his few dollars, Hanns added that the

Czech comrade had also ripped him off by paying him under the well-established black-market rate.

We also became close to my old American ISS friend, Joy, from the IUS. Joy and Jiří lived in another such estate as ours, on the other side of a valley and river, not yet built over. We could walk there and the kids could play with theirs, who were about the same age as ours since they had been latecomers. Joy and Jiří were five or ten years older than we were, but Jiří still had his blond, boyish looks. He was the introvert, she the extrovert. They neither drank nor smoked and Jiří jogged. He was a party member and worked at some academy on the Russian-Czech dictionary. Joy was still very much the Communist but had never joined the Czech party. She might have been working fulltime in some international organisation at this time, but she would have also been doing freelance translation. If Jiří was determined about his Communism, Joy would dismiss the problems and enthuse about the principle or about the way things were gradually improving.

Dana and Miki had jumped out of the Israeli frying pan into the Czechoslovak freezer. Well, originally, of course, they had survived the European fire and gone to Israel. There they had been on the same socialist kibbutz as Ruthie. But they had eventually become disenchanted with Israel and returned to Prague. I don't recall ever meeting such a sad couple. They lived in a decent apartment, actually in the same street as the FAMU film school I had frequented the first time I was in Prague. She was involved in some dreary and badly-paid homeworking. They had two nice girls. They also had a little *chata* (cottage) on a river, maybe 30-40 minutes by train from Prague. And Miki, being a technician, they were gradually improving it. As Ruthie noted, it was only in their *chatas* and on holiday that the Czechs really came alive. Or that we saw them come alive.

My only real Czech friend at work was my charming, but burned-out, co-educator colleague and senior, Jaroslav Těhle. Jarda was a friendly and sophisticated person who looked – as he proudly proclaimed – more like a southern than a northern Slav. His habitual appearance was one of exhaustion, in part due to a mountaineering accident in the Soviet Union. He was a post-1945 Communist, who spent much of his – of our - time in the office telling me stories about African union politicking, the WFTU's contributions to such, the history and culture of Czechoslovakia, his modest if courageous role in the uprising at the end of World War Two, his arbitrary persecution at the height of Stalinism in the early-1950s. All of this was highly educative but hardly productive. Or, it was hardly productive but highly educative. It was Jarda of course, who told me about the Stalinist rain that had followed the reign of Stalin. Before coming to the WFTU he had worked in the Education Department of the national trade union organisation, the ROH (the Revolutionary Trade Unions – a body with its origins in the Profintern of the 1930s). He had also produced the usual propaganda tracts for the ROH (Těhle 1961). Jarda had highschool education but was further self-educated. This was true also for his fluent French and his limited English. His mode of operation was strictly artisanal. When he had to prepare a course for North Africa, he would do urgent, late and rapid work with scissors and paste, reconstructing previous texts. He was without ambition or arrogance. He was once told in the Soviet Union that he could get a Ph.D. on the basis of his teaching texts and reports. All he had to do was add an introduction and conclusion and they would translate the whole into Russian. But Jarda was too modest to accept such a patched-together doctorate. With the foreign currency saved from his travel per diems he bought, from the Tuzex dollar shops in Prague, not the electronic equipment that others dreamed of but crates of his favourite Czech beer when this was unavailable for crowns. His ambition in life was to retire to a forester's cottage somewhere in Bohemia. Jarda threw himself body and soul

into the Prague Spring. I think there was not too much soul left following the invasion and 'normalisation'. After I left the Communist world in 1969 (and the world of Communism in 1970), it was Jarda who purged selected fellow office reformists, stating to me later 'it's better that I did this than some Stalinist'. Which raises the question of whether one has to talk like one, rather than act like one, to be called one. The last sign of life I have been able to find of him is his editing of an official history of the Czechoslovak unions (Těhle 1984). I *have* found his name in a post-1989 listing of StB agents. But the listing was unofficial and disputed. I hope that he wasn't an agent of the secret police as well as the Party. He was a good man but in the wrong place at the wrong time. I was very fond of Jarda and, whilst writing this chapter, had a dream about being in his apartment in Prague, chatting warmly (in what possible language?) with his wife – physically sick and psychologically traumatized from their treatment in the 1950s. On the one occasion in two and a half years, on which I, or we, had been invited to his apartment, Jarda had had to translate for her...



The Rome African Trade Union Seminar of the WFTU and the CGI, 1969. Left: Renato Bitossi, a leading Communist, a leader of the CGIL and of the WFTU. Middle: my Czech colleague, Jaroslav Těhle. Photo: Author.

The South African in the African Department was Mark Shope, a historical leader of the South African trade union movement, but in Prague a landed fish, who talked little, knew no Czechs, spoke no Czech, and apparently lived only for the rare trips to meet his ANC comrades in East Africa. When he told us that his wife was coming, we helped move him into an apartment. Gertrude, when she turned up, was a much warmer person. I was not too surprised to later find that after the end of Apartheid she had become a leading figure within the ANC and then a Member of Parliament. Mark's distance from me may have been a matter of political distrust on his part. He was a true believer and I wasn't. When I met him by chance, many years later, at Lagos Airport, I greeted him with pleasure, but he refused my outstretched hand and walked straight by. It was only after his death in 1998 that I came to understand what Mark was really doing in Czechoslovakia at that time. These are extracts from an obituary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu):

Cde Mark Shope was the former General Secretary of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). He represented SACTU at the World Federation of Trade Unions, which was based in Prague, Czechoslovakia. He was the founder member of Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU) and also of the Southern African Trade Union Co-ordinating Council (SATUCC). He was a self-taught educator. This was evident by the fact that he was for a long time heading the education department of SACTU. He was a Commissar in the people's army Umkhonto We Sizwe. He was taught to read and write by the Communist party. He was one of South Africa's outstanding working class intellectuals, who embraced the revolutionary philosophy of Marxism-Leninism.

Cde Shope was a staunch internationalist and a close friend of the former Soviet Union and other socialist countries including Cuba. He represented the South African Congress of Trade Unions at all the international trade union and labour conferences, particularly the ILO annual Conferences. He was primarily instrumental in training trade union cadres from home during the underground struggle in exile, and also in the underground structures internally.

As an MK soldier, he was amongst the first MK people who went for training in the Soviet Union. He was a leading member of the South African Communist Party. He represented the ANC in Nigeria as a Chief Representative to garner support from Nigerians to support the SA Struggle.¹⁴

Mark, it thus appears, was a figure more typical of the (semi-)clandestine Communist unionists of the Profintern period than of that of the WFTU. But, then, the position of the South African people and workers was also more typical of that past period also.

The British contingent already at the IUS when I arrived consisted of the Communists Brian Barton, of Tim, and of Tim's quite apolitical and rather dumb friend. Brian Barton, married with two kids, lived two stops from us. But he did WFTU work with the ILO or the UN, in Geneva or New York, and we didn't see so much of him. Tim was living with a Czech girl he eventually married. They went to the UK where Tim became a regional secretary for some trade union. One way or another, each of these guys, couples or families had their own lives in Prague so there was no such community of Brits as we had had at the IUS. With Brian Bicat and his wife, Inge, Gerry Pocock and his wife, Ann, it was clearly different in so far as these had been friends and comrades in Oxford, and they had kids more or less the age of ours. I seem to recall Ann and Gerry turning up after the invasion, but Brian and Inge arrived earlier, which is how he was involved with Monty Johnstone and I in writing our protest letter to the British CP (see below). Our relations with these friends were more domestic than political. Indeed, it now seems to me that in so far as the British unions had no formal relations with the WFTU, and since the British CP was concentrating on national union work, it had an ever-decreasing interest in the organisation. Or, for that matter, in us. So that whilst the Chilean CP might have had a continuing interest in the Chilean Communist community in Prague, the British one did not even consult us on the Soviet invasion! When Sam Russell, Foreign Editor of the *Morning Star* was in Prague, in the wake of the invasion, he didn't even give us a buzz. With occasional exceptions, I guess we considered ourselves technicians or professionals, thus

¹⁴ http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/people/shope_m.html.

recognising the disinterest in us of both the party we came from and the organisation we were working for. We might lunch together, go on picnics with each other and various Czech friends, and gossip together. But that was about it.

We became good friends of Marita and Ibrahim. Ibrahim was an Iraqi Communist who had been, at one time, the Arabic editor of *World Student News*. This was the IUS magazine of which I had been the English editor. But he was now the Iraqi representative on *World Marxist Review*, the last gasp of the international Communist movement, which had its offices in Prague. Marita was Finnish. They had met as students in Paris and French was their common language. And, in between his two periods in Prague, she had accompanied him, in 1959, back to Baghdad. There, if I rightly remember, she had worked at the Finnish embassy. But he, as a Communist, had fallen foul of one authoritarian regime or another – or one after another. He had survived in hiding, evidently supported by Marita. As a couple of cosmopolitan Communists, we got on well with them. I remember going with them to the apartment of Hanns and Choli, where Hanns, in an apron, was doing the cooking. He, hoping to shock at least the Arab one, said, ‘I just have to breastfeed the baby and I’ll be right with you’. And then there were the predictably intense discussions about Israel, which in 1967 had launched its victorious six-day war against Egypt and Syria. As we will see below, we also shared with them the Soviet invasion. Eventually, after we left, they also left Prague and *again* returned to Iraq.¹⁵

When the Prague Spring really took off, around April 1968, we were overwhelmed by visitors from the West who had come to see ‘socialism with a human face’.¹⁶ At the same time we were helping our Czech neighbours to go, for the first time in their lives, to visit the West. At one moment I think we had three sets of apartment keys. When the Russians invaded, we had in our house my old YCL and CP dissident friend, Monty Johnstone, his wife Val, and one or two of their kids. We also hosted, maybe earlier, my *Youth Against the Bomb* and YCL friend, John Hoyland, his new wife, Wisty and their even newer baby. John and Wisty were definitely of the Flower Power generation, long, thin, scruffy, grass-smoking, and not too particular about the cleanliness of their baby. John informed us, straight-faced, that the major cultural phenomenon of the decade was the Beatles. We had just about *heard* of the Beatles but the idea of a rock group as the vanguard of world culture had not occurred to us, isolated as we were on the square side of the Iron Curtain, in the middle of another kind of cultural revolution. John and Wisty also turn up, in photos in Sheila Rowbotham’s evocative account of the 1960s (Rowbotham 2000:Photos 7,8). Here John looks even thinner. He was now heavily involved with the independent Marxist paper, *Black Dwarf*.

Thirty-five years later I still meet people who tell me they had been at our place in Prague at this time. One was a close friend, before and after, Sarah from Oxford, with her little girl, Zillah. I had simply forgotten they had been there. Not only were we mentally and emotionally overwhelmed by the Prague Spring, but in this same half year I had been to Nigeria for a month, and then on a short diplomatic trip to the Guinea of Sekou Toure. Because

¹⁵ We lost touch with Ibrahim and Marita after we left Prague. I rediscovered them by searching online for ‘marita finland iraq’ around 2005. By this time they had finally left Iraq and returned to Helsinki. Marita had had a longish interview with an English-language newspaper in Finland (Nousiainen 2004). I finally met up with them again when visiting Helsinki for the first time, 2008. It was a very gratifying reunion, especially bearing in mind the few other survivors of Prague 1968 I have been able to track down.

¹⁶ For a short account of the Prague Spring, the Invasion and its consequences, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prague_Spring.

I had had no warning of this second trip, I forgot to take my anti-malarials, and there was no one at the WFTU who was responsible for reminding staff about such matters. So this is how I got my dose of malaria. It took me a good six months to fully recover. I could have died and I don't suppose that the WFTU would have provided Ruthie with more than some token compensation and tickets home. Anyway, the result of all this and the eventual invasion was that I have forgotten all but a few of those who visited at this time.

So far I have mentioned the Soviet invasion in passing or dealt with the WFTU reaction to it. It is time to deal with it in more detail and as we experienced it.¹⁷ I kept a diary for the first four or five days of the invasion [Box]

¹⁷ Because of its unlikely name, I only recently discovered the account of Alan Levy (1980). Even its original title, *Rowboat to Prague*, 1972, was only marginally more suggestive than its 1980 one. Levy was an American journalist who arrived just before the Prague Spring and was expelled during the Prague Winter. Living close to the Castle, on the side of the airport, from whence the first Soviet troops came, he saw much more violence than we did. Knowing or meeting numerous significant actors, he gives a detailed and well-documented account of the Soviet occupation and dismantling of the Prague Spring. A movie of Milan Kundera's novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, appeared about 20 years later, just before the collapse of Communism in Czechoslovakia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Unbearable_Lightness_of_Being. Both novel and film have always puzzled me since I have always felt that life is quite weighty - if not unbearably so. The most impressive part of the movie for me was the reconstruction of the Soviet invasion of Prague, using original documentary material as well as, I recall, some high-tech montage. Particularly effecting was the scene in which Tereza gives her camera film to a Dutch tourist to take out and publish. I had played the role of the Dutch tourist, one day after the invasion. However, the overall impression presented by director Philip Kaufman, was one more appropriate to Budapest, 1956, than to Prague, 1968. The bloodshed was, in Prague, limited, though vicious enough (see Levy here). And the repression was carried out over years by Czechs rather than immediately by Russians. Although the film was impressive for one made in a location other than Prague itself, it might have been even more so if it had been made and a year or two later in Prague itself and by someone like Miloš Forman. The photo of the burning tank on page 35 below was made and given to me on the first day of the invasion, by a Czech playing the role of Kundera's Tereza. I passed the film to Monty Johnston who published some of the photos in a British Communist Party publication.

August 1968: The Re-imposition of Abnormality

I now find curious what I did and didn't put in the diary. Some of my own recollections can be dated, others not. The chronological order is blurred. On the first day of the invasion, for example, I went to the office, where, as stated earlier, I exchanged shocked words with my department head, Chleboun. I came back home to report what I had seen. In the meantime, Czech passive resistance had turned, pathetically, to removing road signs and even our names next to the bells at the front of our block. The illuminated direction signs at the major road junctions, which had only been introduced a year or so previously, were all smashed. I guess that it was about midnight that we got to bed.

But, despite having been up since five a.m., I could not sleep. I began reading Wyndham's science fiction novel, 'The Day of the Triffids' (Wyndham 1951). It seemed appropriate to the invasion of the Soviet triffids.¹⁸ I had just about fallen into exhausted sleep when, at around five a.m. on Thursday the 22nd, the bell rang. I opened the front door to find Robin Blackburn (then the shaggy-haired Editor of *New Left Review*) and his beautiful Chinese wife (who later died, tragically young). She had her hair *en bouffant* and wore a chic green minisuit. He carried a big red Samsonite suitcase. Who was living in the real world?

We were living in the khaki and iron socialist world of the 1940s where politics was a matter of who had the most tanks and the least scruples. In our world they painted on the walls, 'A Nation That Oppresses Others Cannot Itself Be Free (Karl Marx)'. Or 'Come Back Lenin, Brezhnev's Gone Crazy!'. *They* came from a brightly-coloured capitalist world, with news of other 1968s, where students shouted 'Demand the Impossible Now'.¹⁹ Robin and his wife had been on their way from a 1968 event in Vienna to another in Scandinavia. Their train had crossed the border without problems but then stopped for the duration at a suburban station that happened to be near our suburb. Robin had been invited to Prague by Monty, who was a friend of his and a contributor to NLR. Later, As Robin and I watched the nervous Soviet tank crews and anguished crowds in the debris-covered Wenceslas Square, he asked me whether it was not time to break with Communism. Of course it was, but at that moment I was more concerned with getting enough oil and petrol to *escape* it if necessary. Shortly afterwards I started having a new

¹⁸ Indeed, there is even a suggestion in the novel that the triffids had been invented by Soviet pseudo-scientist, Lysenko. What in 1951 was a Western Cold War fantasy became for us an Eastern Cold War reality. The triffids, incidentally, were three-legged creatures or machines. I don't recall whether, like other such sci-fi aliens, they eventually succumbed to some banal earthly disease. But the Soviet triffids eventually, of course, did. The disease was the capitalist market - and liberal democracy (or a neo-liberal equivalent of both).

¹⁹ At the same time internationalism was being reinvented, practically if not theoretically, by student rebellion in Western Europe. This is how it was experienced by a budding socialist-feminist in the UK:

Our internationalism was implicit and simply taken for granted. It did not occur to us to justify or explain why we were connected to [Martin Luther] King or to [Rudi] Dutschke. These assumed attitudes of an era are often most puzzling to people subsequently. One influence on us had been CND, which had always included peace protesters from other countries. There had also been the anti-colonial movements and the connection to southern Africa. Then came the war in Vietnam, along with opposition to the regime of the right-wing Greek Colonels... This internationalism was much more than an abstract political idea, because the students who came [to the UK] brought information and radical ideas from their own milieux. Friendship and love affairs made the connections to other countries' predicaments all the closer. International relations were thus personal as well as political. (Rowbotham, 2000:172)

recurrent dream: of five minutes on Soviet TV, during which I poured out scorn, ridicule and righteous anger on Brezhnev, in front of an audience of 200 million.

It was either on this day or one later that I went to Vinohradská - its change of name from Stalinová now appearing distinctly premature. On Vinohradská, a few blocks above Vaclavské, there stood the premises of Radio Prague, which had figured prominently in previous occupations and liberations. And here I witnessed one of those peaks of the collective spirit that we need to preserve for the long troughs in which none occur. All the windows within one or two blocks of Radio Prague had been either blasted or shot out. Down on the avenue, lines of trucks with window glass were lined up. On the pavement there stood trestles where glasscutters were cutting glass to size. Others were bringing windows down, each coded for the floor, room and particular window frame. Yet other workers were putting in putty. Within a day and maybe within hours every broken window had been repaired and refitted. I had, for one out of all my days in Prague, seen the socialist division of labour, the socialist work ethic, the expression of proletarian solidarity. I had seen the future and it worked. Just for one extraordinary time and place.

The WFTU office remained closed, the shops had been stripped bare by citizens with Central European reflexes. There was no public entertainment – though I did manage to see uncut rushes of film shot by courageous cameramen. Pelikán was, of course, nowhere to be found. At one point, indeed, the Party leadership disappeared, having been kidnapped by the Soviets and held in isolation until they agreed to a Russian-dictated formula. Only one of them refused to sign, František Kriegel (Levy 1980:293). As they were leaving, defeated, to justify themselves to a restive population (and an army that had confined itself to barracks), they could hardly avoid noting that Kriegel²⁰ (a Jew from Galicia who was also a Spanish and Chinese Civil War veteran) was not amongst them. The Russians explained that they were keeping Kriegel, the only member of the ‘delegation’ who had refused to sign a declaration that clearly threatened what little independence Czechoslovakia had after 1948 or extended in 1968. This must have been as humiliating for the non-Jewish Party and State leaders as it was galling for the Russians. Here was a ‘rootless cosmopolitan’ now behaving as a ‘bourgeois nationalist’²¹ – thus combining the evils that had so far prevented the inevitable global triumph of Soviet Communism. But the for the non- (*continued Page 30*)

²⁰ A Charta 77 website records:

František Kriegel was born in Stanislav (today Ivano-Frankovsk) in 1908 to an Austrian father and a Jewish mother. Due to his Jewish origin, he was prohibited from studying at a Polish university (numerus clausus). He graduated from the Medical Faculty of the German Charles University in Prague. In 1935, he joined the international brigades in Spain. During 1940-1945, he fought the Japanese army in China and Burma. He returned to Czechoslovakia in 1945. During 1960s, he was a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, a Member of Parliament, and Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. In 1968, he was elected Chairman of the National Front and a member of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. On 21 August 1968, he was arrested and forcefully abducted to Moscow. He was the only Czechoslovak politician who refused to sign the Moscow Dictate. A signatory of Charta 77, he died in 1979 persecuted by authorities and spied on by the police.
<http://zpravodajstvi.ecn.cz/index.stm?apc=ztlx1--&x=1818539>

²¹ For these terms from the Soviet vocabulary, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rootless_cosmopolitan, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bourgeois_nationalism.

Prague, August 20-25, 1968²²

Tuesday, August 20

At nine o'clock in the evening a group of us shook hands with Jiří Pelikán, Head of Czechoslovak Television, outside his headquarters in Gorky Square. We had spent two hours with him talking about the democratisation process. I had fixed up the discussion with him for a Communist friend [Monty Johnston] from England and took along also two Latin American comrades.

He was nervous and inattentive, having one eye on the TV set across the room, answering phone calls, and talking with an assistant. But he still wanted to talk with us, and even promised me that we would meet again the following week to discuss the last question I put to him. This was on the forms of struggle against deformations of socialism during the Novotny era. This was a disguised way of asking 'What did you do, how did you resist, during this period?' [Pelikán (1975) suggests independence of mind rather than political assertion].

A couple of things he said stick unforgettably in mind. He said the situation vis-a-vis the Soviet Union was extremely tense and would remain so until the Extraordinary Congress [of the Czechoslovak Party] on September 9. We followed this up by asking him whether he thought there was a danger of a Soviet invasion. He said yes, he thought there was.

We arrived home to find a small party in progress. Two Arab Communists who work in Prague were there. Mustapha [Ibrahim Al-yitayim], who also worked with Pelikan [and me in the IUS] some years back, asked what he thought. 'He thinks that there is still a danger of a Soviet invasion'. There was a chorus of different shouts: 'You see:', 'They are terrible, these Czechs!' and so on. 'Look,' I said, 'That's his personal view. It's not mine. That's his judgment but ours is different'.

It was not that I thought that the Soviets would not invade as a matter of principle. I knew from personal experience (particularly from study of the problem of anti-semitism in the Soviet Union a few years ago) that the present Soviet regime did not let Marxist principles discourage it from actions that could serve even the shortest-term interests. But I was convinced that, despite the continuation of such aberrations, that the general post-20th Congress development in the Soviet Union had been in the other direction. I simply believed that an invasion could not serve the interests of the Soviet Union, even as

²² These are extracts from a typed diary covering Tuesday August 21-Sunday August 25, with a gap on Thursday 23. We had no idea what was going to happen to either us or our friends. For this reason some names are changed. Square brackets indicate my comments. The diary amounts to around seven single-spaced pages.

viewed by the military.

Wednesday, August 21

The doorbell woke me the way it does in books. A repeated prolonged ringing forced me to the door. There stood a stony-faced group of our Latin American neighbours. I thought: one of their kids is missing. Pedro [Hanns] said, 'The Russians have invaded'.

It was five o'clock. I walked around the room. 'Are you sure? Are you sure?'. 'Listen' they said. From above the ceiling of cloud came the continuous moan of heavy aircraft. 'They're mad. They're fucking mad. Now they've bloody well done it.' Ruthie and the kids woke up. We switched on the television. It was blank.

We switched on two radios, one for the Czech broadcasts, one for foreign news. The Czech radio gave us the news. It told people to keep away from the radio building, to avoid provocations, not to build barricades. I went to call Monty and managed to wake him without disturbing Val and the kids. He came back over to our flat. We called the young Dutch couple who were staying upstairs from us. We began to think of practical problems: whether the border was open, food, petrol for the cars. Outside, people were going to work, ignorant of what was going on. We called to the guy from the waterworks. He didn't seem to understand us. Just waved and drove off. The radio was asking people to report to their workplaces anyway.

By the time we got to the shops there were big queues forming. I remember that even at the time of Hungary [November 1956] there was a panic buying of food. It had been impossible to buy many items for a fortnight after. Nobody knew what was going to happen. But everyone expected the worst and bought as much as they could afford or carry. Down at the petrol pump there was a queue a half mile long, with three tails. There was some arguing with people like myself who were going to the front with cannisters. But the one woman was serving stolidly and no one was pushing. People were grouped around transistors.

Whenever it was realised we were foreigners, we were approached by Czechs speaking German. One of them: 'What do you think of this? Look what they are doing to us. That is Communism.' I answer, 'That is not Communism, that is Stalinism!' 'Ha!' he jeers at my Marxist hairsplitting. Another comes from the tyre factory across the road. It is already decorated with signs supporting Dubček and Svoboda. Others in Russian tell the troops to go home. The man says the factory is on strike and will stay so until the troops withdraw. He invites us over. Later, Monty goes, but I have to pick up Ruthie with the shopping and I am also concerned to get to Inge and Brian [Bicat] who may not yet know what is going on. As I turn back to our flats, Soviet jeeps with white markings come down the road from Hostivař.

Friday, August 23

[...]The trade unions yesterday began preparations for going underground though they are not so far surrounded. The new Central Committee has been elected by [an extraordinary] Party Congress held secretly in Prague (probably in one of the big factories). Already yesterday the shooting came to an end, I think. Yesterday evening a mass protest meeting had been called for Vaclavské Namestí, which is full of Soviet tanks. But appeals were radioed not to attend it since it might lead to bloodshed. At the time of the meeting the square was surrounded by pickets turning people away. The meeting did not take

place.

Now it is midday. A General Strike of one hour has been called for. Bells and sirens are sounding over the city. The radio appeals to factory workers who wanted to go out on the streets not to do so. Svoboda [the President] is on his way to Moscow. The radio says his best support is order [...]

Yesterday we saw the statements of the Czech TUs to the world's workers and to the workers of the Warsaw Powers. The TUs also appeal to WFTU for action. The ICFTU took a position already yesterday. Unfortunately the full Secretariat is not available in Prague. It could produce a majority for the Czechs, I think. Whatever the outcome, it is difficult to imagine in what form the organization could survive...

Saturday, August 24

A quiet day for us.

We have enough food, so no need to queue. Instead we spent the morning visiting friends. On the way we stopped to talk with Soviet soldiers. Conversation:

Me: I am an English Communist.

Them: You are not Communists.

Me: I know what Communism is. The Italian Party is against. The French Party is against.

Them: The German Communists who fought Hitler are for us.

Me: I live here. I work here for the [World Federation of Trade Unions]. I see no counter-revolution. Where is the counter-revolution? [...]

M[arita] tells us that S[Ibrahim] was in a suicidal mood the previous day. Reports about Czech who made Russians drive on the road by standing on a grass-covered island that they had been driving over. [...]

In the evening S and M come again. S seems to have recovered enough from his suicidal mood to say that the new CP leadership has many anti-communists in it! He seems, however, to agree with me that there are more 'anti-communists' in the Soviet and other parties...

Sunday, August 25

Even quieter.

There is a Sunday mood and Sunday weather. The news reports night-time shooting by the Soviets at police cars and anything else that moved. Although most of the radio reports seem accurate, I think one must tend to discount the most sensational items. The mass arrests did not take place. The Russians did not release criminals en masse from Pankrac (they took over the prisons mainly because the governors said they would not take anybody in without due process of law). One would have to go to the hospitals to get the actual results of the night's occupation.

About 9.0 we go off in two cars with V[Czech Communist friend of Hanns and Choli?] to see the sights. 'Dubčekova Třída', 'Svobodova Třída', etc. We stop at the top of Václavské [Wenceslas Square] for photos of the statue of Wenceslas, crowded with young people, speakers with or without microphones, posters, flowers and slogans. The Russian

tanks have wisely withdrawn off the square. A car is besieged by people seeking the latest underground newspaper or print [leaflet?]. During our morning trip we gather a good half dozen.

On the corner of Jungmannová we sight two Soviet officers. We stop the car and get out to talk to them. They do not want to stop. One is willing to talk while moving but he seems physically nervous. The other is silent. I take on the nervous one with V. Ruth tackles the other. My one listens but does not properly answer when I ask him through V whether anyone he has met has welcomed him here. He begins to tell V that they have found arms and that counter-revolutionaries have been shooting at them. He reassures us by saying that talks are going on in Moscow and everything will come out alright.

Ruthie has more luck with her one, who openly expresses his unhappiness with the situation. Just as we are finishing a Czech tells us in English that we should not speak to the Russians. The radio has asked people not to fraternise any more. Personally I find this regrettable as these guys are getting the facts of life from the Czechs. Also, of course, about the only thing we can do is to show them our Party cards and argue with them that as Communists we are against this, that it is Stalinism etc. However, I guess that if the decision is non-fraternisation it should be complied with. Anyhow there is little new to say to them and it may be one more lesson that the population is turning colder as time passes.[...]

We are still all waiting for Svoboda [the President, still not returned from a forced trip to Russia] to come back. I think that the situation has normalised enough for the nation to wait several more days for his return. On Saturday many people seemed to be going to work. The shops were open. The trams and buses were running, although apparently not a complete service [...]

This evening I heard the 'official' TV. Heard because there was only a picture of Prague. They dare not show the faces of their announcers. Their programme is laughable. The arguments are puerile. They have nothing to say. The whole thing must be put up [by] the MVD or whatever the Russians call the OGPU [various names of Soviet state security] these days. There is not even an appeal to do anything such as keeping calm (which they are doing anyway at the request of their own radio) or cooperating with the occupation authorities (who never get out of their tanks).

Th[ere] are news reports of protest in the Five countries [that invaded]. Christ, what have they done to themselves? They have stored up enough internal friction to threaten each of the existing regimes. This operation could have been better organized if it had been done by the CIA. I fear for the security of the socialist world.



A shot from a roll of photos pressed into my hand when the photographer recognized me as a foreigner. This was outside the Radio Prague building on Vinohradská (formerly Stalinova), a historical site of popular struggle in Prague. The tank has been clearly set afire. Photographer: unknown.



Bearing a bloodstained flag, young people cross the Old Town Square, Prague, August 21, 1968. Photo: Author.



'Why?' A postcard in both Czech and Russian



Svoboda means freedom and Czechs were both removing street names and replacing them with 'Freedom Avenue'. But *Svoboda* was also the name of the Czech General and President whom protesters were hoping, in vain, would defend or save them from the Russians. Photo: Author.



One or two days after the invasion I sign a petition of protest on the base of the monument to King Wenceslas. A slogan has been painted on it in Russian for the hypothetical interest of the occupying force. Photographer: Unknown.

Jewish Party and State leaders as it was galling for the Russians. Here was a ‘rootless cosmopolitan’ now behaving as a ‘bourgeois nationalist’²³ – thus combining the evils that had so far prevented the inevitable global triumph of Soviet Communism. But the idea of abandoning Kriegel to the Russians was too much for the Czechoslovaks, with their memory of Masaryk’s stand against anti-semitism, and perhaps also of shameful trials of the 1950s with which they had been complicit. The Russians reluctantly let the Czechoslovaks have their diabetic Jew back. And the leaders of the Party-State returned to gradually permit or impose ‘normalisation’ on an increasingly depressed and defeated population.

Back in our apartment Monty, Brian Bicat and I drafted a letter to the CPGB and/or the *Morning Star*. This was eventually signed by the eight British Communists resident in Prague whom we could find:

- We totally condemn the present occupation of Czechoslovakia...
- This invasion took place three weeks before the date fixed for the Czechoslovak Communist Party congress, the majority of whose delegates were known to support Dubček and his new course...
- Despite the provocation of having foreign troops occupying their country for the second time in 30 years, the overwhelming majority of the Czechoslovak people...have reacted with calm and dignity...

²³ For these terms from the Soviet vocabulary, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rootless_cosmopolitan, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bourgeois_nationalism.

- The pervading calm is due entirely to the responsible position of those Czechoslovak organisations, journals and radio stations still at liberty.
- No new government formed unconstitutionally under external pressure should under any circumstances be treated as the legitimate representative of the Czechoslovak people.
- Support the Czechoslovak Communists' appeal to us to mobilise support... Condemn the action of the five powers and demand the immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops.



'Our Commander is Svoboda' (in Russian), on the front of a burned-out bus, Vaclavské Náměstí. Foreground: Robin Blackburn, editor of *New Left Review*. Photo: Author.

A few days later I drafted another such document, referring to the

Extraordinary 14th Congress of the Party, organised and held despite the occupation forces in a factory in the centre of Prague's greatest factory area. Protected by the People's Militia and the rank-and-file workers, this Congress saw the overcoming of differences between tendencies and between social groups... It registered full support for the Dubček leadership, for the New Course and for condemnation of intervention.

There was also a crossed-out final clause:

We believe the Soviet action to represent the crudest and most desperate actions of a degenerate, bureaucratic, autocratic Stalinism. We have confidence in the democratic, human and internationalist forces that are developing within the Soviet Union. We believe that their triumph can be speeded by the most frank and forceful expression of opinion by the world revolutionary movement.

Reflecting on this possibly unmailed document and my self-censorship of the last utopian paragraph, a strange parallel now occurs to me. This is of the character in a novel by the internally-exiled Ignazio Silone, who travels to Rome to see the great and benevolent Mussolini on a demonstration. Returning, disappointed, to his village, he declares that the real, virtuous, Mussolini has been usurped by an evil impostor. In our, or anyway my, case in Prague, with the awful evidence around me, I was still expressing faith in a real and virtuous Communism, or at least in its possibility.

One or two days after the invasion I had managed, via the British Embassy, to send a message to Ray that we were alive and safe. On August 29th I wrote her a longer letter:

The reasons we want to hang on here are several. We feel in no personal danger. The political atmosphere is good – because there is a genuine 99 percent support for Dubček. We are now admirers of the Czech national character – for which I had only moments of appreciation in the past. We feel we are in on history and don't want to miss it...Finally, we do have emotional ties with people and the country, having shared with them that sudden liberation of spring and the even more sudden end it was put to. There have been not many moments in my life when I could feel that I, as a Communist, was so immediately identified with the hopes of so many people. This relationship of mutual confidence and mutual development through interaction is not something I would like to give up. It is an opportunity thrown up rarely by history and that does not usually last too long.

As hope died there began a flood of apocryphal stories about the creative forms taken by the not-so-passive resistance. Some of these were grim (even Grimm) tales, such as the one about the Russian tank-crew lured away from their tank by friendly Czechs, wined and dined, to return to it and find the gun had been neatly removed by an oxyacetylene torch. The jokes, of course, were finer, if only marginally less cruel:

It is one a.m. in the small Slovak town of Pavlovce nad Uhom, a few kilometers along a dusty road from the Soviet border. It also happens to be August 21, 1968... Grey-faced, unshaven workers from the local quarry, and labourers from the giant cooperative farm, are drowning their sorrows in beer, wine and

slivovitz - successively. A lone dark gipsy in ragged clothes plays a mournful air on his fiddle.

Suddenly the door bursts off its hinges. In the doorway stands a gigantic Soviet marine officer, flanked by smartly-dressed, blue bereted, soldiers, whose AK47s scan the small crowd. Bar tables are overturned, beer sloshes over shoes, the customers stand petrified, their hands hesitatingly over their heads.

The officer indicates that they should lower their hands and takes out a piece of paper, from which he reads, in Russian and bad Slovak: '*Tovarishchi!* You, here, new Worker, Peasant, People Government Socialist Czechoslovakia. You invite brotherly Soviet Army liberate you against West German Zionist Imperialist Revanchist *provokatsiya*. You, until 02.15 hours, please decide Ministry position. I go.'

At 2.15 he reappears, with his guards. He points at the gipsy violinist, now slumped in a corner. 'You, what Ministry you?' 'Me?' gasps the gipsy, struggling drunkenly to his feet'. 'Me? Er...me, *tovarish?* I'm...well...er...Minister for Marine Affairs'. The Russian soldiers burst into laughter: 'Minister for Marine Affairs! In a landlocked country!' The gipsy pulls himself up to his full one meter fifty, looks at the one meter ninety Soviet officer and says, 'Why not? After all you have a Minister of Culture'.

Acts of civic courage or blind hope still occurred. There was the already-mentioned Extraordinary CP Congress. News of this was given to me by a Czech Communist historian friend, Hana Mejdrová. Our confidence in the leadership of the international proletariat was revealed by our common decision to meet in the square *outside* the WFTU, away from spying eyes or prying ears.²⁴ Then came the victory of the Czechoslovak ice-hockey team over the Soviet one, March 1969, leading to a general turnout of the population of Prague (including us), totally blocking Wenceslas Square, and chanting, pathetically, if in rhyming Czech:

Neměli tam tanky, dostali dvě branky!
We didn't have tanks but we got two goals!

This was, unfortunately, more or less all they had to celebrate for a generation or more. Except for more jokes:

²⁴ Hana went on to sign Charta 77, the founding document of the democratic movement in Czechoslovakia, as also to publish or co-publish work on Communist history (Hajek and Mejdrová 1997).

First Prisoner: How long did they give you?
Second Prisoner: Three years.
First Prisoner: What for?
Second Prisoner: For nothing!
First Prisoner: Come on now, for nothing you get six years!



British Communists in Prague formulating a letter to the British CP. *Left:* Brian Bicat, an old Ruskin friend whom I had recruited to WFTU, and Monty Johnstone, former editor of *Challenge*, a fluent Russian speaker and historian of the Russian Revolution, then visiting us in Prague.

Considering today what I could have possibly meant when I had said, on hearing of the invasion, ‘Now they’ve bloody well done it!’, it occurs to me that what they had *done for* was not simply my faith in Communism but the cohesion of the world Communist movement and the idea of Communism as an emancipatory idea. The impact on Communism, in Britain, Western Europe and more widely is revealed in the later account of Reuben Falber, one-time Assistant General Secretary of the CP.²⁵ The British party, which had a record of subordination to the Soviet Union (with cautious and partial exceptions between 1957 and 1968) came out with a series of condemnations of the Russians and endorsements of the Czechs. This was apparently completed with a Party Congress, by a vote of 292 to 118. Unfortunately, the ‘tankies’ did not leave the Party but fought to recover its pro-Soviet soul. Moreover, numerous other non-governing Communist parties, including the South African, Cypriot, US and Chilean ones, endorsed the Soviet invasion. And the British CP, continuing habits built up since its foundation, still responded to embassy summons, to congress invitations (though decreasingly), and offers of free holidays. Interestingly, Falber recalls my one-time friend and colleague, Igor Biryukov, as a ‘dour’ counselor/interpreter at the increasingly stressful Soviet Embassy sessions. Falber completes his sober account with the statement,

whatever the sins and errors of the past – 1939, 1956 etc, in August 1968 the Communist Party of Great Britain did get it right (Falber n.d.).

To which one might respond that the worm turned too late and by too little. One problem was that by its principled stand the CP threatened to orphan itself. Moreover, a Soviet order for 10,000 copies of the *Morning Star* had been stopped, at least temporarily. Finally, there was no way the CP could rid itself of the 25-30 percent of Party activists whose loyalty was to the Soviet Union rather than anything more recognisably socialist.

²⁵ All of this must have been particularly galling for Falber, in so far as he had for many years been the CPGB middleman for the Moscow Gold the Party had always denied receiving: and which we party members – never seeing any sign of it – used to joke about. In 1991 Falber publicly admitted that between 1958 and 1979 (i.e. 10 years *after* the conflict over the invasion) he was handling some GBP 100,000 per annum from the Russians (Linton 1991, Mosbacher 1996). This puts another gloss on the Party having ‘got it right’ in 1968. Further accounts suggest collusion by the British MI5, since the continued existence of the CPGB was a useful stick with which they could beat the rest of the British left. The matter then either rises, or descends, into the realms of the espionage novel. Jimmy Reid, who I recall as a genial General Secretary of the YCL in the 1950s-60s, reports

I once thought talk of Moscow gold was a lie peddled by the right-wing press in Britain. Alas, it was true in every sordid detail.

It persisted well into the latter half of the twentieth century. The delivery was always on Hampstead Heath. At an appointed place, the deputy general secretary of the British Communist Party, a man called Reuben Falber, would wait. A car would draw up to the kerb. A window facing the kerb would be lowered, the KGB man inside would hand out a parcel containing cash in British currency. Only three people knew of this: these were Falber, the general secretary of the CP, John Gollan, and someone from the *Morning Star* newspaper. (Reid 2001).

There is no necessary retribution for the devious, at least on earth. Falber survived, dying in 2006 at the grand old age of 92.

Goodbye Stalin

For the six months after the invasion very little happened at the WFTU - not that this implied much reduction in the customary sloth. Having nothing else to do, I took my Nigerian materials, wrote them up, typed stencils and turned them into a 50-page report on the Nigerian Trade Union Congress (Waterman 1968). This modest document, based on my one month in Nigeria earlier that year) was definitely the longest piece of WFTU-based research on African unionism since the Woddis books. I handed it personally to Mark Shope in the African Department. Neither he nor anyone else in the WFTU ever responded to it. Fresh, individual and independent research - Communist-inspired though it might be - was irrelevant to WFTU's feeble efforts, currently in a condition of suspended inanimation. However, the paper did help me to get into the master's course at the Centre of West African Studies in Birmingham. This was the beginning of the Rest of My Life. But I had not yet finished with Czechoslovakia or Communism. In March 1969, at Birmingham University, I wrote a 15-page paper refuting Soviet justifications for the invasion (Waterman 1969:1):

My argument is as follows: that after 1948 a fundamentally inappropriate form of socialism was applied in Czechoslovakia. It was one that conflicted with the demands and the possibilities of an industrialised bourgeois democracy, with the actual experience of the period 1945-48, and even with the intentions declared after 1948. It is this that explains the movement that followed January 1968, the wholesale condemnation of authoritarian socialism and the confidence of the search for a new type. Moreover, as I will try to show, the possibility for different modes of socialism exists in the theory of scientific socialism (classical and contemporary) and in Communist practice.

Despite its continued confinement within the framework of Communist discourse, some rather nice sources²⁶ and quotations, the piece was considered unpublishable by the CPGB, to which it was sent. And despite my growing disillusion with the British CP it did not yet occur to me that I might have submitted it elsewhere.²⁷

Tragically, it was another 20 years before Communism left Czechoslovakia. As the regime began to crumble under a new wave of street protests, a demand was circulated concerning national and international labour rights. Needless to say, it was not issued by either the state-controlled unions nor by the WFTU. In form and content it reproduced the spirit of 1968:

²⁶ One of these was to the scholarly liberal history of the Czechoslovak CP by Taborsky (1961). This was a book I had bought in London, at considerable expense, especially for my second trip to Czechoslovakia. It was widely circulated amongst the comrades there.

²⁷ One or two letters or articles by those of us resident in Prague were published in various CPGB publications at this time. Monty Johnstone, on return to the UK, would have been the most successful. I now find a forgotten piece of my own on the Prague Spring, published in the YCL magazine, before the invasion (Waterman 1968).

Právo na stávk u
=====

Ústava ČSSR právo na stávk u výslovně neupravuje. Toto právo není předmětem ani žádné jiné právní úpravy v ČSSR. Podle základního práva, platného i u nás, však platí, že co není zákonem zakázáno, je dovoleno. Mezinárodní pakt o hospodářských, sociálních a kulturních právech, který přijala i ČSSR / č. 120/1976 Sb./ právo na-stávk u upravuje čl. 8 odst. 1 písm. d. Stojí zde: "Státy, smluvní strany paktu, se zavazují zajistit ... právo na stávk u za předpokladu, že je vykonáváno v souladu se zákony příslušné země." / Toto právo je tedy jedním z těch práv, u níž ČSSR dosud nedostála svým mezinárodně-právním závazkům./

Právo na stávk u má tedy každý občan ČSSR, a protože toto právo není zákonem ani jiným právním předpisem upraveno, je neomezeno. /To však neznamená, že by stávkující neměli jinak dodržovat platné právo. Nesmí se např. dopouštět trestných činů ublížení na zdraví, poškozování cizích věcí atd. Nesmí tedy v průběhu stávk y dělat to, co by nemohli dělat i jinak./

<http://www.joewein.de/praha89.html>

This translates as:

The Right To (Go On) Strike

The constitution of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic does not specifically deal with the right to strike. This right is not the subject of any other law/amendment in the CSSR either. According to the fundamental/basic law, in effect/valid also here (in our country), all that is not forbidden by the law is permitted.

An international agreement concerning economic, social and cultural rights, accepted by CSSR / . . . / deals with the right to strike in article 8, paragraph 1, letter d. Here it states: "Countries, the parties of this agreement, commit to ensure/provide . . . the right to strike, given it is exercised in accordance with the laws of the country." / This right, therefore, is one of the rights where CSSR has not fulfilled its international-law commitments so far./

Every citizen of CSSR has, therefore, the right to go on strike, and as this right is not in any way dealt with by any law or amendment/legal regulation, it is unrestricted. /That, however, does not mean that those who are on strike should not follow applicable laws. For instance, it is not permitted to commit crimes of physical injury, destruction of others' property etc. Therefore, during the strike they cannot do what they could not do otherwise.

But just because it is archaic and even irrelevant does not mean that any institution necessarily dies. Some years ago, I wrote an epitaph for the WFTU (Waterman 2000) in which I recognised its continuing membership of the undead²⁸:

A spectre still haunts the world of international trade unionism, the spectre of the World Federation of Trade Unions...

- In Liverpool, 1989, a veteran dockworker leader argued with me the necessity of uniting the social-reformist International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (then expanding exponentially) with the communist World Federation of Trade Unions (then declining vertiginously).
- In 1994, in the dilapidated downtown factory area of Durban, South Africa, a huge WFTU shield dominated a tiny union office. Top South African union leaders argued the anti-imperialist tradition and anti-capitalist merits of the WFTU.
- In 1997, in de-industrialised Lima, between the grey Andes and the deep blue sea, and at the last frontier of capitalist globalisation, a national trade union centre proudly - desperately - claimed its WFTU affiliation.
- At around the same time, Andy Herod (1994), an American researcher was writing one of the first-ever academic articles on the WFTU, based on an interview with its General Secretary, giving the readers the distinct impression that this was some kind of equivalent or competitor to the ICFTU, with its 124 million members.
- Even in 1999, taking part in two autonomous left international trade union events, one in South Africa, one in Mexico, I was confronted by evidence that the WFTU exists...in a new Spanish/English magazine for the Americas called, of all things, *Utopías!*

I am more than perplexed at the longevity of an organisation that was a ghost of its former self when I worked for it over 30 years ago in 1968. In any case, after 1989 - *because* of 1989 - the WFTU was reduced to a spectre of this ghost. Its continued existence proves that there is life after death. Or that international trade union organisations can exist quite separate from any knowledge of their existence amongst the mass of workers internationally, or of any evidence of relevance or effect. Or that - unlike the network - the organisation can have an afterlife of 40-50 years?

I concluded that piece with the earlier-mentioned 'Comrades Agreement' of 1968, by which the WFTU's Italian affiliate agreed not to raise the matter of the Soviet invasion at the IUS Council meeting, in exchange for Soviet agreement not to demand a reversal of the Secretariat's denunciation immediately after the invasion. And I concluded that

One should not too hastily condemn the Italian Communist trade unions for their action in 1968. Thanks to their shabby, cowardly and totally despicable behaviour, the WFTU *remains* the one international Communist front organisation that ever publicly condemned the Soviet Union. The only problem

²⁸ 'Undead is a collective name for beings that the [superstitious](#) believe are deceased yet behave as if alive. Undead may be [spiritual](#), such as [ghosts](#), or [corporeal](#), such as [vampires](#) and [zombies](#).' (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Undead>).

is that some who know this are dead (really dead, not just politically so). Others have forgotten it. Others remember but don't care. And others don't know. Which may leave only...me? And now...you! And any worker or unionist in the world you tell it to. Do so, because there are, as I have suggested, some unions and workers, who for romantic or fundamentalist reasons - more related to religious faith or ethnic identity than to labour, democracy and socialism - still think that the WFTU was, or is, more than a massive symbol concealing an ineffective office.

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