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Orienting India : Interwar Internationalism in an Asian Inflection, 1917-1937

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2.1 The All-India Trade Union Congress and the world of labour

If India determines to become the centre for the support and protection of the labouring classes and regards socialist Russia amongst the Eastern countries, we are certain there will be no failure. The committee is of the opinion that an Asiatic Federation will never fail, provided Asia does not absorb Russia. The Russian in the eyes of the Asiatic, are a semi-Asiatic nation and half of Asia is under their influence. By abandoning the old Imperial Russian ideas, Russia is now fighting for a principle, for which the standard bearer should have been Asia.¹

This chapter explores Asianism in the Indian trade union movement and seeks to demonstrate the importance trade union leaders attached to Asian cooperation. International workers' solidarity was projected onto Asia, and the potential for combatting both imperialism and capitalism jointly. But Asia also became the backdrop against which future models of development and industrialization were discussed, challenged, and sometimes pitted against each other. For much of the 1920s, the All-India Trade Union Congress saw Asia, and not just India, as the primary site where workers' issues should be addressed, and did so without a clear choice for either reformist or revolutionary trade union methods. After 1929, different factions of the Congress embarked on different Asian journeys.

The history of India's Trade Union Congress begins formally in 1920, although its roots date back several decades before this. India's early trade unions consisted mainly of strike committees that usually disbanded once a particular grievance had been addressed. They were generally led by social reformers or philanthropists connected to the nationalist movement.² The first longer-standing unions, such as the Bombay Mill Hand Organization (1890), the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants of India and Burma (1897), and the Printers Union Calcutta (1905), were welfare organizations rather than trade unions.³ The first recorded attempt to unite trade unions from the various provinces into a central body dates from October 1918. That year saw the formation of a Central Labour Board intended to achieve labour legislation such as a minimum wage for Indian workers collectively.⁴ The

¹ APAC, IOR, L/P&J/12/241: Secret Report, 1925, regarding a proposal by Obeidullah Sindhi to unite 'the oppressed Asiatic Nations'.

² B. L. Mehta, *Trade Union Movement in India* (New Delhi: Kanishka Publishing House, 1991), 42.

³ D. K. Roy, *Trade Union Movement in India: the Role of M. N. Roy* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 1990), 6.

⁴ Mehta, *Trade Union Movement*, 48.

Central Labour Board never materialized, but it does show that the plan to federate India's trade unions into a single body was already circulating when the urgency to do so suddenly presented itself after Versailles.

That urgency was the establishment of the League of Nations and, more important, its subsidiary the International Labour Organization (ILO). The international labour conferences (the first was held in October 1919 in Washington) were designed to ensure the unique tripartite structure of the ILO: each national delegation was to consist of not only government representatives, but also employers' and workers' delegations. India was one of very few Asian nations to receive a separate seat in the League of Nations and the ILO. As this had been a major victory in the battle for international status as a nation, representation at the ILO was considered vital to the process of shaping that status. To Indian trade unionists in particular, the ILO presented a unique opportunity to address their concerns in an international forum. In that sense, the ILO offered a voice and an agency that the League of Nations itself did not. Whereas the delegation to the League consisted mostly of British Government of India representatives and Indian princes, Indian trade unionists selected their own representatives to the ILO. Prominent scholar and revolutionary Taraknath Das voiced the opinion of many when he remarked that 'the fundamental principle of the British Government was and is that the Indian people should not have any representation with the independent nations and when there will be any representation of India ... it should be done by those Indians willing to misrepresent India'.⁵

India's employers were relatively well organized in bodies such as the Jute Mills Association of Calcutta, and the Mill-owners Association of Bombay, as well as by various provincial chambers of commerce. But when the question of a workers' delegate to the first ILO conference in Washington arose, various unions rushed to submit their own candidates. Claims and counter-claims ensued, with each union rejecting the other's candidates. Finally, there appeared to be some consensus for Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a prominent nationalist and social reformer known to the British as the 'father of Indian unrest'.⁶ He had been imprisoned for sedition between 1908 and 1914 and under these circumstances, the Government of India could easily select a person of their own choosing, and they put forward the much more moderate trade union leader Narayan Malhar Joshi. The British briefly attempted to create a workers' delegation agreeable to all by sending Tilak to Washington as an advisor to chief delegate Joshi. Unsurprisingly, Tilak declined.⁷

N. M. Joshi was not an unpopular union leader. He had been active in the Servants of India Society from 1909 and had founded the Social Service League in 1911, an organization that still exists today. A prolific writer and social activist, he was nevertheless more agreeable to the British because he sought to ameliorate the condition of Indian workers primarily through legislation and reform rather than through strikes and collective action. Trade unionists loudly challenged the legality of the viceroy's nomination of a workers' delegate. They did not necessarily regard Joshi as unsuitable for the post, but he was *unelected*. It was

⁵ APAC, IOR, L/PJ/12/166. Copy of an untitled 1923 pamphlet by Taraknath Das.

⁶ D. V. Tahmankar, *Lokmanya Tilak: Father of Indian Unrest and Maker of Modern India* (London: J. Murray, 1956).

⁷ S. A. Dange, *All-India Trade Union Congress: Fifty Years Documents* (New Delhi: AITUC Publication, 1973), lxxvi.

clear that trade unions had to devise a forum for the selection of their own ILO delegate to prevent further interventions from the Government of India. The unions in Bombay took the initiative and a gathering of trade union leaders was planned for 31 October 1920.

The first session packed the Empire Theatre in Bombay to capacity. The participants ranged from delegates representing workers and employers to nationalist leaders such as Motilal Nehru, Vallabhai Patel, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Chaman Lal, and many others. The session was presided over by prominent nationalist Lala Lajpat Rai, who had first-hand experience of organized labour in the United States and the Philippines.⁸ The gathering founded the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and established an executive committee. The Government of India acknowledged the new All-India Trade Union Congress as the organization most representative of Indian workers, and the AITUC received the right to nominate workers' delegates to the ILO. On its first meeting in July 1921, Lala Lajpat Rai, the elected representative to the second ILO Congress in Geneva, resigned in favour of N. M. Joshi, marking the start of N. M. Joshi's ILO career, which lasted until 1948.⁹

It is important to note that AITUC's ILO delegates, and Indian labour leaders generally, were not, in fact, workers. Nor were they representative of India's labour force as a whole. The unionized wage labourer, generally taken as a norm by labour historians, actually accounted for only a small minority of Indian workers.¹⁰ For much of the interwar period, Indian trade union leadership was drawn from the educated classes, and many rose to prominence in the Indian National Congress. Rajnarayan Chandavarkar has noted that their connection with the workplace was often tenuous and that 'some unions had about as much life as the letterheads which they printed ostentatiously on their notepaper'.¹¹ Moreover, much of AITUC's moderate leadership was influenced by ideas of top-down social reform, taking it upon themselves, not the workers, to mould workers' rights into a worthy civil cause deserving of notice in the halls of Geneva. As Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us in his study of working class organization in Bengal: an educated man who had been to Europe was not a coolie (unskilled labourer) but a *babu* (gentleman).¹² Many may have thought of themselves as 'one of the workers', but they were often called 'Union Babu' nevertheless, which implies a fundamentally different relationship to those he sought to represent.¹³ The act of travelling and the holding of leadership positions disqualified one as a worker. However, it is also important to note that the ILO delegates who were selected by the trade unions were not

⁸ D. Ahmad, *Landscapes of Hope: Anti-Colonial Utopianism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 69.

⁹ NMML, N. M. Joshi Papers, file no. 2: Letter to Lala Lajpat Rai, 28 September 1921; *N. M. Joshi Papers*, file 1: biographical note.

¹⁰ W. van Schendel, 'Stretching Labour Historiography: Pointers from South Asia', in *Coolies, Capital And Colonialism: Studies in Indian Labour History*, edited by R. Behal and M. van der Linden, 229–62 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹¹ R. Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance and the State in India, ca. 1850–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998), 74.

¹² D. Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal, 1890–1940* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press 1989), 152. On the influence of reformist ideals on trade union leadership, see also D. Chakrabarty, 'Sasipada Banerjee: A Study in the Nature of the First Contact of the Bengal Bhadrakalok with the Working Class of Bengal', *Indian Historical Review* 2:2 (1976): 339–64.

¹³ Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History*, 153.

entirely divorced from the trade union scene in India. Both Joshi and R. R. Bakhale, treated below, were involved in the organization of several Bombay strikes in the 1920s. And through the machinery of the ILO, they could bring these experiences, as well as their visions of reform, to a new international platform.

An uneasy coexistence

While the formation of the ILO had been the principal catalyst for the federation of Indian trade unions into AITUC, it soon became apparent that the Russian Revolution had had no less of an impact on the Indian labour movement.¹⁴ Reformists who preferred the parliamentary route to direct action were frequently at odds with militant trade unionists within AITUC. Initially, the points of convergence between the two groups were more significant than what divided them: both were anti-imperialist, both sought to ameliorate the condition of workers; and both felt much was to be gained by taking Indian labour issues to the largest possible audience. In that sense, both groups were resolutely internationalist. Any opportunity of contact with international organizations that would increase AITUC's credibility within India and before the world was seriously considered. AITUC did not yet have a larger political agenda, nor did it have a clear programme of action or basic principles to guide its policy beyond 'organizing Indian labour' to improve the lot of workers.

However, the size—or rather, potential size—of a truly All-Indian Trade Union Congress had not gone unnoticed by the two international labour federations at the time: 'Moscow' (the Third International or Comintern) and its competitor Amsterdam (The International Federation of Trade Unions, IFTU).¹⁵ Moscow and Amsterdam both actively pursued AITUC's affiliation from the start. At AITUC's second session in 1921, the former sent a message of 'fraternal greetings', which reads both as an invitation and a warning, and demonstrates the bitter battle for the allegiance of (colonial) workers between the IFTU and the Comintern that had already erupted. It was explicitly framed in an Asian context:

Comrades, in wishing you success, we know we are wishing success and freedom to us all. A short-sighted labour movement of the past did not realize this great factor, and permitted the slavery of Western capitalism to be enforced upon the innocent, helpless human beings of the East, and we have now all seen the result. ... The soldiers of Britain and of Europe that march into the peaceful countries of the Far East to enslave mankind ... are all members of the working classes that are members of the Amsterdam International. ... The Amsterdam Trade Union International never took any effective means against, nay, even participated actively in the subjugation of foreign countries like India, Egypt, Persia, Afghanistan and parts of China. ... Our

¹⁴ This has been noted by, among others, S. D. Punekar, *Trade Unionism in India* (Bombay: New Book Company, 1948); S. C. Jha, *The Indian Trade Union Movement—An Account and an Interpretation* (Calcutta: K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1970), 90.

¹⁵ On the competition between the two, see inter alia G. van Goethem, *De Internationale van Amsterdam: de wereld van het Internationaal Vakverbond, 1913–1945* (Antwerpen: Houtekiet, 2003); R. Tosstorff, 'Moscow versus Amsterdam: Reflections on the History of the Profintern', *Labour History Review*, 68:1 (2003): 79–97.

Russian comrades have pointed out to the world who are the real enemies of the workers of the world.¹⁶

Publications smuggled into India in various inventive ways showed the active interest that international communist trade unionists took in AITUC. Many of these were framed in the context of joint Asian action. The First International Congress of Revolutionary Trade and Industry Unions, for instance, called upon the labour movements in Asian countries to join the Red Trade Unions.¹⁷

Such bulletins were often sent from Berlin. Although British intelligence were at a loss at the time to find out who had sent them, they most likely came from Manabendra Nath Roy, the most prominent Indian member of the Comintern at the time, and the founder of India's Communist Party.¹⁸ Unable to return to India for fear of arrest, he had established a Labour Information Bureau in Berlin with the purpose of providing a channel of communication between Indian and European labour organizations.¹⁹ He was also working towards an Indian Revolutionary Congress in Central Asia with Soviet help, and tried to get Indian trade unions to collaborate on this project.²⁰ Roy's influence on AITUC in its early years was not inconsiderable. He was actively in touch with several of AITUC's leftist trade union leaders, such as S. A. Dange, D. R. Thengdi, and Muzaffar Ahmed.²¹

Roy was explicitly in favour of affiliating to the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), which stood more explicitly for freedom of subject nationalities. Roy's thinking on this subject demonstrates the intimate link between nationalism and internationalism at this period: the Indian working class could not be indifferent to the political struggle for national independence. Until they were free from foreign rule, they would not be able to improve their economic condition. However, this political struggle could only become successful if it transcended national boundaries and was fought internationally. Only a full-scale attack on imperialism could really set the working classes free.²²

But many of AITUC's reformist members, especially those engaged in ILO affairs, favoured affiliation to the IFTU. To them, that body's close relationship with Geneva meant that AITUC's association with IFTU could have strategic value, and might increase AITUC's acceptance as a fully-fledged participant in the international labour movement. Although the

¹⁶ Quoted in Gupta, *A Short History*, 30.

¹⁷ West Bengal State Archives (WBSA), Police files, 166/22 file 249/22: Red Labour Union Bulletin. Weekly report, 24 August 1922.

¹⁸ On N. M. Roy, see K. Manjappa, *M. N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010); V. B. Karnik, *M. N. Roy: A Political Biography* (Bombay: Nav Jagriti Samaj, 1978). On his involvement with the trade union movement, see Roy, *Trade Union Movement in India*.

¹⁹ Roy, *Trade Union Movement in India*, 8; Manjappa, *M. N. Roy*, 83–4.

²⁰ RCCSRMH 459-68-2, M. N. Roy to Ya. Z. Suritz, 4 October 1920. P. Roy, S. D. Gupta and H. Vasudevan, eds., *Indo-Russian Relations 1917–1947: Select Documents from the Archives of the Russian Federation Part I: 1917–1928* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1999), 31–4: 33.

²¹ WBSA, Police Files, 35/26, file 248/26: Note on the Development of the AITUC and its capture by the Communists. By 1927, Dange was one of the assistant secretaries of the AITUC, and Thengdi one of the three vice-presidents. See Roy, *Trade Union Movement*, 19.

²² G. Adhikari, ed., *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India*, vol. 2. 1923–1925 (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1974), 77–8.

IFTU and the ILO were not officially linked, there were deep ties between the two in the early 1920s.²³ Moreover, by this time, the IFTU had reserved a place in its council, for one of the 'Asiatic countries, so that they might be able to put their case before the International World more effectively'.²⁴ In January 1924, the commissioner of police in Calcutta reported that in view of this Joshi had prompted Makunda Lal Sarkar to suggest the affiliation of the AITUC to the IFTU.²⁵

For the moment, the increasing competition between reformist and revolutionary trade unionists could be kept in check by not affiliating to either. The issue came up at every annual Congress, but there were two elegant solutions at hand; usually, it was either decided that AITUC was not yet 'fully consolidated' and that further international affiliations should be put on hold until such time as it was; or, that no decision would be made until unity between Amsterdam and Moscow had been achieved. The latter was not an AITUC fantasy; within the IFTU too, some members felt that the organization needed the 'strong and youthful' Russian trade union movement.²⁶ And in the absence of a clear-cut choice between Moscow and Geneva, no one in the AITUC, not even the reformists, saw any harm in receiving support from either when domestic strikes were on the line. V. V. Giri of the Railway workers federation, for instance, received 25,000 roubles for the workers of Kharagpur, although he would later side with the reformists at the time of AITUC's split.²⁷ Even Joshi was quoted saying that 'there is no harm in receiving money from Moscow or anywhere else for the support of a strike'.²⁸ However, a truce is not a peace, and as the 1920s progressed the influence of Communist trade unionists within AITUC increased. By 1927, they realized they might have a narrow majority and they held a secret meeting in the Royal Hotel in Calcutta to discuss ways of ousting Joshi as secretary.²⁹ Thengdi was one of the initiators of this meeting, along with other leaders of AITUC's revolutionary faction: R. S. Nimbkar (the evening's host), K. N. Joglekar, and Muzaffar Ahmed. No action was taken for the moment, but it was clear that the two factions in AITUC were drifting apart fast.

The fate of AITUC as a unified organization of Indian trade unions would be decided in the period 1927–29. Thanks especially to two factors: the emergence of various new platforms for Asian cooperation in a trade union context, which made the question of international affiliations more urgent; and the infamous Meerut arrests, in which various communist trade union leaders were imprisoned on charges of conspiracy. That latter forced the AITUC to decide whether it was to strive for labour reforms within a parliamentary context or by a more revolutionary route. This battle was fought almost entirely in the context of Asia, with the emerging Asian labour platforms at the centre of the fight. Up to 1928, however, when the AITUC broadened its international affiliations, the ILO remained the only

²³ This was mainly due to the close personal friendship between the organizations' leaders, Albert Thomas (ILO) and Jan Oudegeest (IFTU). See Van Goethem, *De Internationale*, 129.

²⁴ WBSA, Police Files, Serial no. 49, file 248/36, Extract from the report on the political situation and labour unrest for the week ending 31 January 1924.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ IFTU President Purcell, quoted in Van Goethem, *De Internationale van Amsterdam*, 50.

²⁷ Roy, *Trade Union Movement*, 21.

²⁸ M. R. Masani, *The Communist Party of India* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 51.

²⁹ WBSA, Police Files, Serial no. 49, file 248/36: Secret Report, 24 March 1927.

international body in which AITUC had direct representation. It was also the only international platform to which Indian trade union leaders could travel freely and without being accused of subversive activities. This warrants a closer look at the various ways in which the AITUC delegates used their presence in Geneva to engage with the international labour movement at large, and with their Asian environment in particular.

2.2 The International Labour Organization and Asia

Historiographically, the study of internationalism in the interwar period has tended to focus on the League of Nations, rather than on the International Labour Organization.³⁰ However, recent years have seen a surge of interest in the history of ILO the tripartite structure of which, and its larger membership vis-à-vis the League of Nations, make it more representative of interwar internationalism. The literature on the ILO within the context of labour history has always been comparatively rich,³¹ but the focus is now shifting to studies of the ILO's influence on various larger themes including studies of the ILO's role in the history of human rights and international law.³² Conversely, the increase of interest in (local) histories of Indian labour has led several historians to explore its international dimensions.³³ Recent studies have considered it within the ambit of the ILO as well.³⁴ Given these changes in historical interest, it is remarkable that to date, little research has been carried out into the ILO as a key site where non-European actors met in the attempt to bring their specific interests before an international audience. This section explores the ILO not as a space for interstate relations or as the birthplace of international labour legislation, but as a place where Asian workers' representatives could join forces and call attention to the specific problems of Asian labour.

³⁰ See, for instance, C. Miller, "Geneva—The Key to Equality: Interwar Feminists and the League of Nations", *Women's History Review*, 3:2 (1994): 219–45; M. Mazower, 'Minorities and the League of Nations in Interwar Europe', *Daedalus*, 126:2 (1997): 47–63. The following pages also draw on C. Stolte, 'Bringing Asia to the World: Indian Trade Unionism and the Long Road Towards the Asiatic Labour Congress, 1919–1937', *Journal of Global History* 7:2 (2012): 257–78.

³¹ For institution-focused histories of the ILO, see A. E. Alcock, *History of the International Labour Organization* (London: Macmillan, 1971); N. F. Dufty, 'Organizational Growth and Goal Structure: The Case of the ILO', *International Organization* 26:1 (1972): 479–98; G. A. Johnston, *The International Labour Organization: Its Work for Social and Economic Progress* (London: Europa, 1970); and most recently G. Rodgers et al., *The ILO and the Quest for Social Justice, 1919–2009* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

³² A. Schweizer, *Zwischen Rassismus, Markt und Menschenrechten* (Zürich: Chronos, 2005); E. M. Belser, *The White Man's Burden: Arbeit und Menschenrechte in der globalisierten Welt* (Bern Stämpfli Verlag, 2007); D. Maul, *Menschenrechte, Sozialpolitik und Dekolonisation* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2007); J. van Daele et al., *ILO Histories: Essays on the International Labour Organization and Its Impact on the World during the Twentieth Century* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010).

³³ Recent years have seen a surge of interest in the historiography of Indian lascars (seamen) as particularly mobile groups. See G. Balachandran, 'Making Coolies, (Un)making Workers: "Globalizing" Labour in the Late-19th and Early 20th Centuries', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 24:3 (2011): 266–96; G. Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour? Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, c. 1870–1945* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press 2012); Raza and Zachariah, 'To Take Arms across a Sea of Trouble.'

³⁴ R. P. Behal. M. van der Linden, *Coolies, Capital and Colonialism. Studies in Indian Labour History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); C. Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and its Forgotten Histories* (London, 2003).

As the coveted workers' nomination for the ILO had been one of the principal reasons for the founding of the All India Trade Union Congress, the organization aspired to international activity from its inception.³⁵ At the ILO, Indian trade unionists could seize upon the novel institutional frameworks of international life to implement their visions of reform. In that context, it is interesting to note that these were not limited to India, but imagined in a wider context of imperial exploitation of Asia. This was not only the case with those internationalist enthusiasts who actually made it to Geneva; the annual AITUC meetings gave a clear mandate to their ILO delegates to frame their concerns about the broader problem of imperialism. At the 1927 Kanpur session, V. V. Giri of the Indian Railwaymen's Union moved that the ILO should be made aware of 'the necessity of including the workers' delegates in the Delegations of countries which are under the administration of Colonial or mandated territories and to the desirability of including the representatives of native or coloured workers in the delegations from countries in which they form a substantial proportion of the population but which are governed by the white people'.³⁶

The mandate to address the arrearage of most Asian nations in matters of labour and labour legislation, as well as the mandate to work for an ILO that was more representative of the worlds' workers, was eagerly embraced by the Indian delegates themselves. Their speeches at the annual ILO conferences were often explicitly intended to draw the West's attention to Asia as a whole. Joshi's speech to the 1929 conference is revealing:

Of the labour conditions in Asia may I say that even in Japan conditions are not actually very much improved? China, Siam and Persia have not yet made a beginning. Afghanistan and some other parts of Asia are not even touched. The imperial States ruling over a large number of Crown Colonies, several of which are vast, have not done much to discharge their responsibilities towards the workers living in them.³⁷

Their concerns were thus twofold: first, they explicitly linked imperialism and the lag of working conditions in Asia, since the colonial metropolises had as yet demonstrated little concern for the workers in their colonies. Second, now that there was a platform where these issues could be addressed, Asia was sorely underrepresented and could not make itself heard. For the moment, 'Asia' at the ILO consisted only of India, Japan, China, Persia, and Siam. Of those four countries, only India and Japan sent delegations to the ILO that met the organization's tripartite criteria. China would not send a workers' delegation until 1929; for Siam, this would take even longer.³⁸ Whereas the lack of Asian workers' representatives

³⁵ For histories of All India Trade Union Congress, see G. Ghosh, *Indian Trade Union Movement* (Kolkata: People's History Publication, 2005); S. C. Jha, *The Indian Trade Union Movement—An Account and an Interpretation* (Calcutta: K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1970); N. P. Raman, *Political Involvement of India's Trade Unions: A Case Study of the Anatomy of the Political Labor Movement in Asia* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1967); H. Crouch, *Trade Unions and Politics in India* (Bombay: Manaktalas, 1966).

³⁶ *The All-India Trade Union Congress Bulletin*, December 1927: 'On the ILO Conference of 1927 in Geneva'.

³⁷ Speech of N. M. Joshi, printed in full in *The AITUC Bulletin*, July 1929, 5.

³⁸ Siam could not have sent workers' delegates, as Siamese labour in this period was not yet organized. Until the advent of constitutional monarchy in Siam in 1932, trade unions were illegal. On Siam's engagements with the Geneva institutions, see S. Hell, 'Siam and the League of Nations: Modernization, Sovereignty and Multilateral Diplomacy, 1920–1940' (PhD dissertation, Leiden University, 2007), 54.

could be blamed on the individual countries, the problem was exacerbated by the ILO's administrative structure, in which Asia was even more underrepresented. The lack of 'Asian' staff appointments was seen as part of the reason why Asian issues of labour and industry received so little attention at the ILO. As Purushottama Padmanabha Pillai, an Indian interwar ILO veteran, later lamented: 'Europe [with] 402 million gets 12 seats on the Governing Body; the Americas with 274.3 millions, get 11 seats; Asia with 1154 millions or with well over half the total population of the world, gets only 5 seats'.³⁹

The quest for more Asian representation at the ILO conferences, as well as in the organization's administration, was the first item on the agenda of Asian ILO delegates. The second item lay in the core business of the ILO: the applicability of its labour conventions to Asia. Most conventions passed by the ILO were based on industrial working conditions in the West, and there were no provisions for partial or gradual ratification.⁴⁰ The conditions of labour and industry in most Asian countries meant that many conventions could not be ratified, despite the improvements they might bring. This was a catch-22: delegates did press for a modification of the ratification protocol, 'as being very necessary for Asiatic countries, which have a long and difficult journey to cover'.⁴¹ Partial ratification, even if it would replicate a differential treatment of Asian workers, could still create more favourable working conditions on the ground. On the other hand, in the words of Atul Chatterjee, the first Asian chairman of the ILO governing body in 1932: 'we do not want to be considered a backward nation always and forever'.⁴² The conclusion was simple: the International Labour Conference should be more sensitive towards problems of Asian labour. The Asian delegations proceeded to invite the ILO director to tour Asia and visit its workers to learn about specific Asian problems. They managed to convince the ILO director of the need for an 'Asiatic Inquiry', but when the delegations proposed an 'Asiatic Labour Congress' under the auspices of the ILO, the response from the ILO conference was lukewarm, most likely for fear that such a gathering would provide anti-imperialists with a platform.

But most important, the ILO did serve as a space of increased encounter and engagement between Asian delegations. Considering the imperial travel restrictions in place within Asia, Europe remained the most likely place to meet Asian delegations. The delegates of India and Japan, as the only two nations with workers' representation, forged especially close ties. Four characters stand out in this regard. N. M. Joshi and Chaman Lal, as prominent AITUC leaders and inveterate travellers with a strong admiration for the advances made by Japan in the field of industrialization, cooperated closely with their Japanese colleagues. They developed strong personal relationships with Mitsuko Yonekubo and Suzuki Bunji, representing the Nihon Kaiin Kumiai (Japan Seamen's Union) and the Nihon Rōdō Sōdōmei (Japanese Federation of Labour) respectively. Together, they decided that the ILO agenda should be more reflective of their concerns. The 'Asiatic enquiry' by the ILO director was indeed undertaken, and this was seen as a first step. However, the results remained

³⁹ P. P. Pillai and L. N. Birla, *India and the ILO* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1945), 32.

⁴⁰ This was not only a matter of concern to the Asian delegations: some of the ILO's more progressive administrators envisioned the ILO as a creator of universally binding conventions and wanted to dispense with national ratification altogether. See Van Goethem, *De Internationale van Amsterdam*, 128.

⁴¹ Quoted *idem*, 12.

⁴² *Ibid.*

unpublished and the expected discussion of the mission's findings was not carried out at the next ILO conference.⁴³ Joshi decided to increase the pressure on the ILO. The fears of European ILO members that a conference focusing on Asian labour problems might have adverse economic and political effects—or might turn into an anti-imperialist platform—could also be used against them:

The dissatisfaction at the practical achievement of Geneva is growing. Geneva itself has created expectations in the hearts of the workers of the world which still remain to be even partially fulfilled. Moreover, the influence of Geneva is not the only influence which is affecting the imagination of the workers of the world, particularly those of the East. There is the other influence centred in Moscow, differing from Geneva in ideals and methods, which is making a strong appeal to their imagination by the grandeur of its promise. ... It is futile to argue that the translation of ideals into actuality is a slow process. The slowness of evolution makes revolution attractive. The workers of Asia and Africa will not wait for many decades to achieve what the Europeans may have achieved in a century.⁴⁴

In other words, Asia demanded to be heard on the international stage. The warning contained in Joshi's message was that if the ILO continued to be deaf to Asians' concerns, the Comintern might be less hard of hearing. However, it is unlikely that this threat carried much weight. The Japanese Federation of Labour, whose members were more explicitly anti-Communist than those of the divided AITUC, would not have backed it. There was little hope that an official Asian ILO conference would materialise. Neither the Japan Seamen's Union nor the Japanese Federation of Labour would ever take their issues to Moscow, but neither would Joshi or Chaman Lal. But one option remained: an independent Asiatic Labour Congress, organized on their own initiative, to discuss matters pertaining to the ILO in Asia. The idea to hold an Asiatic conference first arose in 1925.⁴⁵ The suggested venue had been Shanghai, but the political troubles in China prevented the conference from being held at that time and the plans were shelved until 1928.

The organizers—at this stage the core was to exist of Indian, Japanese and Chinese trade unionists—now had to walk a very fine line if they wanted the Asiatic Labour Congress to improve rather than hamper Asian opportunities in the ILO. Even if the organizers were all confirmed reformists who had explicitly rejected the path of the Red International in favour of that of the ILO, the fact that the Congress would not be held under auspices of the ILO was itself cause for concern for the organization's European members. The organizers tried to ease these apprehensions by repeatedly stating that the Asiatic Labour Congress was not meant to operate as an alternative to the ILO to allow Asians to make common cause within the context of the ILO. This would be demonstrated by holding the conference annually, 'five or six weeks' prior to the Geneva conference.⁴⁶ In that way, Asian delegations could engage in a preliminary discussion of the ILO's agenda for that year so that a collective Asian stance on

⁴³ *The AITUC Bulletin*, July 1929, 5.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress: Speech by N. M. Joshi.

⁴⁶ *The All-India Trade Union Congress Bulletin*, January 1929, 81: Memorandum.

certain issues might be formulated. Lal, Joshi, Yonekubo, and Suzuki drafted a memorandum to this effect, which was put before the next AITUC session. At this point, the AITUC was still enthusiastic about the idea:

This Congress, in order to draw closer together the exploited workers of the East hereby decides, in accordance with the Memorandum signed jointly by Mr Yonekubo, the Japanese Workers' Delegate to the last International Labour Conference and Mr Chaman Lal, the Indian Workers' Delegate, to issue invitations to the organised Trades of Asiatic Workers ... for the holding of an Asiatic Labour Conference as early as possible in Bombay with the object of concerting measures for effective joint action to combat the capitalist offensive against Asiatic [workers].⁴⁷

The full text of the memorandum was prominently published in the May issue of the All-India Trade Union Congress Bulletin. Considering how easily the resolution had passed, it is quite surprising that the Asiatic Labour Congress would eventually cause major trouble to the unity of the AITUC. This was due to the rise of alternatives for Asian cooperation. The next section will therefore explore a different set of Asian labour engagements that arose at the same time that the plans for the Asiatic Labour Congress were coming to fruition.

2.3 Asianism at the League Against Imperialism

In view of the great importance attached to taking Indian labour issues to the international stage and carving out a place at the ILO, it is interesting to note that within a few short years the AITUC had involved itself with a myriad of other Asian activities that were not always related, or indeed even agreeable, to the post-war international cooperation as determined by the rules of 'Geneva'. These activities included cooperation with labour activists from different colonial and semi-colonial parts of Asia, as well as fraternal relations with Soviet-backed labour organisations, both of which were considered seditious by the government of British India and perceived as a threat in Geneva. As noted, it soon became apparent that the Russian Revolution had inspired Indian trade unionism just as much as the establishment of the ILO had done.⁴⁸ While AITUC's ILO enthusiasts were dreaming of Asian cooperation, other Asian platforms came knocking at AITUC's door with increasing urgency. By 1927, they had become impossible to ignore.

One such platform was the League Against Imperialism, which was founded at the Congress of Oppressed Nationalities in Brussels on 10 February 1927. This conference drew 175 delegates, of whom 107 came from areas under colonial rule. Invitations had been sent from Berlin in December 1926, signed by the Provisional Committee of the International Congress against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism.⁴⁹ The first three of the considerable list of signatories were Madame Sun Yat-sen, at that time still part of the Kuomintang Central Executive Committee but soon to leave for Moscow; Jawaharlal Nehru; and Hafiz Ramadan

⁴⁷ *The All-India Trade Union Congress Bulletin*, Report of the Ninth Session, Resolution 19, 1928, 74.

⁴⁸ See also Jha, *The Indian Trade Union Movement*, 90.

⁴⁹ IISH, League Against Imperialism Archives, file 1: Invitation to the International Congress against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism.

Bey, an Egyptian anti-imperialist activist in exile in Paris. All three were conspicuously named before the European members of the provisional committee in the list. Among the latter were German communist Willy Münzenberg, the driving force behind the Brussels Conference, Romain Rolland; Albert Einstein; Dutch architect Berlage; and Dutch poet Henriette Roland Holst.⁵⁰

The agenda read, in part: ‘the emancipation movement of the oppressed nations and the support to be given by the labour movement and the progressive parties in imperialist countries; co-ordination of the forces of the national emancipation movement with the forces of the labour movement in the colonial as well as the imperialist countries; and building a permanent international organization’.⁵¹ In other words, the Congress was to link the European labour movement and other anti-imperialists to colonial activists in support of independence movements. The Brussels congress saw labour movements as integral to the anti-imperial struggle, which is reflected in the list of delegates who attended. This was no less true for the Indian delegation, which consisted of—among others—the Ceylonese Trade Union Congress, the Hindoo Workers Welfare League, and the Hindoo Journalists Federation in Europe.⁵² The AITUC was conspicuous by its absence, although it had been invited. After much debate, those factions of the AITUC hesitant to send delegates to such a gathering of revolutionary forces had put the question on hold, resolving to revisit the issue if the Brussels congress met a second time.

Later that year, delegates from the League Against Imperialism made a renewed attempt to get the AITUC on board by joining the annual AITUC session at Kanpur in November 1927. However, an AITUC delegation to the League Against Imperialism might never have been formed were it not for the government of India’s decision to arrest and deport J. W. Johnston, the League representative to the AITUC. Interpreting this as an open challenge to AITUC’s autonomy, even the most reformist, anti-Communist, and pro-parliamentarian among AITUC’s leaders felt that it was time to make a stand. The organization affiliated itself to the League Against Imperialism in ‘emphatic protest’ against the ‘unwarranted unrest and deportation order passed against our fraternal delegate Mr Johnston’.⁵³ K. N. Joglekar, the organizing secretary of the Railwaymen’s Union, and D. R. Thengdi of the AITUC executive council, both close associates of S. A. Dange and Muzaffar Ahmed, were selected to be AITUC representatives to the next conference of the League.⁵⁴ The only concession to the reformers was that the affiliation was for one year only.⁵⁵ However, an AITUC delegation was indeed sent to the Second Congress of the League Against Imperialism, held in Frankfurt two years later. The All-India Workers and Peasants’

⁵⁰ Nationaal Archief (NA), Rapporten Centrale Inlichtingendienst 1919–1940 (RCI), 36043: Secret Report, 16 November 1926. Berlage was a member of the *Revolutionaire Intellectuelen* (revolutionary intellectuals). Henriette Roland Holst had broken with the CPH (Communist Party of Holland) by this time, but supported Münzenberg’s anti-imperialist initiative.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² IISH, LAI Archives, file 2: List of organizations and delegates.

⁵³ Resolution 20a of the 1928 Jharia meeting. NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress: Report of the 9th Session.

⁵⁴ P. C. Joshi Archives of Contemporary History, Meerut Conspiracy Case (MCC) file 33: Statement of K. N. Joglekar, 2038.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Party, the Municipal Workers Union (Bombay), the Bombay Trade Council Union, and the Railwaymen's Union were also present.⁵⁶

Asianism in the League Against Imperialism

In the already sparse historiography of the League Against Imperialism, Asianism as a theme has been conspicuous by its absence.⁵⁷ This is strange, considering that the very foundations of the League Against Imperialism were Pan-Asian in character: a group of students from several colonial and semi-colonial areas had come together in a Pan-Asiatic League in Berlin prior to the Brussels Congress, and were involved in preparations for the latter.⁵⁸ The intent of having the Brussels Congress function as a platform for Asian delegates to meet and organize ways of coordinating anti-imperialist activities was clear from the outset. As Nehru wrote to Roger Baldwin, who participated in the initiative on behalf of the American Civil Liberties Union: 'All of Asia is on the move and India is only the point of a mass with immeasurable momentum'.⁵⁹ But although co-operation between the Chinese and Indian delegations at the Congress itself has been noted, the scale at which Asian delegations conferred with each other has so far not been touched.

It should be mentioned at this juncture that the Asianist origins of the Brussels Congress were not intended to exclude Africa. Quite the contrary, the gathering was intended for all 'Oppressed Nationalities'. However, the number of African delegates was comparatively small. There was a full Egyptian delegation, but on account of its geographical location, Egypt was considered as part of Arab West Asia, and to all intents and purposes included as an Asian country.⁶⁰ The Congress was further attended by several South African trade unionists; a representative of the Sierra Leone Railwaymen's Federation; two journalists, one from Morocco and one from Algeria; and a delegate from the Tunisian Destour Party.⁶¹ However, the famous Senegalese activist Lamine Senghor was a delegate on behalf of all *colonies françaises*, and he was appointed to the executive committee of the League Against Imperialism as representative of the whole 'negro race'.⁶²

At a separate meeting in Brussels, the Asian delegates discussed the possibility of founding a more permanent Pan-Asian Organisation in which labour activists could take

⁵⁶ IISH, LAI Archives, file 2: List of delegations.

⁵⁷ Though mentioned by M. Brecher, *Nehru: A Political Biography* (London: Oxford UP, 1959), 109–10. On the League Against Imperialism, see further, M. Louro, *At Home and in the World: Jawaharlal Nehru and Global Anti-Imperialism* (PhD dissertation, Temple University, 2010); V. Prasad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2007), 16–30; and J. Jones, *The League Against Imperialism* (Fulwood: Socialist History Society, 1996).

⁵⁸ N. K. Barooah, *Chatto: The Life and Times of an Indian Anti-Imperialist in Europe* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 248.

⁵⁹ SMML, RNB, Box 7 File 30: Nehru to Baldwin, undated.

⁶⁰ Egypt was part of many Asianist initiatives throughout the interwar period, and would also be included in the 1947 Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi, treated in chapter 5.

⁶¹ SMML, RNB, Box 8 File 2: League against Imperialism delegates. The Destour party would later also send representation to the Asian Socialist Conference, treated in chapter 5.

⁶² NA, RCI, 15497: report from *Le Drapeau Rouge*, 16 February 1927. On Senghor's anti-imperialist activism, see further, B. H. Edwards, 'The Shadow of Shadows', *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 11:1 (2003): 11–49.

part.⁶³ Nehru established particularly intensive contacts with the Chinese delegation, which consisted of, among others, the labour federations of Canton and Kwantung and the Federation of Chinese Workers Abroad.⁶⁴ It is worth noting that the resolutions arrived at in Brussels demonstrate Asianism at two different levels. On the one hand, the Asian contacts fostered served specific political ends. China and India arrived at a joint statement denouncing the use of Indian troops and resources in the British suppression of China. Their resolution read:

Ever since the unholy Opium War from 1840 to 1842, Indian troops have been sent to China time and again, in order to secure the power of British Imperialism in that country. Eighty-seven years have Indian troops been abused in this way, and thousands of Indians were stationed as police officers today in Hong Kong, Shanghai etc. They were later used to shoot Chinese workers, which has caused Chinese hostilities against the Indian people to grow.⁶⁵

On the other hand, the resolution also demonstrates the popular topos of ‘ancient bonds’ between Asian lands, which had longer antecedents and was actively being disseminated by the Greater India Society and related scholarly organizations in the 1920s. This discourse will be elaborated further in chapter 3, but its presence at a communist-sponsored anti-imperialist gathering demonstrates the wide currency of the notion of historical Asian ties on the verge of being restored:

For more than 3000 years, the people of India and China were united by close cultural relations. From the days of the Buddha to the end of the Mughal period and the start of British rule, these friendly ties were ever-present. ... British Imperialism, which has kept us in isolation from one another in the past and has brought so much injustice, is now the very power that unites us in our struggle against it.⁶⁶

The Sino-Indian resolution was one of the few bilateral resolutions arrived at in Brussels. Most resolutions were either based on a particular grievance of one single delegation, or collective stances against imperialist exploitation. Another exception to this rule was a resolution arrived at by the Asian delegations. This was not a small group. ‘Asia’ in Brussels consisted of twenty-eight delegates from China, fourteen from India, four from Indonesia, three each from Korea and Indo-China, and two from the Philippines.⁶⁷ Their joint statement professed the features they had in common. It is reminiscent of the style of the Sino-Indian resolution, in that it emphasised Asian cultural and political heritage and focused on the features that the represented nations had in common:

⁶³ Brecher, *Nehru*, 109–10.

⁶⁴ ISSH, LAI Archives, file 2: List of delegations.

⁶⁵ IISH, LAI Archives, file 26: Joint Sino-Indian resolution. Translation from German by the author.

⁶⁶ IISH, LAI Archives, file 26. Resolution proposed by India and China. Translation from the German by the author.

⁶⁷ IISH, LAI Archives file 2. List of organizations and delegates.

The International Congress against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism, considering, that there are no areas in Asia free from colonial imperialism; considering, that all Asian lands have been the heritage of indigenous nations since centuries; considering, that these nations themselves have built states; considering, that these Oriental nations, who possess an old civilization, have a right, as much as the Western peoples, to determine the course of their own history; considering that political independence is an *absolute requirement* for a people, and that no nation may be subjected to a power it rejects, *demands*, that all groups participating in this Congress as well as the current organization, which must be built on these decisions, must undertake all necessary action, to free Asia from Imperialism and Colonial Oppression.⁶⁸

According to the International Antimilitarist Commission, the Brussels Congress had ‘caused feverish excitement to spread through the whole of Asia’.⁶⁹ Exaggeration or not, at the Second Congress of the League Against Imperialism, held in Frankfurt from 20 to 31 July 1929, the number of Asian participants had increased and the delegations had become more diverse. The first Congress had consisted mainly of interest groups and exiled activists already in Europe. Examples are the *Perhimpoeaan Indonesia*, the successor of the *Indonesische Vereeniging* (Indonesian Association), which had been founded by Indonesian students in the Netherlands in 1922; Kuomintang chapters in Europe and the Federation of Chinese Students in Europe; and the Hindoo Unions of Oxford and Cambridge. There were various reasons for this, the most important being that with the Bolshevik threat looming large, metropolitan governments had tightened control over who was allowed to travel and for what reason—and the League Against Imperialism was not a gathering to which a visa was easily obtained. As a consequence, colonial territories were represented primarily by interest groups already on the ground in Europe. This was not at all a new phenomenon—it was the very reason so many interest groups already existed. The fact that intracolonial gatherings in Asia were all but impossible to achieve, in combination with the fact that an increasing number of colonial students received their education in Europe as the twentieth century progressed, had made cities like London, Paris, Berlin, and Amsterdam important meeting grounds for anti-imperialists of various persuasions.⁷⁰

The shift in the make-up of the second gathering of the League Against Imperialism was partly the fruit of conscious attempts to appeal to local Asian groups and disseminate propaganda in vernacular languages.⁷¹ It was also due to the success of the Brussels congress.

⁶⁸ IISH, LAI Archives file 28: Joint Resolution by the Asian Delegations. Translation from the German by the author; emphasis in original.

⁶⁹ SMML, RNBP, Box 8 File 2: Press Service, International Antimilitarist Commission. The Antimilitarist Commission was an organization maintained by syndicalists and anarchists with its headquarters at The Hague.

⁷⁰ Among many others, Edwards, ‘The Shadow of Shadows’; K. K. Manjapra, ‘The Illusions of Encounter: Muslim “Minds” and Hindu Revolutionaries in First World War Germany and After’, *Journal of Global History*, 1:3 (2006): 363–82; H. Fischer-Tiné, ‘Indian Nationalism and the World Forces: Transnational and Diasporic Dimensions of the Indian Freedom Movement on the Eve of the First World War’, *Journal of Global History*, 2:3 (2007): 325–44.

⁷¹ In this way, the LaI became the *adhivasitapradeshnīśasta aur niyantrakaviruddha sabha*. LoC, RGASPI, 542/1/4/22, 22 September 1926. League documentation was also spread in Arabic, Urdu, and Chinese.

British intelligence concluded that the Congress had indeed stimulated Pan-Asian initiatives.⁷² This view was supported by a report that all Asian delegates had been subsidized to attend the Brussels Congress with funds originating in Russia.⁷³ Aside from the close cooperation between Indian and Chinese delegates—who met again at Dutch trade union leader Edo Fimmen’s house in March—the prospect of a ‘Pan-Pacific gathering’ in China later that year was closely watched.⁷⁴ Intercepted correspondence from Nehru revealed ‘a big Pan-Pacific conference at Hankow in June to which representatives from India, Indonesia and other Eastern countries are being invited’.⁷⁵ The Executive Committee of the League Against Imperialism was also to send a delegation. This conference was in fact the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Congress (PPTUS), in the process of being founded as the Asian branch of Profintern, the Red International of Trade Unions, which will be treated in more detail in the next section.

The increased participation from the colonies was reflected in the agenda for the Second Congress of the League Against Imperialism. Not only was the majority of the Indian delegation made up of various trade union organizations; the plenary agenda for the Congress even stated ‘the All India National Congress, the All India Trade Union Congress and their role in the National-Revolutionary Struggle’ as a separate issue.⁷⁶ This is not altogether surprising in view of the fact that the League Against Imperialism’s impact on the Indian trade union movement had also been considerable. Despite its absence from the first gathering, the AITUC had been meticulous in discussing the League’s resolutions. Nehru wrote to Roger Baldwin, a personal friend and active member of the League’s executive committee on behalf of the United States: ‘the recent session of the AITUC has been the first International great success of the League in view of the fact that all our recommendations have been adopted’.⁷⁷

The Indian delegation’s active networking with the other Asian delegations, as well as the AITUC’s pro-active attitude to the League, had paid off in terms of interest for the Indian case. In an independent resolution, the League expressed its collective solidarity with the Indian struggle for freedom.⁷⁸ But this was a two-way street. Nehru had been drawn into the League by Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, a revolutionary exile in Berlin and the League’s secretary there.⁷⁹ Together, they worked hard to enlist more independence movements. They kept track of editorial comments on the League in dailies in several languages⁸⁰ to see who would be willing to affiliate. Just before the second Congress, Chattopadhyaya wrote triumphantly to Nehru: ‘There is every reason to believe that we shall succeed in drawing the parties into active cooperation with the League. If that is attained, we shall have the satisfaction of recording the affiliation of all the national movements from Morocco to

⁷² APAC, IOR, L/PJ/12/404: Workers and Peasants Parties, excerpted from D. Petrie, *Communism in India*.

⁷³ APAC, IOR, L/P&J/12/266, New Scotland Yard to India Office, 15 September 1927.

⁷⁴ APAC, IOR, L/P&J/12/266, Telegram: Viceroy to Secretary of State, Simla, 6 May 1927.

⁷⁵ APAC, IOR, L/P&J/12/266, Note for the working committee by Nehru, 4 April 1927.

⁷⁶ SMML, RNBP, box 8 folder 3: International League Against Imperialism 1928–1929; invitation to the second Congress.

⁷⁷ SMML, RNBP, box 8 folder 3. Nehru to Baldwin, 26 January 1928.

⁷⁸ IISG, LAI Archives file 113: Resolution on India.

⁷⁹ And, incidentally, also the brother of Sarojini Naidu, who played a prominent role in the Asian Relations Conference in Delhi in March 1947, elaborated upon in chapter 5.

⁸⁰ European languages, but also Malay. P. C. Joshi Archives, LAI Papers, file 6.

Indonesia'.⁸¹ Clearly, the wish for a Pan-Asian platform of anti-imperialists had not yet been abandoned. Though the League Against Imperialism would become a vessel for myriad agendas and groups over the years, this does demonstrate at least one of them: the intention of its Indian participants to mould the League into a meeting place for Asian independence movements.

The success of the first two gatherings of the League Against Imperialism in joining European and Asian anti-imperialists, and serving as a platform for Asian nationalists to meet and cooperate, did not last. Into the early 1930s, the League would become an increasingly fragmented affair. The situation in India remained one of its primary occupations, but this was mainly because the organization had been hijacked by radical Indian students abroad. As a result, it became chiefly a solidarity movement between British and Indian communists. Various local committees, most prominently those in London and Edinburgh, took turns vilifying Gandhi and Nehru as traitors to the cause.⁸² The main bone of contention was their perceived conciliatory attitude towards their British masters. Hatta of Indonesia and Chiang Kai-shek of China were condemned in the same way. 'They had once been members of the League. Now ... they have been expelled from its ranks'.⁸³

Pan-Asianist enthusiasm did continue at the local chapters of the League. The Anti-Imperialist Students' Group was started in Berlin in the winter of 1931, mainly through the efforts of the Indian medical student A. P. Petigura.⁸⁴ The group came to British attention when the latter was arrested during a raid of the League's headquarters in December 1931.⁸⁵ One of the issues they fought was the classification of colonial workers according to culture—'European', 'Asiatic', or 'primitive', for example—holding that they were all victims of imperialism in equal measure.⁸⁶ However, the League had become completely divorced from Asia itself and was no longer in touch with any outside groups. The conscious break between its communist members and the 'reformist-nationalist bourgeois' (in the words of the former) had rendered the League inoperative. Attempts to revive it were finally abandoned and in 1935, it was dissolved. The hardening of ideological lines in the 1930s had also sealed the League Against Imperialism's fate.

2.4 Divergent paths: the Nagpur split

The choice to send an AITUC delegation to the second congress of the League Against Imperialism did not sit well with the reformist section of the AITUC. The growing hold of communist trade unions on the AITUC was increasingly making itself felt. This had everything to do with the strong increase in trade union cooperation in Asia. The strong links between Indian trade unionists and the Kuomintang, which had been forced in the League, participation in the incipient Pan-Pacific Trade Union Congress of the Red International, and

⁸¹ P. C. Joshi Archives, LAI Papers, file 6: Chattopadhyaya to Nehru, 3 March 1929.

⁸² APAC, IOR, L/P&J/12/271, New Scotland Yard Report, 15 October 1930.

⁸³ APAC, IOR, L/P&J/12/271, Report 24 July 1931.

⁸⁴ Ardeshir Phirozsha Petigura would finish his medical studies and remained in the United Kingdom until at least 1947. APAC, IOR, L/P&J/7/12224, National Status of Dr Ardeshir Phirozsha Petigura.

⁸⁵ APAC, IOR, L/P&J/12/273, Communication from the International Secretariat, 8 February 1933.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

the plans to convene an Asiatic Labour Congress, could not be reconciled in one federation. The Kuomintang had expelled communists from its ranks in 1927 and was now the professed enemy of the Red International. The Red International itself was more than ever suspicious of the ILO as an instrument of imperialism. Aside from the rift running through Chinese labour, the Japanese trade unions had to be reckoned with. The reformist Japan Seamen's Union was working with Joshi to convene the Asiatic Labour Congress. However, the Japanese Revolutionary Trade Union Council (Hogaiki) took active part in the preparations of the PPTUS.⁸⁷ The Asiatic Labour Congress was to consist of Asian ILO-delegations working to better present Asian trade unionism in Geneva, whereas the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat wanted to represent the voice of the Asian worker. Cooperation with one excluded cooperation with the other. Faced between the choice of Asian cooperation within the orbit of the ILO or that of Moscow, political tensions within the AITUC became urgent, especially as the first Pan-Pacific Trade Union Congress drew near.⁸⁸

The Asian activities of the Profintern, or Red International of Labour Unions, make up another story that has not received much attention to date. If the Profintern is mentioned at all, it is usually to demonstrate its lack of relevance: 'it never amounted to much, and for nearly half its active life its dissolution was under serious consideration'.⁸⁹ But this view fails to take into account Profintern's activities in Asia, where it played a major role in linking the anti-imperialist activities of various Asian groups. As with the AITUC, the period 1921–27 was crucial. At the first Profintern Congress in 1921, the assembly expressed its interest in the Eastern question, and in early 1922, the Profintern participated in the First Congress of the Toilers of the East.⁹⁰ In 1923, this interest was made official by the establishment of Profintern's Far Eastern Bureau. Its main foci were trade union activities in India, Indonesia, and China, but the Bureau would in time include those in the Philippines, Indo-China, and other areas.

This attempt to form a united front in Asia generated much discussion in Profintern itself, since the trade union federations of all these countries, integrated as they frequently were with their respective struggles for independence, often consisted of multiclass parties. To some, including Trotsky, the idea of multiclass parties was reprehensible: 'In China, India and Japan this idea is mortally hostile to ... the hegemony of the proletariat and ... can only serve as a base, a screen, and a springboard for the bourgeoisie'.⁹¹ Nevertheless, until the late 1920s, a diverse range of groups received Soviet support in Asia, ranging from anti-imperialism to Pan-Islamism, both seen as potential unifying ideologies for revolutionaries in

⁸⁷ WBSA, Police Files, Serial no. 49, file 248/36: Draft Propaganda Thesis on the Pan-Pacific Labour Conference.

⁸⁸ No studies of India's links to the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat have been carried out as yet. The most informative studies on the Secretariat are J. Fowler, 'From East to West and West to East: Ties of Solidarity in the Pan-Pacific Revolutionary Trade Union Movement, 1923–1934', *International Labour and Working Class History* 66:1 (2004): 99–117; F. Farrell, 'Australian Labour and the Profintern', *International Review of Social History* 24:1 (1979): 34–54.

⁸⁹ G. Swain, 'Was the Profintern Really Necessary?' *European History Quarterly* 17:1 (1987): 73.

⁹⁰ R. McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism* (Equinox: 2006), 82.

⁹¹ L. Trotsky, *The Third International after Lenin* (1926; reprint New York: Pathfinder, 1996), 223.

the East.⁹² India was drawn more closely into the orbit of the Profintern by the formation of the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat. A preliminary conference had been organized for October 1926 in Sydney, and the AITUC had endorsed it, promising to send delegates.⁹³ However, it turned out to be too difficult for most Asian delegates to reach Sydney, so the founding of the PPTUS was postponed and its next conference scheduled for 1927 in China. The invitation read:

The stormy growth of the trade union movement in the Far East, following the world-changing rise of the national movement in the colonial and semi-colonial countries ... the pressing economic problems of the working class in this sphere, which are more sharply acute than anywhere else in the world; and the absence hitherto of any organized relationship between the organized workers of the lands most effected—all combine to make the proposed Congress of the very utmost importance to the whole working class.⁹⁴

As noted above in section 2.1, by March 1927 the communists had a narrow majority in the AITUC. When the invitation to the Hankou Congress of the PPTUS arrived, they decided to send two official AITUC delegates. D. R. Thengdi and S. V. Ghate, both strong communist sympathizers, were selected for the purpose. However, the Government of India refused to issue either of them a passport.⁹⁵ As M. K. Johnston, the deputy commissioner of police in Calcutta noted: 'Communism had become more to India than the wordy vapourings of a few unbalanced semi-intellectuals whose influence for evil was exceedingly small'.⁹⁶ With regard to revolutionary trade unionism, the Government of India was shifting its policy of surveillance to one of active intervention. No Indian delegation was present at this first Pan-Pacific Labour Congress, but the refusal of passports had no effect whatsoever: the Congress passed a resolution condemning the government's intervention in preventing Indian trade unionists from attending, and India was treated as a full member anyway, receiving a seat on the Bureau of Transport Workers for the Pacific *in absentia*.⁹⁷ The question of whether the AITUC should fully affiliate to the PPTUS was put on hold once more.

At the 1928 AITUC session at Jharia, all international affiliations were on the table again. It has been noted above in section 2.3, that this session affiliated the AITUC to the League Against Imperialism for the duration of one year. However, the PPTUS also sent an invitation to its next session at Vladivostok, to be held in August 1929. The message included a little kick: it warned the AITUC against the Asiatic Labour Congress, and urged them to

⁹² RCCSRMH, 495-68-9: Mohammad Abdur Rabb Barq to the Comrades of the Third International, Second Congress, Baku, 10 August 1920, *Indo-Russian Relations: 1917-1947*, edited by In Roy, Gupta, and Vasudevan, part 1.25-6. This point is elaborated in section 4.1.

⁹³ WBSA, Police Files, Serial no. 49, file 248/36: Draft Propaganda Thesis on the Pan-Pacific Labour Conference.

⁹⁴ WBSA, Police Files, Serial no. 49, file 248/36: Invitation from the head of the Preparatory Bureau of the Pan-Pacific Labour Congress.

⁹⁵ Mehta, *Trade Union Movement*, 140; Gupta, *A Short History*, 112.

⁹⁶ WBSA, Police Files, 35/26 file 248/26: Note on the Development of the AITUC.

⁹⁷ X. J. Eudin and R. C. North, *Soviet Russia and the East, 1920-1927: A Documentary Survey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 268.

explicitly ‘oppose the splitting proposal of Suzuki in the name of the Asiatic Labour Conference’.⁹⁸ R. R. Bakhale, one of the AITUC’s most intrepid travellers, had visited the IFTU in person, bringing back the message of IFTU’s ardent desire to have the AITUC affiliated to it. Thereafter, Bakhale had visited Russia to study the conditions of workers there and returned with messages of a similar nature.⁹⁹ All these invitations were discussed in great detail. The debate on the IFTU was a familiar dance by now, as was the outcome: the AITUC expressed its ‘inability to affiliate itself for the present with the IFTU Amsterdam, in view of the fact that there has not yet been achieved trade union unity’.¹⁰⁰ The move to affiliate to the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat was so narrowly defeated that it was decided to neither decline nor accept: the matter was deferred to the next conference.

The Asiatic Labour Congress was next on the list. A memorandum signed by R. R. Bakhale, on behalf of Chaman Lal, and by Yonekubo of the Japan Seamen’s Union had been put forward. The memorandum held no more than the information that the Congress intended to convene annually; that all Asiatic countries were welcome and that it would be held in India in 1929 if possible. However, it generated a heated debate. Bones of contention were the fact that ‘the agenda shall include the discussion of subjects on the agenda of the ILO Conference’, and possibly also that Suzuki was to be its first president.¹⁰¹ The latter was known to be a fairly conservative trade unionist. But the most vocal objections did not come from the AITUC, but from Jack Ryan, the representative of the PPTUS to the AITUC, which finally decided to adopt the memorandum and invite Asian delegations to India on behalf of the Asiatic Labour Congress’.

The Jharia conference ended in a deadlock between the reformists and the revolutionaries. It had become quite clear that the AITUC was not going to affiliate to the IFTU. However, the Asiatic Labour Congress had scored a temporary victory over the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat. The latter received no clear statement of support from the AITUC, but the League Against Imperialism—also sponsored by the Comintern—did get the AITUC’s vote of confidence.¹⁰² None of these decisions was easily resolved, and each was the result of a long congress full of compromise. Several issues had been carried over to the 1929 session. The League would be up for discussion again, as would be the PPTUS. But when the issue of Asian affiliations rose again at the 1929 Congress, the domestic circumstances of the Indian trade union movement had altered the playing field considerably.

Towards the split: the Meerut Conspiracy Case and the 1929 Congress

It was obvious to the reformist trade union leaders of the AITUC that the majority of India’s trade union congress was moving in a more militant direction. The Government of India had

⁹⁸ Gupta, *A Short History*, 130.

⁹⁹ Gupta, *A Short History*, 136–7.

¹⁰⁰ Gupta, *A Short History*, 138.

¹⁰¹ NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress: Memorandum.

¹⁰² Whether the LaI was actively sponsored by the Comintern has long been a matter of debate. Traffic of funds for the 1927 have not been proven. However, there were strong ties between the organizers of the Brussels Congress and the Comintern. See LoC, RGASPI, 542/1/3/10: Willi Münzenberg to ECCI secretariat, 1926. From 1929, the Comintern was actively running and paying for the Berlin office. See LoC, RGASPI, 542/1/32/36: ECCI to Münzenberg, 22 May 1929.

not failed to notice either and in March 1929, it imprisoned several left-wing trade unionists in the infamous Meerut arrests.¹⁰³ Thirty-two trade union leaders were arrested, eighteen of whom were AITUC leaders from the revolutionary faction. Aside from S. A. Dange, the list of detainees reads almost like a record of the secret Calcutta meeting that had attempted to oust Joshi from the leadership: D. R. Thengdi and S. V. Ghatge (who had been the selected delegates to the PPTUS), Muzaffar Ahmed, K. N. Joglekar, and R. S. Nimbkar were also arrested. An ordinance was issued under the Public Safety Bill, which provided for detention without trial. The trade unionists were charged under Section 121A of the Indian Penal Code: 'whoever within or without British India conspires to ... deprive the King of the sovereignty of British India or any part thereof, or conspires to overawe ... the Government of India or any local Government, shall be punished with transportation for life, or any shorter term, or with imprisonment of either description which may extend to ten years'. The indictment was explicitly directed against the AITUC's Asian activities, and the accused's contact with the League Against Imperialism and the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat was part of the charges.

The charges were accompanied by searches of the residential and working premises of the accused. The authorities hoped to find literature pertaining to internationalist theory in general and communist theory in particular, as well as documents relating to the Red International of Labour Unions, the League Against Imperialism, the Youth Communist League, the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat, and related organizations.¹⁰⁴ Correspondence with known agitators such as Chattopadhyaya was also on the list. Fascinatingly, all poetry was deemed suspect: any book of English poems, irrespective of its contents, was to be taken into custody.¹⁰⁵

The search yielded thousands of documents. A snapshot of the exhibits presented in court may serve to demonstrate how the struggle between revolutionaries and reformists had woven its way into the trial. Among the exhibits were leaflets denouncing the 'Geneva Show' of the ILO; leaflets denouncing the Second International; copies of the *Pan Pacific Worker*, the journal of the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat; passport applications to the latter's conference; leaflets of the League Against Imperialism; and copies of the *Far Eastern Monthly* and the *Bulletin of the Red International of Labour Unions*.¹⁰⁶ This forced the Meerut accused to defend the relevance of their international activities to their trade union methods. It also caused the Meerut trial to become a battleground where the international affiliations of the reformists and revolutionaries were pitted against each other. The Meerut prisoners accused N. M. Joshi, R. R. Bakhale, V. V. Giri, and B. Shiva Rao, all organizers of the Asiatic Labour Congress, of suffering from a perverted form of internationalism, in which they had 'adopted all that is bad and enfeebling from the reformist trade unions of other countries'.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ On the Meerut case, see A. G. Noorani, *Indian Political Trials, 1775–1947* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 238–64; P. Ghosh, *The Meerut Conspiracy Case and the Left-Wing in India* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1978). For contemporary accounts, see *The Meerut Prisoners and the Charge Against Them* (London: Modern Books, 1931); L. Hutchinson, *Conspiracy at Meerut* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1935).

¹⁰⁴ NAI, HP, 10–4 of 1924: charge sheet Meerut Conspiracy Case.

¹⁰⁵ P. C. Joshi Archives, MCC, File 9: Prosecution Exhibits, 2078: List of articles to be searched for.

¹⁰⁶ P. C. Joshi Archives, MCC, File 48: Prosecution Witnesses PW-104 (18 July 1929–16 August 1929).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Nor was their beloved ILO a viable alternative: the ‘complete record’ of ILO legislation applied in India consisted of one convention regarding unemployment that ‘does nothing for the unemployed’, and legislation on the employment of women in mines ‘so unsatisfactory as to be condemned by Mardy Jones as an instance of “Government’s complicity with capitalist rapacity”’.¹⁰⁸ Joshi and his colleagues were accused of being aware of this, but nevertheless telling the workers ‘that their grievances will be redressed by legislation ... and, as a reward for this betrayal of the workers, the reformist leaders are given a seat in the Assembly or a free trip to Geneva’.¹⁰⁹ In this way, the proceedings drove a further wedge into the already divided Indian trade union scene.

The impact of the Meerut conspiracy case was enormous. The trials turned into a very public media affair, and a powerful demonstration of interwar anti-imperialist solidarity. In England, Meerut defence committees sprang up in several places. Some were organized by Indian students active in the League Against Imperialism, but several British trade unionists also took an active part. The trials had a profound impact on working classes throughout Britain. By 1932, a Manchester street theatre group was performing a play based on the trial. It had large appeal within the Workers’ Theatre Movement and was performed by other troupes as well, including The Red Players and the Red Megaphones, who both staged it during the time of the case.¹¹⁰ The plight of the defendants was both framed and perceived as rooted in a context of global economic despair, leading to involvement from agitators as diverse as British trade unionist Tom Mann and the Trinidadian activist Adrian Cola Rienzi.¹¹¹

Even if the impact of the Meerut Conspiracy Case did not have the effect the prosecution desired, it did prove to the AITUC’s reformist leadership that the Congress had to change. The fact that the League Against Imperialism and the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat had been mentioned in the indictment proved that a continued engagement with these bodies was not in the interest of Asian labour. The reformists, who sought to give Asian labour a voice in Geneva, moved to dissociate the AITUC from further Comintern-sponsored bodies. At the AITUC’s meeting at Nagpur in December 1929, the thundering of Asia drowned out every other sound. The battle for Asia had begun, and the reformists appeared to be on the losing side. In the stormy session, the following resolutions were made:

This Congress resolves to affiliate to the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat and extends a cordial invitation to the Secretariat to hold its next session in India. This Congress further rescinds the resolution about the holding of the Asiatic Labour

¹⁰⁸ P. C. Joshi Archives, MCC, File 157: Statement of R. S. Nimbkar (Accused), vol. 3.2886–2999, 6682. Mardy Jones was a Welsh politician from a mining family.

¹⁰⁹ P. C. Joshi Archives, MCC, File 156: Statement of R. S. Nimbkar, 6661.

¹¹⁰ C. Warden, *British Avant-Garde Theatre* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 79–80; R. Samuel, E. MacColl, and S. Cosgrove, *Theatres of the Left, 1880–1935: Workers’ Theatre Movements in Britain and America* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 117.

¹¹¹ S. Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich: Race and Political Culture in 1930s Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 177.

Conference in view of the fact that it is likely to be a rival body to the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat.¹¹²

The Congress further decided to continue its affiliation to the League Against Imperialism, and 'congratulates the League Against Imperialism on its work in promoting the solidarity of the working class of the Imperialist and oppressed countries and for the emancipation of the colonial people'.¹¹³ The reformists' humiliation was complete when the meeting further resolved that the ILO was 'an organization established by the imperialist governments of Europe for the purpose of their imperialistic designs' and that no further AITUC delegations would be sent to Geneva in the future.¹¹⁴ It was abundantly clear that reconciliation between the rival factions was no longer an option. The thirty or so trade union leaders who had opposed these resolutions walked out and held a separate meeting. They started writing a statement of their own. The main issue was the fact that the proposed Asiatic Labour Congress had been voted down in favour of the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat, despite previous resolutions to the contrary. It was left to Nehru himself, who had been called upon to chair the Nagpur congress, to read out a letter from some of the AITUC's most influential leaders, many of whom were former ILO delegates, which explained their absence from further AITUC proceedings. Their statement clearly shows that the battle for Asia was the principal cause for the rift:

The proceedings of the Executive Council of the AITUC have revealed beyond doubt the fact that the majority of its members are determined to commit the Congress to a policy with which we are in complete disagreement. The point of view of the majority is clearly indicated in the resolutions for ... the affiliation of the Congress to the League Against Imperialism, and to the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat, and the rejection of the proposal to hold the Asiatic Labour Conference ... Under these circumstances, we have to dissociate ourselves completely from the resolutions of the Executive Council and we further feel that no useful purpose will be served by continuing our participations in the proceedings of the Congress.¹¹⁵

The letter was signed by N. M. Joshi, Diwan Chaman Lal, V. V. Giri, B. Shiva Rao, and several others. A separate statement was drafted by trade union leaders without international experience, but who were equally uncomfortable with the path the AITUC had embarked upon. Even their statement shows that the AITUC's Asian affiliations were the most important issue: 'The Executive Committee passed resolutions fundamentally opposed to the principles of Trade Unions and the policy of the Trade Union Congress. Affiliation of the Congress to the Pan-Pacific Secretariat is one of such resolutions'.¹¹⁶ Nehru made a brief attempt to reconcile the two factions, advising that while affiliation to IFTU was undesirable,

¹¹² Gupta, *A Short History*, 151.

¹¹³ Gupta, *A Short History*, 152.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Gupta, *A Short History*, 158. V. V. Giri became the first president of the seceded federation.

¹¹⁶ Gupta, 158. The statement was signed by Mrinal Kanti Bose, K. C. Roy Choudhury, K. C. Mitra, and Latafat Hussain.

as ‘India and the colonial countries have been studiously ignored by it’, affiliation to the Communist International was not advisable either.¹¹⁷ However, the Indian trade union movement, which had once been the hope of Indian labour as an organized force with a general strike as the ultimate weapon against the government, was irreparably torn. Three days after the Nagpur congress started, sixty delegates gathered at a separate location, not far from where the AITUC was holding its closing session. They decided to found a rival trade union federation, provisionally called the Indian Trade Union Federation, soon to be known as the National Trade Union Federation (NTUF). Giri was selected as its chairman, and Bakhale was to be its secretary. As the AITUC had voluntarily given up the ILO nomination, they decided to continue representing ‘Indian’ labour in Geneva, and unopposed by revolutionary trade unionists, the NTUF was now free to start organizing the Asiatic Labour Congress in earnest.

2.5 The Asiatic Labour Congress

NTUF’s first task at hand, however, was domestic: representing those trade unions that had joined their side in the split—and making sure that they would not regret it—as well as enlisting new unions. This would take some time. It was a difficult task too, for two disastrous strikes among textile and railway workers had left many angry workers in no mood to join the self-designated ‘moderate’ NTUF, which many believed sought a seat at the imperialists’ table. Correspondence with Yonekubo from this period suggests that this was one of the main causes for the delay in convening the Asiatic Labour Congress.¹¹⁸ Yonekubo, who represented some 92,000 workers of the Japan Seamen’s Union and had to explain the delay back home, did not appreciate it. His curt reply, however, included the wish that NTUF would be able to ‘overcome the reds absolutely’,¹¹⁹ and tensions were further eased when Yonekubo stopped in Bombay later that year to discuss plans for the conference. They drafted a constitution and decided that the Congress would not be held until Chinese participation had been secured.¹²⁰

It soon turned out that an Asiatic Labour Congress was easier to conceive of than to execute. First, there were many travel restrictions to consider. The fact that the Congress was not sanctioned by the ILO—even if its organizers were ILO delegates—made for uncooperative institutions, be they imperial governments or international organizations. Matters of transportation and communication presented tremendous logistical challenges as well. In choosing a venue, steamer timetables and routes had to be considered. This played into the hands of the Indian delegates’ desire to have their country host the gathering. They extolled the virtues of India’s many excellent port cities, especially Bombay, which was a convenient stopover for delegates en route to Geneva, and Madras which was convenient for delegations from Ceylon.¹²¹ Other problems were even more basic, such as whom to invite and where to send the invitations. Most Asian nations, and especially the dependent

¹¹⁷ Gupta, *A Short History*, 165.

¹¹⁸ NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress: R. R. Bakhale to Yonekubo, 7 March 1930.

¹¹⁹ NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress: Yonekubo to R. R. Bakhale, 9 April 1930.

¹²⁰ G. O. Totten, *The Social Democratic Movement in Prewar Japan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 274.

¹²¹ NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress: Preliminary meeting Bombay.

territories, were not represented at the ILO, there was no central list of non-ILO affiliated trade unions, and neither the ILO nor the International Federation of Trade Unions in Amsterdam was very forthcoming with contacts.¹²²

Ceylon and China represented some hope. On receipt of the draft constitution, the Ceylon Workers' Federation and Provident Association indicated that it would like to join the movement.¹²³ China, though it had been considered a vital participant from the Congress' inception in 1925, finally joined in 1933 when Li Yu Hosiang, the Chinese Workers' delegate at the ILO, signed a memorandum with the Indian and Japanese delegates. With the long-desired Chinese participation secured and the date for the ILO Conference of 1934 in Geneva decided upon, the plans for the first Asiatic Labour Congress could be finalized. It would be held as the yearly caravan of ships made its way to Geneva. Colombo was chosen as the most appropriate venue—an easy stopover for the Japanese and Chinese delegations, as well as conveniently reached from India. Asian workers' unity at the ILO would finally be a reality.

The first session: Colombo 1934

At the conference, finally held in Colombo on 10 May 1934, only Japan, India, and Ceylon were present. Of the Asian ILO members, the Thai delegates, consisting of representatives of the Thai monarchy and not trade unionists, had remained aloof from the plans. Thai activities in Geneva were targeted as showcasing Siam as a nation on a par with Europe, rather than as a part of Asia. The fact that only the most senior diplomats were present in Geneva is a further testament to the importance attributed to the League of Nations by political elites in Bangkok.¹²⁴ The Persian delegates, representing the authoritarian state of Reza Shah Pahlavi, also took no part in the Congress.¹²⁵ For Japan, the most prominent participants were Tadao M. Kikukawa, one of the leaders of the Japanese Trade Union Congress and author of *Rōdō Kumiai Soshiki Ron* (On the organisation of labour, 1931), and Suzuki Bunji, president and founder of the Confederation of Japanese Labour.¹²⁶ The most distinguished representatives from India were Joshi, the 'father' of the movement, and Jamnadas M. Mehta, president of the NTUF and soon to be mayor of Bombay. Japan's and India's eyes and ears in Geneva were F. I. Ayasawa and P. P. Pillai, respectively. A. E. Goonesinha, president of the All-Ceylon Trade

¹²² Although the latter organization could have supplied them if they had been so inclined. For instance, Indonesian trade unions had already applied for IFTU membership. See IISH, IFTU Archives, file 91: Note on the demands of the PVPN, 1932. Several Indonesian unions had federated in 1919, with the communists seceding in 1921. The first workers' representatives for the Dutch East Indies had attended the ILO Conference of 1929. See also R. C. Kwantes, *De ontwikkeling van de nationalistische beweging in Nederlandsch-Indië* (Groningen: Nederlands Historisch Genootschap, 1975).

¹²³ NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress: Ceylon Workers' Federation and Provident Association to NTUF, 10 October 1929.

¹²⁴ Hell, 'Siam and the League of Nations', 49.

¹²⁵ For Persia's international engagements in this period, see S. Cronin, ed., *The Making of Modern Iran: State and Society under Riza Shah, 1921–1941* (London: Routledge, 2003), esp. 82–102.

¹²⁶ NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress: minutes of the first session. On Kikukawa and Suzuki, see S. S. Large, *Organized Workers and Socialist Politics in Interwar Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 163, 184; J. Hunter, *Japanese Economic History 1930–1960*, vol. 5, *Industrial labour in Japan* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 107; S. Garon, *The State and Labor in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 108; V. C. Mackie, *Creating Socialist Women in Japan: Gender, Labour and Activism, 1900–1937* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 132.

Union Congress, as well as S. W. Dassenaik, member of the Ceylon Labour Party and the Legislative Council of Ceylon were among the attendees from the host country.

Despite its rather limited participation, the Asiatic Labour Congress passed grand resolutions pertaining to the whole of Asia, and there seemed to be no lack of confidence that at the next session, fraternal delegations from other Asian countries would indeed be present. The Congress opened with the singing of the labour song in English, Sinhalese, and Japanese. Joshi gave a history of the movement for convening an Asiatic Labour Congress and emphasized that the Congress was meant not to distance Asia from international machinery such as the ILO, but to be more active in it.

I wish to make it clear to our comrades outside Asia that ... those of us who are meeting here today are not inspired by any spirit of separation. ... This movement of the Asiatic Labour Congress is only intended to enable the workers of Asia to come into line with the workers of the other parts of the world so that instead of being a hindrance to the progress of the world we shall be able to march hand in hand with them.¹²⁷

This was even more evident in the speech by Peri Sundaram, Ceylon's Minister for Labour, Industries, and Commerce. His words voiced the desire to have Asia as a fully-fledged member of the international system, cooperating with the West on an equal footing:

This kind of international cooperation has already been born and developed under the aegis of the League of Nations, and there have also been parallel lines of development amongst various regional units. The West has already made great strides in this direction, but this is the first occasion when the nations of the East are realizing their own responsibilities in the matter of promoting concerted international action to meet common problems. It is in this sense that I consider that this first Congress of yours is going to be an epoch making event in Asiatic history.¹²⁸

As a first order of business, the constitution was approved. The reformists had been true to their name, which had caused uneasy equilibrium between the ideals of the ILO and an anti-imperialist stance. The result was just enough to make the Western ILO members nervous, but not enough to satisfy the more radical elements in the trade union movement. Among their solemn aims were 'to bring about unity among the working classes of Asia'; 'to remove the disabilities of a discriminatory character imposed upon Asiatic workers'; 'to remove the exploitation of workers in Asiatic countries under foreign domination'; and 'to promote the development of International Social Legislation'.¹²⁹

The resolutions arrived at during the conference further affirmed the Asiatic Labour Congress's entrenchment in the Geneva system. But they also explicitly denounced the effects of Western bias in world politics and economics at the time, addressing the detrimental effects

¹²⁷ NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress: Minutes of the first session.

¹²⁸ NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress: Speech by the Hon. Mr Peri Sundaram.

¹²⁹ NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress: Constitution as approved by the Congress on 10 May 1934.

of everything from tariff walls to globalization on the condition of workers in Asia: ‘modern economies have now transgressed the bounds of parochialism and nationalism; and in order to cope with the multitudinous and complex economic and social problems of our times and to ensure for the worker his adequate place in the sun, cooperation between the various nations is most urgently needed’.¹³⁰ The issue of transnational labour was also prominently addressed, an important issue especially for transport workers and seamen, in whose unions Asian colleagues tended to be unwelcome:¹³¹ ‘In many quarters of the world—although owing to overpopulation he is superfluous at home—the Asiatic labourer is unwanted. ... He must not only be taught to rise in self-esteem but he must actually rise in the estimation of other nations. Then and not till then will the solidarity of labour become more than an empty phrase’.¹³² Lastly, the issue of colonialism was explicitly addressed. The fourth resolution read: ‘This Congress records its definite opinion that the grant of political freedom and right of self-determination to such of the countries in Asia as are under foreign domination is essential in the interest of international understanding and world peace’.¹³³

The original object of discussing matters pertaining to the ILO was not forgotten. The Congress called for direct representation of colonies and dependencies in the ILO; the allocation of two Asiatic seats in the governing body; and an obligation to apply ILO conventions ratified by a country to its dependent territories as well. Under the existing constitution of the ILO, this was not compulsory. It also called for a tripartite Asiatic Labour Congress under the auspices of the ILO itself.¹³⁴ Finally, an attempt was made to salvage the Pan-Asian character of this poorly attended conference by urging all national labour organizations in Asia to invite fraternal delegates from other Asian countries to their annual conferences.

The goal of wider representation at the next gathering was to be achieved through a press offensive from the ‘headquarters’ of the Asiatic Labour Congress.¹³⁵ Great pains were taken to give it its proper panache. When the Federation of Jewish Labour in Palestine joined the Congress, marking the westernmost point on the Congress’ Asian map, Yonekubo and Bakhale were quick to praise the Congress as a ‘continental body’.¹³⁶ However, all this threw the reality of the situation into stark relief: there were no funds to speak of, and there was no ‘headquarters’. There was not even any stationary: Yonekubo continued to use the letterhead of the Japan Seamen’s Union, and Chaman Lal and Bakhale that of the NTUF.

Towards the second Asiatic Labour Congress, 1934–37

The way the Congress was represented in the press, and remembered by its participants, might be divided into the twin sentiments of ‘Asia Awakened’ and ‘Asia Oppressed’. The two were

¹³⁰ NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress: Speech by the Hon. Mr Peri Sundaram.

¹³¹ M. van Rossum, *Hand aan Hand (Blank en Bruin): Solidariteit en de werking van globalisering, etniciteit en klasse onder zeelieden op de Nederlandse koopvaardij, 1900–1945* (Amsterdam: Aksant, 2009), 117–50.

¹³² NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress: Speech by the Hon. Mr Peri Sundaram.

¹³³ *The Trade Union Record*, May & June 1934, 10.

¹³⁴ *The Trade Union Record*, May & June 1934, 10.

¹³⁵ NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress: ‘To the Editors of Newspapers’, 20 May 1935.

¹³⁶ NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress: Dov Hos, Secretary of the General Federation of Jewish Labour, to Bakhale, 27 January 1935; Bakhale to Dov Hos, 4 July 1935.

not necessarily contradictory, as they were part of the same anti-imperialist narrative, and they were often expressed within the same newspaper article.

‘Awakened Asia’ is well represented by, among others, the *Bombay Chronicle*. This newspaper featured a series of articles with headlines such as ‘Bright Outlook For Asiatic Labour Congress: Colombo Session Inaugurates New Era Of Cooperation Among Eastern Countries’, praising it as ‘the first fruit’ of the ‘devoted and arduous work’ of Joshi and his Japanese colleagues.¹³⁷ While conceding that the Congress’s ‘potentialities and possibilities were not yet fully appreciated’, it concluded that ‘till now all international labour alliances and combinations originated from the West. Renascent Asia is now making her experimental efforts in this direction and that is why I consider that this Congress sets up a new landmark in Asiatic history’.¹³⁸ The *Times of India* was equally enthusiastic, announcing ‘Asiatic Labour Congress: Workers Unity’, calling the first session a ‘good beginning’, and predicting that the Congress was ‘likely to grow’.¹³⁹ *The Hindu* reservedly called the Congress a ‘momentous gathering whose potentialities it would be wrong to measure by its comparatively humble beginnings’ and reminded the public that ‘it should be remembered that India and Japan between them, representing as they do the two great divisions of Asiatic races, the Aryan and the Mongolian, may well claim to speak for Asia on large questions of policy’.¹⁴⁰ This last view was indicative of the widespread sentiment in India in the early 1930s that Japan and India were to lead the re-awakening of Asia.¹⁴¹ This view was not absent among the Congress’ participants either. After Colombo, the Japanese delegates were proceeding to Geneva and had hardly arrived in Aden when they wrote Joshi:

We look back on that historic meeting with pleasure and look forward to our future collaboration with the firm conviction that by the united efforts we workers of Asia shall be able to demonstrate our strength, free ourselves from old bondage and contribute to the establishment of social justice and peace.¹⁴²

The vision of ‘oppressed Asia’ was equally well represented, and the most poignant examples may be taken from the *Times of Ceylon*, which published many of the speeches delivered at the Congress. One editorial maintained that the Congress ‘would ultimately serve as the panacea for the evils that the Asiatic Worker is subjected to’.¹⁴³ And it cited Goonesinha as saying that ‘the most unhappy working man in the world today is the Asiatic, because of the heartless exploitation and ruthless tyranny that he has to labour under’.¹⁴⁴ The article went on to criticize the ILO—which had never been the intention of the Asiatic Labour Congress, which itself wanted to remain close to Geneva—for passing grand resolutions and mapping

¹³⁷ *Bombay Chronicle*, 25 May 1934.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Times of India*, 19 May 1934.

¹⁴⁰ *The Hindu*, 12 May 1934.

¹⁴¹ I. S. Friedman, ‘Indian Nationalism and the Far East’, *Pacific Affairs*, 13:1 (1940): 18.

¹⁴² NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress: Letter from the S. S. Fushimi Maru to N. M. Joshi, 17 May 1934.

¹⁴³ *Times of Ceylon*, 10 May 1934.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

out programmes for the benefit of the worker, 'presented to us as a hollow mockery, always reminding us of our helpless position; for those nice things are not for us'.¹⁴⁵ Such a negative image of the ILO was not at all evident from the proceedings of the Congress, but it is likely that the Congress' otherwise anti-imperialist idiom may have bred some confusion in the attending press. The Asiatic Labour Congress was indeed intended to provide 'Asiatic workers' with a new mouthpiece to voice their concerns. It advocated change, but that was to be achieved through participation in the existing international structure of the ILO.

At the second Asiatic Labour Congress, finally held in May 1937 at the Labour Hall in Tokyo, only India and Japan were present. The other members of the Asiatic Labour Congress, Ceylon and Palestine, did not attend. The Congress still professed its determination to work with the ILO and to secure wider Asian representation at that body. In their reports to the press, the Indian delegates emphasized this along with the Congress's anti-imperialist rhetoric and the fact that China's absence was publicly lamented.¹⁴⁶ In the opening address, Nihon Rōdō Kumiai Kaigi president¹⁴⁷ said of the Congress's intentions:

We must strive to effect a speedy realization of what is laid down in the 'Magna Charta' of the ILO in Asiatic Countries as well, and in this way, work for the prosperity of our new industrial nations. Asiatic nations need not follow in the wake of the leading capitalistic nations of the world and enter into competition with them. Our Congress aims to remove the racial inequalities and the capitalistic and imperialistic domination under which the working classes of Asia are placed.¹⁴⁸

The only Indian delegate who had also been present at the first Asiatic Labour Congress was Congress' secretary R. R. Bakhale. After the Congress, he was invited on a tour of Manchukuo and Korea, visiting factories and 'studying the conditions of the industrial workers'.¹⁴⁹ He proceeded to China to win affiliations for the Asiatic Labour Congress, but had to admit that 'strained political relations between Japan and China have made the entire Chinese population highly suspicious of anything international with which Japan is associated'.¹⁵⁰ He left China just four weeks before the start of the Sino-Japanese war, somewhat unrealistically 'with a confident hope that by the time the Asiatic Labour Congress meets in India in 1939, we shall have China affiliated to it'.¹⁵¹

But despite the presence of an Indian delegation, the Congress had become an exclusively Japanese affair. The principal sponsors of the 1937 Congress, the Sōdōmei and its labour bloc in the Nihon Rōdō Kumiai Kaigi, tried their best to portray the convention as an important milestone in 'Asian' labour history, and retrospectively claimed the movement as a Japanese initiative.¹⁵² Though a third session was indeed scheduled for 1939, the Congress

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ *The Indian Labour Journal*, 1 August 1937.

¹⁴⁷ The Congress of Japanese Labour Unions, comparable to the AITUC before the 1929 split.

¹⁴⁸ *The Indian Labour Journal*, 1 August 1937.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Large, *Organized Workers and Socialist Politics*, 184.

would not meet again. The next issues of the *Indian Labour Journal*, Bakhale's forum of choice, were devoted almost exclusively to calls for boycotts of Japanese goods, declarations of support for China, and rather prominent announcements of Bakhale's new activities. After the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, he had abandoned internationalism and refocused his attentions exclusively on India's own labour policy.¹⁵³

The Sino-Japanese war eclipsed any possibilities for the movement's survival. Much like the NTUF itself, both the Japan Seamen's Union and the Japanese Federation of Labour had been considered moderate unions.¹⁵⁴ If they were uninvolved with the trade unionism of the Comintern, they were equally wary of the increasingly ultranationalist policies of Japan. Suzuki Bunji had been a member of the central committee of the Social Democratic Party (1926–32), which opposed Japan's China policy.¹⁵⁵ He remained involved with the party, which fused with the National Labour–Farmer Masses Party, forming the Social Masses Party from 1932 onwards. But after 1937, Indian cooperation with Japanese organizations in the name of Asian labour, regardless of those organizations' politics, had become impossible. It would generate too much bad press. On the Japanese side, trade unionism had rapidly become too restricted and too small to even survive.¹⁵⁶ On the Indian side, Japanese imperialism, particularly in relation to China, was condemned in the strongest possible terms across the political spectrum and further association with Japanese bodies would have been too damaging for the NTUF.¹⁵⁷ Asianism itself had become tainted.

Meanwhile at the AITUC: revolutionary Asianism after the split

The AITUC had entered a period of factional fighting, in which the issue of Asian affiliations figured prominently. Newly elected leader S. V. Deshpande represented the most militant wing of the Congress. He had condemned the split in no uncertain terms: 'the Right Wing Leaders split away in order to weaken the economic and political struggle of the Indian workers. They split away to help British Imperialism and Indian capitalists. The Right Wing leaders had no mandate from the rank and file to split the trade union movement'.¹⁵⁸ A mere six days after the Nagpur split in December 1929, one of his first actions was to move for official affiliation to both the League Against Imperialism and the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat. It was quite clear in which direction the truncated AITUC wished to move: 'the great Russian Revolution of 1917 had opened up a new horizon for the workers of the whole world. The Indian worker must study closely the history of the Russian Revolution. They must of course entertain no thoughts of violent revolution, but it is unnecessary to make an undue fetish of non-violence'.¹⁵⁹ This fit well with the views of the Far Eastern Bureau of the

¹⁵³ *The Indian Labour Journal*, 10, 17 and 24 October 1937.

¹⁵⁴ S. Garon, *The State and Labor in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 108.

¹⁵⁵ Mackie, *Creating Socialist Women in Japan*, 132.

¹⁵⁶ Large, *Organized Workers and Socialist Politics*, 164.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. newspapers such as *Young India* and the *Congress Socialist*: 'The tentacles of the Japanese empire creep slowly forward abridging Chinese freedom', Dec 21 1935, 4.

¹⁵⁸ WBSA, Police Files, 98/1926 AITUC: Answer of Militant Working Class to the Splitting Policy of Right Wing Leaders, by Deshpande, December 1929.

¹⁵⁹ This was obviously a slight towards Gandhi. WBSA, Police Files, file 98/1926 AITUC: report 1931.

Profintern, to whom the Nagpur split represented a chance to get 'India', as represented by the AITUC, on board.

The AITUC remained in touch with the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat throughout the next year and a half. It was a profitable relationship, for the PPTUS sent funds to help continue the AITUC strikes.¹⁶⁰ Although passport refusals ensured that no direct AITUC representative could travel to the 1929 PPTUS Congress, the revolutionaries in the AITUC maintained their connections to the secretariat in writing. Government bans on trafficking in seditious literature notwithstanding, texts were, after all, easier moved than people. The official organ of the PPTUS, the *Pan-Pacific Worker*, came to rely on Indian contributors to fill its pages. Importantly, these continued to address Asian anti-imperialist solidarities rather than focus on the plight of organized labour in India. The Asianist rhetoric of the journal echoed that of the League Against Imperialism: Asian lands that had been united in pre-imperialist times now stood united against the imperialist powers that had kept them apart:

Because the Moroccans, Indonesians, Hindus and Chinese are struggling to liberate themselves from the double yoke of militarism and imperialism, they are branded as cruel and blood-thirsty. But if they submit without resistance to the modern forms of robbery and exploitation, the capitalist writers and 'ideologists' are sure to laud the grandeur and beauty of the old civilisations.¹⁶¹

However, the already truncated AITUC faced further fragmentation, which would roughly divide it into two sections: those who wanted to concentrate on the national struggle and unify Indian labour towards that end; and a section who wanted to 'purge' the AITUC of all reformist and nationalist elements and affiliate to the Third International as soon as possible. The 1931 session of the AITUC broke up in disorder, with Deshpande, along with several communist splinter groups, staging a walkout. His faction had an interesting afterlife up to 1935 as the Red Trade Union Congress, loosely part of the Red International of Trade Unions.

The disarray in which the AITUC found itself at this juncture was exacerbated by the on-going Meerut trials. The Meerut prisoners were still in jail with no prospect of being released, and suspected communists were closely watched. As a result, many went underground. Communist funds, literature, and messages from elsewhere in Asia were supplied through lascars who could come and go undetected.¹⁶² Their shipping routes maintained the contacts between communist unions throughout Asia and linked organizations such as the Far Eastern Bureau, the League of Oppressed Peoples of the East, and the League Against Imperialism to their Indian correspondents.¹⁶³ The opportunity to employ such

¹⁶⁰ Maharashtra State Archives (MSA), Home Special File 543(18) E Pt. I, 1929–1933: Bolshevism—funds. Arrangements for interception and control of funds from Communist sources abroad.

¹⁶¹ *Pan-Pacific Worker* 1:1 (1927): 11.

¹⁶² On lascar networks, see section 4.3.

¹⁶³ Occasionally, lascars were captured. A good example is a sailor travelling under the alias of 'Samuel' plying the shipping route between Singapore and India, among other places. Although he was suspected of acting as a courier, British intelligence services discovered him to be a frequent visitor to the League Against Imperialism. WBSA, Police Files, Intelligence Bureau, Home Dept., New Delhi, 23 November 1932.

clandestine contacts was inherent in these smaller organisations, many of which contained Seamen's Unions that were sympathetic to communist ideas.¹⁶⁴ From intercepted telegrams, it becomes clear that funds were sent from the Colonial Bureau of the Comintern at Moscow, the All-Russian Textile Workers' Federation, the Central Committee of Municipal Workers at Moscow, the All-China Labour Federation, and the Lascars' Welfare League.¹⁶⁵ However, this last and most sustained attempt by the Government of India to combat revolutionary Asianism ensured that concerted Asian action was no longer an option.

If it had become harder for the AITUC to work with its Asian interlocutors, it had also become less interesting to do so. With the failure of the Chinese revolution, hopes that Asia would strengthen the Red International were dwindling in Moscow. The forced collectivization and industrialization under Stalin reoriented Communist policy towards reformist trade unions.¹⁶⁶ This also impinged on the RILU's Asian work. The Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat decided it no longer wanted to pursue claims to international unity with class traitors.¹⁶⁷ The evolution of the RILU and, consequently, the PPTUS into instruments of Stalinist policies meant that their role in Asia was effectively finished. The PPTUS lived on into the mid-1930s, but came to focus on Chinese and Japanese seamen plying the Pacific routes and the problems they faced in the United States.¹⁶⁸ With the dissolution of the League Against Imperialism as well as of Profintern in the late 1930s, the Asianism of revolutionary trade unionists was over.

2.6 Conclusion

Indian labour as organized under the AITUC had the potential to organise general strikes and might have become a powerful force in the struggle for independence. Instead, the AITUC fragmented over its Asian affiliations. This demonstrates the importance attached to Asian solidarity and cooperation in the interwar period. Both the revolutionary and reformist groups in the AITUC considered their Asianist projects as a vital part of their trade unionism. Labour Asianism experienced its zenith between 1927 and 1929. In these years, reformists and revolutionaries worked together in the League Against Imperialism, and worked towards building a variety of Asianist platforms. However, as the 1920s drew to a close, so too did the willingness of ideologically distinct Asian labour organizations to cooperate. The British clampdown on revolutionary trade unionism coincided with stricter directives from Moscow. Asian cooperation within the Profintern and the Asiatic Labour Congress came to be seen as mutually exclusive, and the AITUC split into two rival federations whose paths continued to diverge until the Asianist moment drew to a close. The Profintern was disbanded in the mid-1930s, and the Asiatic Labour Congress, whose primary interlocutors were Japanese trade

¹⁶⁴ The Oriental International Seamen's Union provided a vital link. This organization was said to be 'practically a branch of the Red International of Labour Unions. MSA, Home Special file 543(2): Bolshevism—Note by the India Office London on the Indian Communist movement.

¹⁶⁵ MSA, Home Special File 543(18) E Pt. I, 1929–1933: List of organisations, societies etc. from whom telegrams regarding remittances of Communist money might be sent to addresses in India.

¹⁶⁶ Tosstorff, 'Moscow versus Amsterdam', 89.

¹⁶⁷ *Idem*, 91.

¹⁶⁸ Fowler, 'From East to West and West to East', 113.

unionists, ceased its activities in 1937, two months before the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war. One locus of labour Asianism remained: the ILO at Geneva.

Interestingly, the ILO finally addressed the issue of the ratification of labour conventions by Asian countries in 1937, the very year that saw the eclipse of labour activism in Asia. A newly established committee of experts on the ratification of ILO conventions included Atul Chatterjee, a former member of the League of Nations governing body. Chatterjee's report stated:

The ILO lays down the general principle that any convention ratified by any country should also be applied as far as possible, to that country's colonies, protectorates or other areas which are within its political jurisdiction. This clause is of special importance to Asia, large slices of which are owned by Imperial Powers such as Great Britain, France, Japan, the Netherlands, etc. It would therefore be interesting to note the methods by which the ILO seeks to bring these colonial and other territories also within the orbit of its beneficent influence.¹⁶⁹

The commission had some effect, for the ILO addressed the application of the Minimum Age Convention to Asia at its annual session that year. The fact that the *Indian Labour Journal* carried this news on its front page demonstrates that this was perceived as a considerable victory.¹⁷⁰ The discussion led to a further examination of existing ILO conventions, whether they carried exceptions for Asian countries, and whether these exceptions were intended as temporary. As it seemed that favourable winds were blowing through the halls of the International Labour Conference that year, Indian delegate Satis Chandra Sen decided that the time was ripe to ask the Conference to revisit the issue of an Asiatic Labour Congress under the auspices of the ILO. Unsurprisingly, he was supported in this endeavour by the Japanese workers' delegate.

The importance of a regional conference has once again been emphasized in the Director's Report. In the Director's words: 'the Organisation could not fulfill its function if America and Asia always came to Europe and if Europe never had the opportunity of seeing America or Asia. It is essential that the ILO should have closer knowledge of Asia, and should make the affairs of countries such as India its especial concern.'¹⁷¹

However, not only did the larger ILO conference respond unfavourably to this request, but the Indian and Japanese government representatives—part of the same delegation—failed to lend their support.¹⁷² However, all was not lost. In December 1937, ILO Director Harold Butler travelled to India to attend a session of the National Trade Union Federation. Held in Calcutta

¹⁶⁹ *The Indian Labour Journal*, 10 May 1937, 2: 'The ILO and Colonial Territories'.

¹⁷⁰ *The Indian Labour Journal*, 27 June 1937, 1: 'Comrade Naidu Champions Indian Workers in Geneva'.

¹⁷¹ *Idem*, 11 July 1937, 5: Plea for Asiatic Labour Conference; Indian Worker's Delegate's Speech at the ILO Conference.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

the week before Christmas, B. Shiva Rao presided over the meeting and impressed upon the Director the significance of his visit to Asia:

I know I am but voicing your thoughts in extending to them both a most warm-hearted welcome, and in expressing the hope that the Director of the great Institution will be so encouraged by the results of his initial contact with India and other countries of the East that he will pay periodical visits to us, and not only carry with him first-hand impressions of workers' conditions in the East, but make our contacts with Geneva living and intimate. The workers of India owe a very heavy debt, indeed, to the ILO.¹⁷³

However, the NTUF was left with the rather unpleasant task of downplaying Japanese involvement in the Asiatic Labour Congress. It is very revealing that in the presence of Butler, Rao tried to deemphasize the fact that the second Asiatic Labour Congress had been an exclusively Indo-Japanese affair, saying that it had been an opportunity to 'make contact with workers from some other Asiatic countries'. Problems particular to Asiatic workers had received attention 'in a setting more congenial to such consideration than is afforded by Geneva'. Rao continued by stating publicly that Butler's presence in India fed the hope that an Asiatic Labour Conference under the auspices of the ILO would be implemented soon, but hopefully 'under more favourable circumstances than unfortunately obtain in the Far East today'. It is an indication of the predicament the movement for an Asiatic Labour Congress was in by its association with Japan, that Rao, in the remainder of his speech, retreated into the well-worn rhetoric of the historic bonds between India and China and forcefully emphasized that the NTUF unequivocally condemned Japan's aggression there: 'China and India have much in common, and it is my firm conviction that the culture and the spiritual outlook of these two ancient countries must hasten the dawn of the day when righteousness shall again prevail on the earth. But meanwhile cruel sufferings are being heaped upon the Chinese people by their oppressors and our hearts go out to them in deepest sympathy'.¹⁷⁴

With Europe on the brink of war and Japan about to withdraw from the ILO, an Asiatic Labour Congress under auspices of the ILO was unlikely. But after the interruption posed by the Second World War, the Asianist rhetoric that had led to the foundation of the Asiatic Labour Congress resurfaced. And in a context of imminent Asian decolonization, it now resonated differently at the ILO. At the last wartime ILO conference, held in Philadelphia in 1944, the governing body decided that a Preparatory Asian Regional Conference would be held in New Delhi in 1947, followed by an official Asian Regional Conference in China in 1948.¹⁷⁵ ILO Director David Morse reaffirmed this new course when he said that 'nowhere has the march of events been more fraught with significance for the future than in Asia ... of no other part may the truth, that peace must be founded on social justice, be more aptly recalled ... an immense undertaking awaits the Organisation in Asia. It

¹⁷³ *The Indian Labour Journal*, 26 December 1937, 1: 'Presidential Address at the Third Session of NTUF'.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ Labour Forum New Delhi, *Planning for Labour: A Symposium on the Occasion of the Preparatory Asian Regional Conference of the ILO held in New Delhi, October–November 1947* (Bangalore: The Labour Publications Trust, 1947), xvi.

can be proceeded [sic] only with the unreserved cooperation and support of the governments, employers and workers of Asian counties.¹⁷⁶

The four Asian member states of the ILO at this time were China, Persia, India, and Siam. Japan would not re-join until 1951. Nevertheless, the temporary enthusiasm produced by the fact that the ILO had been the only Wilsonian institution to survive the war, and the inclusion of several Asian delegates at the San Francisco negotiations that founded the United Nations, refocused attempts to demand an Asian share in the international system then taking shape. Many still considered the ILO the principal platform for the cause of Asian labour. Asian delegates' attempts to give Asia its due in Geneva redoubled. The same arguments that had disquieted the imperial powers in the interwar period now propelled the plan forward. The very fact that the war had encompassed large parts of Asia led to the assertion that Asian labour should be studied with particular care and that a regional approach would be fruitful.¹⁷⁷ To that end, an inclusive approach was adopted. The Philippines joined the Preparatory Asian Regional Conference, even though it was not yet an ILO member state, and several non-sovereign Asian countries—Burma, Ceylon, British Malaya, and Singapore—were represented separately and not as part of metropolitan delegations.¹⁷⁸

The Asian Regional Conference opened in New Delhi on 27 October 1947 with workers' delegations from all the invited countries present. Issues that had been addressed by the Asiatic Labour Congress were now discussed under the auspices of the ILO. In terms of wages and workers' protection, the conference took steps to abolish the double standard that had existed in the ratification of ILO conventions between Asia and the West.¹⁷⁹ The conference concluded with a list of recommendations for ILO reform, several of which had been long desired by its Asian delegates: regular meetings in Asia; branch offices and correspondents in Asia; more publications in Asian languages; and better representation of Asia among the ILO staff.¹⁸⁰ By 1948, the ILO counted thirteen Asian countries among its members.¹⁸¹

It has been said that 'the history of labour internationalism is a history of failure, of dreams disappointed, ideals compromised and initiatives corrupted'.¹⁸² This statement applies well to the Asianist enthusiasm in the Indian labour movement. The Asiatic Labour Congress was not a success, but that would be a rather instrumental reading of events. The tripartite structure of the ILO allowed the voice of the Asian worker could be heard, and there was sufficient Asianist momentum to convene an independent conference. The Asiatic Labour Congress, and the insistence by the various Asian delegations that Asia deserved due attention at the ILO, should be regarded as an important stepping-stone towards wider representation in that body, as well as towards the ILO's Asian regional organization.

¹⁷⁶ SMML, DMP, Box 19 File 2: Report of the Director General.

¹⁷⁷ Labour Forum New Delhi, *Planning for Labour*, xvi.

¹⁷⁸ *Idem*, xvii.

¹⁷⁹ International Labour Office, *The ILO and Asia: The Work of the Preparatory Asian Regional Conference, New Delhi, October–November 1947* (Geneva: ILO, 1948), 11.

¹⁸⁰ *Idem*, 22–3.

¹⁸¹ SMML, DMP, Box 6 File 4: International Labour Conference, 29th session: appendix.

¹⁸² V. Silverman, *Imagining Internationalism in American and British Labor, 1939–49* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

The first Asian Regional Conference of 1947 was presided over by Nehru himself, retrospectively crowned by historians as the father of Indian Asianism.¹⁸³ The foundations of this Asianism, however, must be located in a much wider Indian arena, hotly debated and carefully shaped by a wide variety of perspectives. Faced with several choices for Asian engagement to strengthen the cause of Indian labour, this contested space of cooperation was the main cause of the AITUC's split into two rival organizations. After the split, the AITUC and NTUF continued on divergent Asian paths in the context of the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat and the Asiatic Labour Congress. Though their Asianist, anti-imperialist rhetoric was not at all dissimilar, their respective visions of Asia—as a red continent or as a fully-fledged participant in Geneva—were very different. Both, however, represent a moment in Indian associational life when Asianist discourse and practice were an inextricable part of the public sphere.

¹⁸³ S. Mathur, *Spectrum of Nehru's Thought* (New Delhi: Mitthal Publications, 1994); C. Jaffrelot, 'India's Look-East Policy: An Asianist Strategy in Perspective', *India Review*, 2:2 (2003): 35–68; and most recently S. Singh, 'From Delhi to Bandung: Nehru, "Indian-ness" and "Pan-Asian-ness"', *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 30:1 (2011): 51–64.