

A special relationship

A TUC Library exhibition
on the connections between the British
and American Labour Movements from
the Nineteenth Century until today

We are often told that American and British governments have a "special relationship." Less often do we hear that the trade unions of Britain and the United States built their own special relationship over the last 200 years.

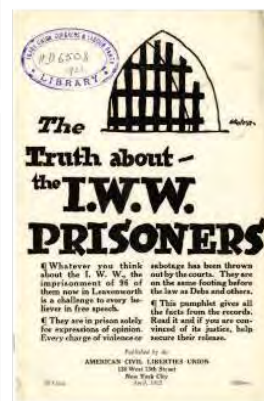
Usually their relationship was weak – sometimes it rivalled the one between Presidents and Prime Ministers. The story of labour's special relationship is one of solidarity and fraternity. It is also one of conflict, disunity and even oppression.

Whether good or bad, close or distant, British and American trade unionists have learned from and worked with each other. They have not always learned the right things. But in the world of Donald Trump and UKIP, economic slumps and falling wages, casual labour and the disposable employee, the labour movements of Britain and United States must rebuild their special relationship if they want to survive, and prosper.

This exhibition tells the story of that special relationship, from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century.

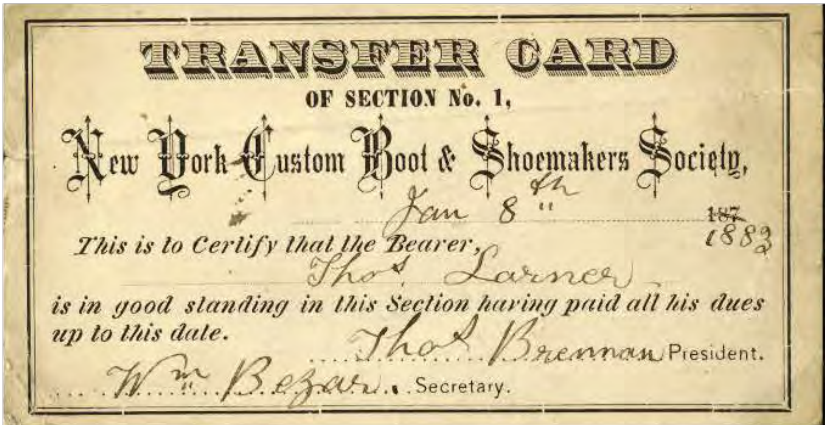


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2 Early days

Labour's special relationship was close since the very beginning. In the 19th Century, the new steamships and railways took millions of British men and women to the New World, and they took their unions and traditions of organisation with them. Coal miners from Durham and Yorkshire, textile workers from Lancashire and Scotland, agricultural labourers from Somerset and Ireland, cigar makers from London, and many more, all helped to establish early unions in the United States. In some cases, British immigrants even organised branches of their own unions on American soil. By the end of the 19th Century, for instance, two British unions, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers and the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, both organised dozens of branches in the United States.



During the nineteenth century, many individual British and American unions in the same industry made agreements with each other so that members travelling from one country to the other would still be represented by a union at work. This is one such transfer card. It gave membership in the American New York Custom Boot and Shoemakers' Society to a British shoemaker who had moved to the United States.



▲ One of the earliest examples of the exchange of ideas between British and American labour was Robert Owen (1771-1858). Owen was a factory manager who became an outspoken advocate of better wages, working conditions, and education for workers' children. He helped found the co-operative movement and advanced his own brand of socialism, which he took to the United States during the 1820s.



3 'a British road'

Even at this early stage, British and American trade unionists learned from each other. The founders of the American Federation of Labor (the precursor of today's AFL-CIO) in 1886, directly based themselves on the Trades Union Congress. They followed what they called a "British road."

That road meant lobbying Parliament for labour – friendly laws, and organising in slow, gradual steps, mainly among the most skilled (and largely white and male) workers. Socialists in the AFL also tried to follow their own British road. In 1893 they nearly had the AFL adopt the Morgan Plan, a programme based on that of the British Independent Labour Party, that would have committed the AFL to creating an American Labour Party of their own.

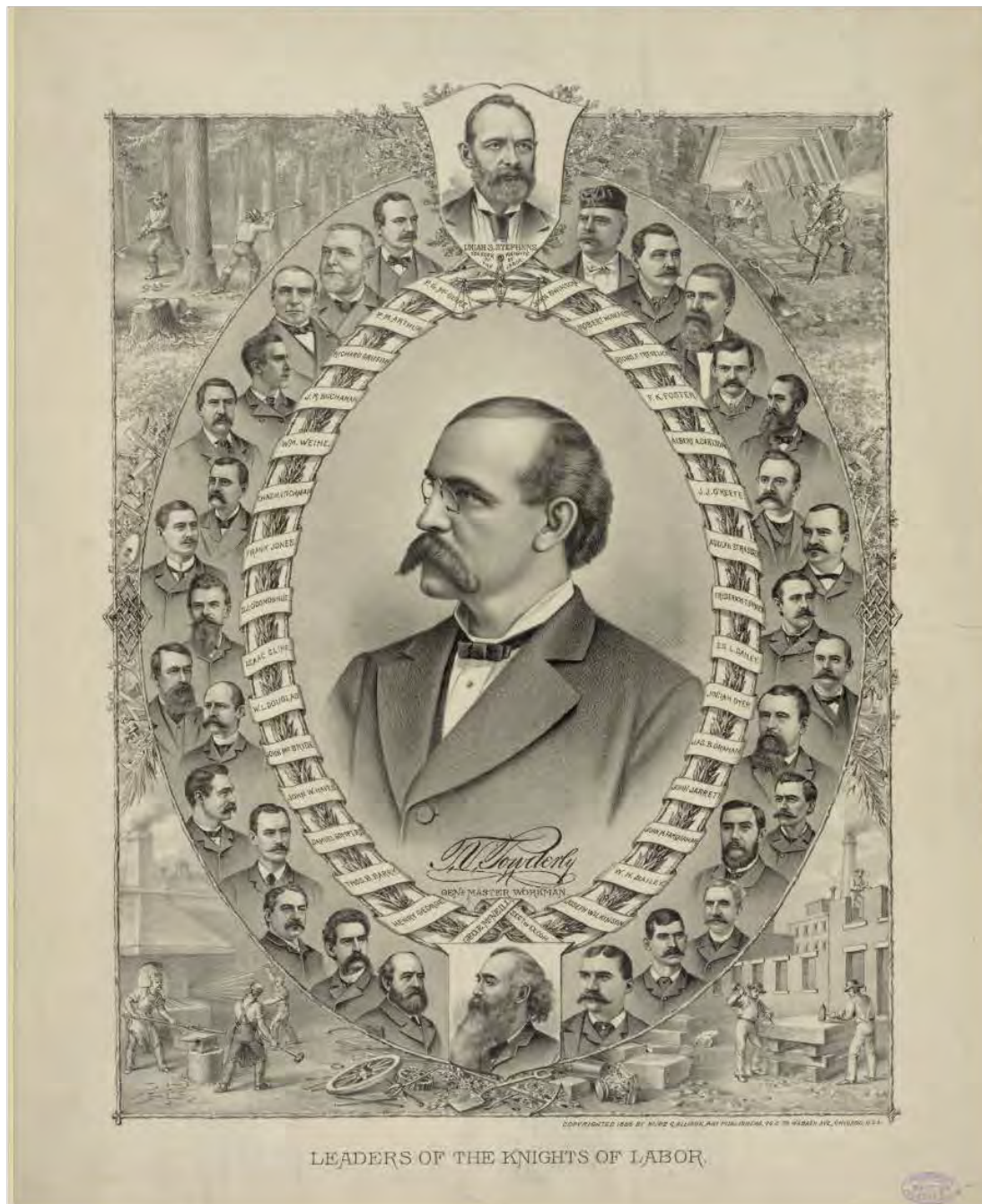
This exchange went both ways. An American movement, the Knights of Labor, reached nearly a million members in the United States during 1886. They also organised between 10,000 and 15,000 workers in Britain and Ireland by 1890. Knights of Labor in Britain and Ireland pushed for the inclusion of unskilled workers in the labour movement, and to agitate for a working-class political movement that would be independent of the Liberals and Conservatives. Their work, and those of others, eventually led to the British Labour Party.



The Knights of Labor blended the functions of a trade union and the ambitions of a political party with the forms and symbols of Freemasonry. Their Great Seal, displays this heritage very well. The slogan on the outside was taken from the ancient Greek legislator Solon; the notation "AK the ninth"

refers to their book of ritual, the *Adelphon Kryptos*; and the triangles, pentagons and hexagons within the seal are each loaded with symbolic meanings. All the major figures of the American labour movement, from the trade unions and the Knights of Labor, are represented in this 1886 tableau. Terence Powderly,

General Master Workman (President) of the Knights of Labor in the middle; Uriah Stephens, founder of the Knights of Labor, is at the top in the centre. Samuel Gompers, first President of the American Federation of Labor, and Henry George, the famous economist, are both at the bottom to the left.





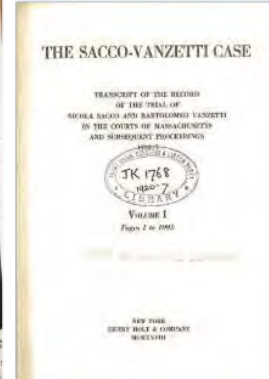
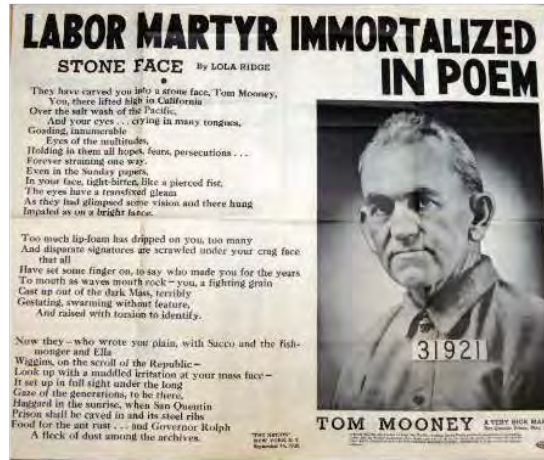
▲ A dramatic reconstruction of the moment when a bomb exploded amongst Chicago police at Haymarket Square on May 4, 1886.

On the 1st of May, 1886, hundreds of thousands of American workers went on strike for the eight hour day. Three days later, anarchists in Chicago held a meeting at Haymarket Square. Police moved in to break up the meeting. At that moment a bomb exploded among the police, who then fired into the crowd.

Eight anarchists were charged with conspiracy to plant the bomb. All were found guilty. Some were hanged, others later pardoned, and one of them committed suicide in his cell.

The campaign for the acquittal of the Haymarket Martyrs spread around the world, including in Britain.

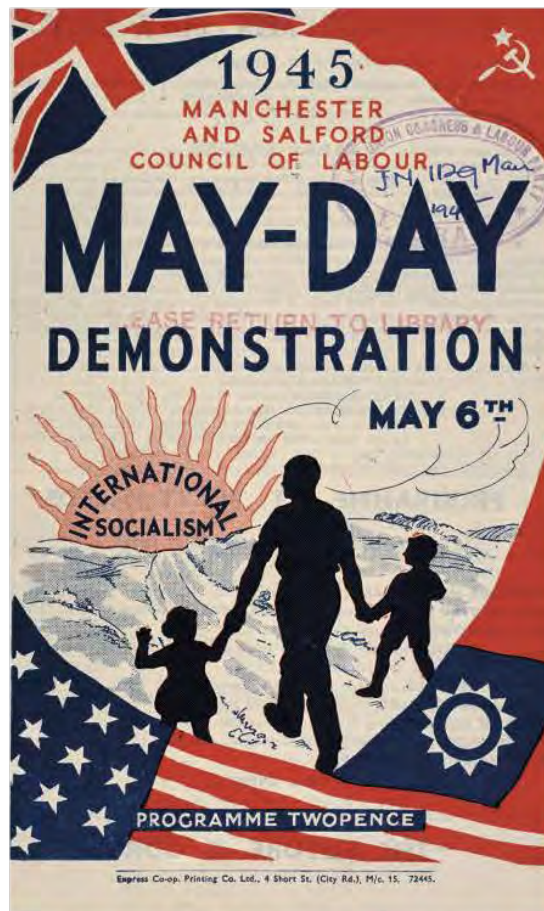
Within four years that campaign helped lead to the first celebration of an international workers' festival – May Day. Many people are still unaware that the origins of May Day are found as much in Chicago as in London, Paris, Moscow or Berlin.



▲ The Haymarket martyrs were the first American defendants to attract support from trade unionists in Britain and elsewhere.

The case of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, two Italian-born anarchists accused of the murder of two men during an armed robbery in Massachusetts in 1920, attracted great attention across the Atlantic. So did the case of Tom Mooney, a socialist and trade unionist accused of planting a bomb that exploded amid a pro-war parade in San Francisco in July 1916, and killed ten people.

In both cases, the defendants protested their innocence: Sacco and Vanzetti were executed in 1927, while Mooney was eventually pardoned in 1939. He died three years later.



▲ May Day still remains a day where trade unionists march, remember the struggles of those that came before them, and think about the international dimension of their movement, as suggested by this poster for the 1945 May Day march in London.

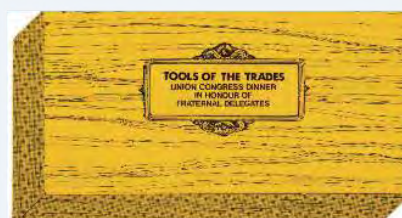
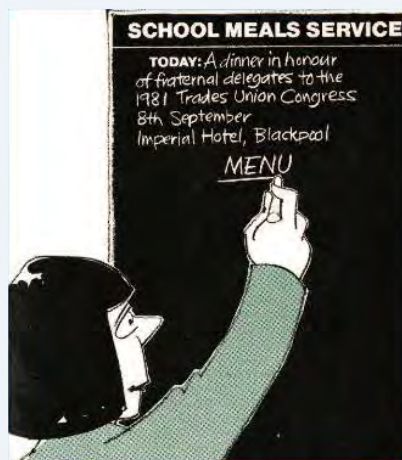
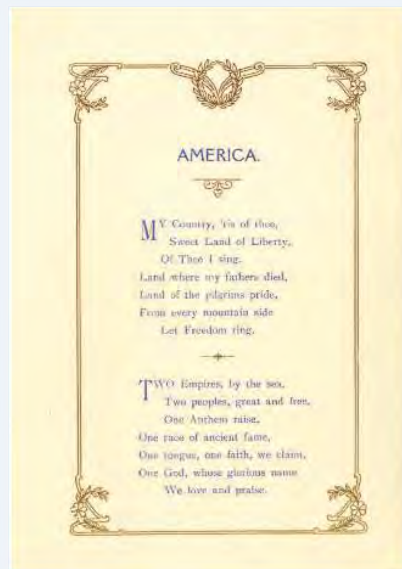
Solidarity

The American Federation of Labor and the Trades Union Congress built their own brand of solidarity. From 1894, they exchanged delegates between their annual conventions. These fraternal delegates were treated to special dinners.

They had a place of honour at the conventions. They gave speeches that emphasised the strong bonds between labour on both sides of the Atlantic. This tradition of fraternal delegates no longer exists, but its history reminds us of one side of labour's special relationship.

This menu *far right* is from a dinner held in honour of the fraternal delegates from the American Federation of Labor to the Trades Union Congress of 1912. The smaller text in red reads "International Friendship, Incomparable Fraternity, Immense Future."

These two stanzas are from the back of the menu featured earlier. The first one, from the American song "My Country Tis of Thee," is played to the tune of "God Save the Queen." Both could be sung at the same time as a symbol of Anglo-American unity. The second stanza is from a song, "Two Empires By the Sea," which alludes to the shared Anglo-Saxon heritage of (most white) British and American trade unionists and to the racial and imperial attitudes common at the time.



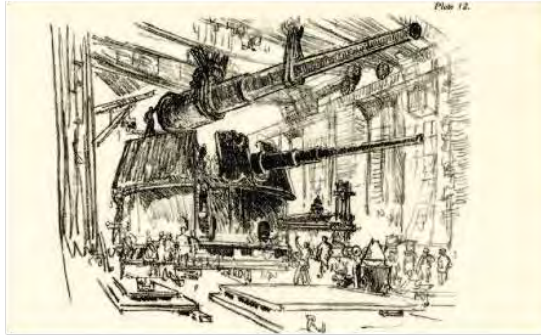
Wartime choices



In 1914 the First World War broke out in Europe. In 1945 the Second World War ended. Between these dates, British and American trade unionists faced a stark choice.

Should they support their own governments in return for concessions and more power? Or should they oppose any war that leads workers in one country to kill workers from another? Most chose the first. Some chose the second.

Shared experiences in war brought the British and American labour movements closer together, even as workers in each country were divided on how to respond to the demands of war.



▲ The First and Second World War drew millions of women into the industrial workforce, and into the labour movement, as men were sent to the front. When those wars ended, women had proven – to anyone who still needed proof – that they were just as capable workers and trade unionists as the men. This drawing is of women producing munitions in a British factory during the First World War.



GERMAN SHELL BURSTING IN THE ALLIES' TRENCHES IN FLANDERS.
In the foreground is a 150 mm. German shell which did not explode.

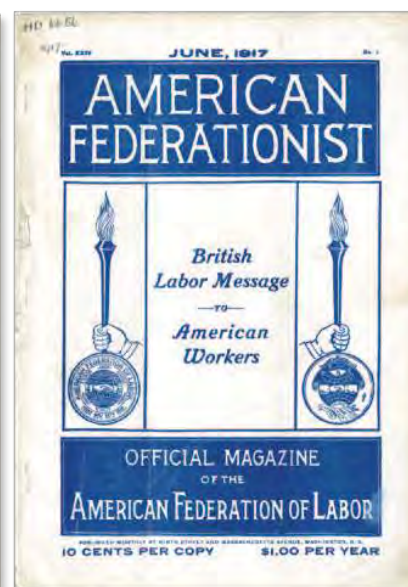
War aims

The AFL and TUC supported their governments during the First World War. AFL leaders worked on government arbitration boards that tried to minimise strikes and lockouts. In return they got federal protection of the right of workers to organise into unions. The TUC signed similar agreements. The Labour Party won representation in the Cabinet.

AFL and TUC representatives met regularly during the conflict and helped to cement the Anglo-American alliance. TUC leaders also did their best to encourage the AFL to support American entry into the war from 1914 onwards.

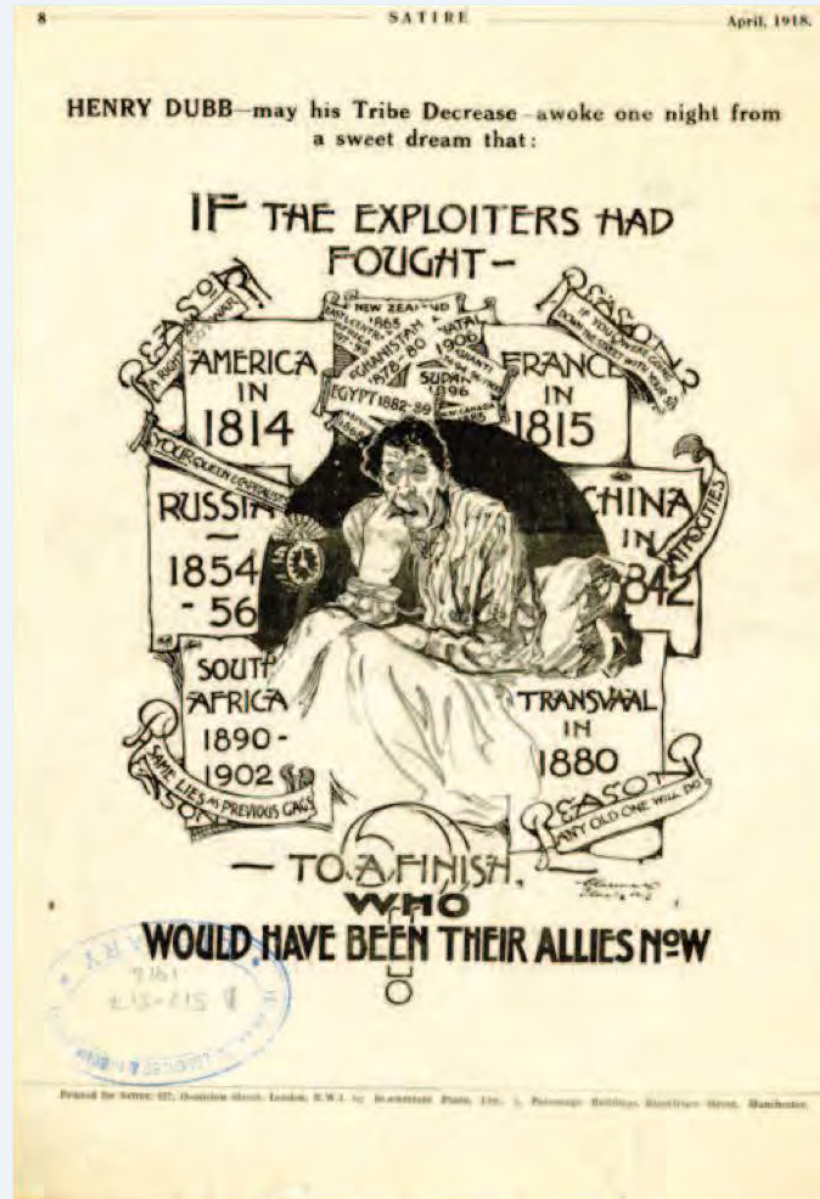


▲ President Woodrow Wilson, AFL President Samuel Gompers and Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson at the 1916 dedication of the AFL's new headquarters in Washington, D.C.



This cover left from a 1917 issue of the AFL's official journal, the *American Federationist*, alludes to attempts by the TUC to get the United States to join the war on the British side. The story refers to the AFL urging the American government to follow the British example and protect union rights in wartime.

The US army broke strikes in the war industries. Vigilantes, armed and supported by major corporations and local police, deported or killed thousands of IWW members. To defend themselves, the IWW sent pleas for support to British unions like the one (printed by the American Civil Liberties Union). On the right.



▲ This cartoon in a British magazine points to the many wars that Britain had fought during the nineteenth century against each of the countries that became its allies between 1914 and 1918.

Samuel Gompers

Two men, each with ties to Britain and the USA, symbolised the division that war caused in labour's ranks. Samuel Gompers was one of the fiercest supporters of America's role in the First World War, and was himself a symbol of labour's special relationship. Born to Dutch Jewish parents in London in 1850, he moved to the United States in 1863 and soon started work as a cigar-maker in the tenements of New York City.

He emerged as a leader of the Cigar Makers Union in the 1870s, and then became the founding president of the American Federation of Labor in 1886. Gompers had long opposed American involvement in European wars before 1914. Yet when the Wilson Administration entered the war in 1917, Gompers made sure that the AFL supported it. He visited Britain several times in 1918 to help keep British labour behind the war effort, and remained president of the AFL until his death in 1924.



▲ This photo proves that the tradition of fraternal delegates between the TUC and AFL stretched back to the nineteenth century. The four men, photographed while taking a bicycle ride on Hampstead Heath, London, includes Samuel Gompers, as fraternal delegate from the AFL, second from right.



USA Fraternal delegates:
John P. Frey, Samuel
Gompers and B. A. Larger



Courtesy of the Library of Congress LC-DIG-ETC Credit: LC-DIG-ETC Credit: Courtesy of the Library of Congress LC-DIG-

Another symbol of the division caused by war was (almost literally) on the other side of the barricades from Samuel Gompers -although he was, like Gompers, a symbol of labour's special relationship.

Born to Irish parents in Edinburgh in 1868, James Connolly moved to the United States in 1903. While there he joined the IWW and the Socialist Labour Party, and both movements profoundly shaped his thinking for the rest of his life.

A socialist, trade unionist and Irish nationalist, Connolly led the Irish Citizens Army, set up to protect strike breakers during the Dublin lockout of 1913.

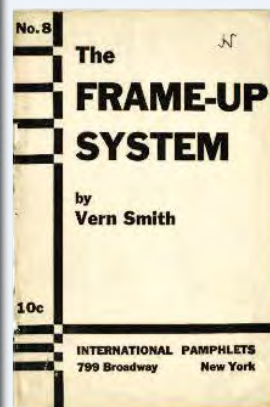
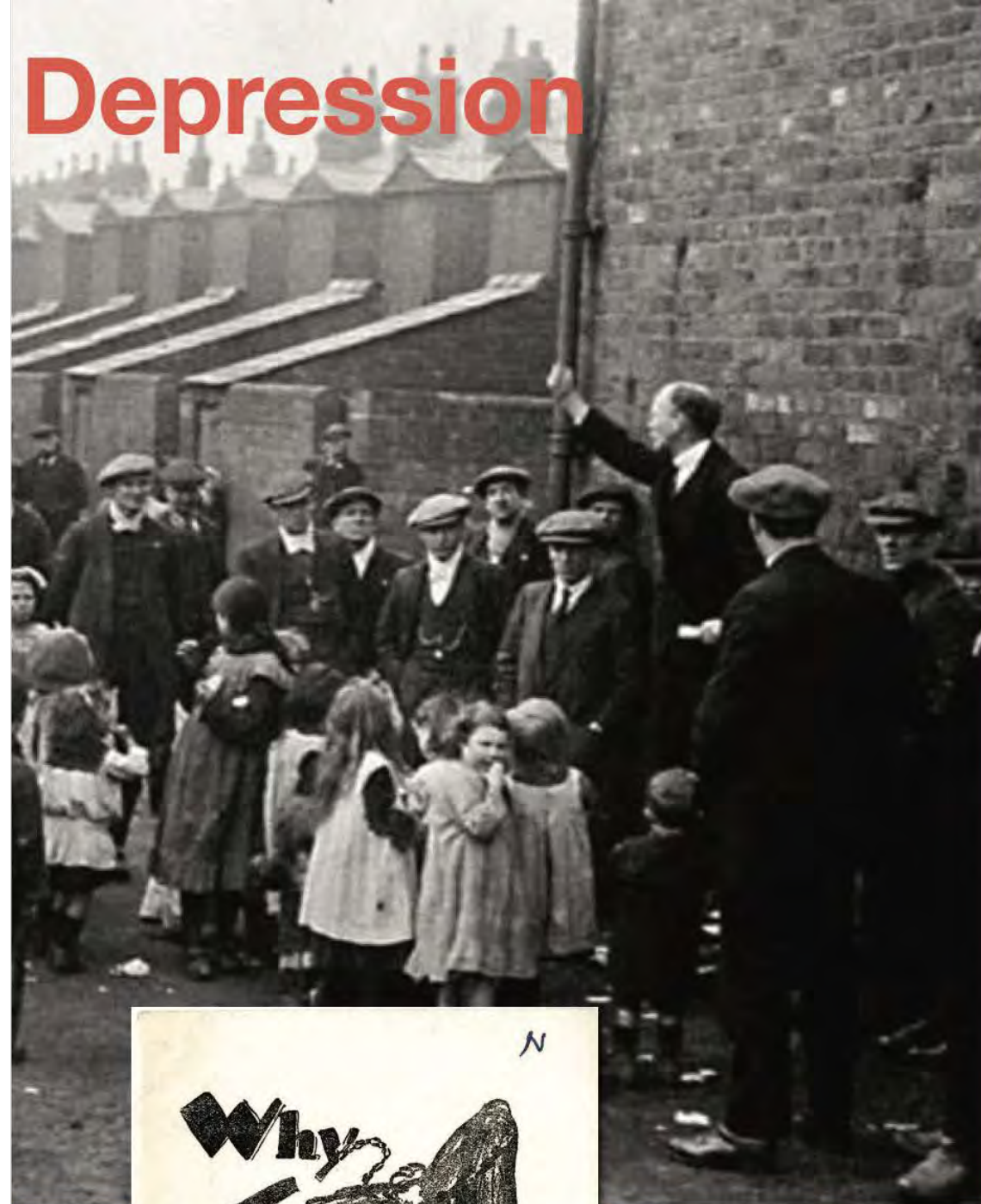
In 1916, he led his Citizens Army, along with Patrick Pearse's Irish Volunteers and a number of other nationalist groups, in a rebellion against British rule - the Easter Rising. After the Rising failed, Connolly, wounded in the fighting, was executed by a British firing squad on 12 May, 1916.



▲ The Dublin statue of James Connolly by Eamonn O'Doherty was commissioned by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions who raised finance from a wide variety of labour movement sources from the Communist Party of Ireland to the Carpenters Local New York.

▲ James Connolly speaking at a Socialist meeting in Union Square, New York City, on May Day in 1908.

Depression



▲ The Bolshevik Revolution raised important questions about the survival of capitalism all over the world. This American pamphlet, above right printed in the early 1920s, implores its readers to join the new American Communist Party and replicate the Bolshevik victory in the United States.

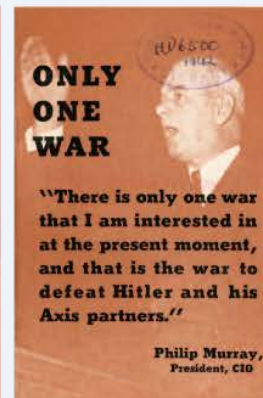
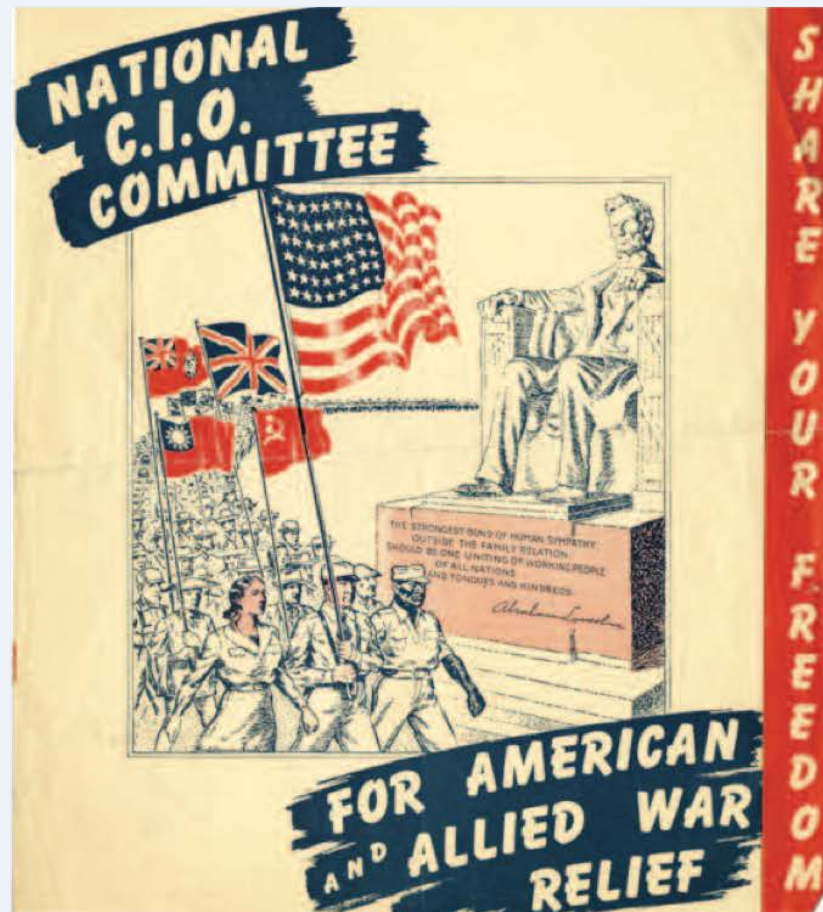
The years between 1914 and 1945 were marked by depression and revolution as well as by war. After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, communist parties grew around the world. More than ten thousand workers joined the new Communist Party of Great Britain. Thousands joined what became, after several splits and mergers, the Communist Party USA. Communists and anti-communists in Britain and the United States each looked to their comrades across the Atlantic for support.

In 1929 the Wall Street crash soon led to a Great Depression. Mass unemployment and economic turmoil made international cooperation more difficult, even as it became more necessary. The rise of the American Congress of Industrial Organizations during the 1930s created new possibilities and new problems, for British and American labour unity. This umbrella of new unions represented the mass production industries, and was from the beginning a rival to the American Federation of Labor.

The TUC, AFL and CIO all enthusiastically supported their governments during the Second World War. Most socialists and communists supported it too, especially after Germany invaded the Soviet Union.

By the end of the Second World War they won even more political influence than in the First. Britain had a Labour Government. American unions deepened their alliance with the ruling Democratic Party. Both of them also built an uneasy alliance with Soviet trade unions.

In 1945, trade unionists from East and West met for a World Trade Union Conference in London to press for the rights of labour and unions in the world after the war. That conference created a World Federation of Labour.



▲ The President of the CIO, Charles Murray (featured in pamphlet), the President of the AFL, William Green, and the General Secretary of the TUC, Walter Citrine, all found it much easier to rally their members against the Nazis than they had against the Kaiser nearly three decades earlier.



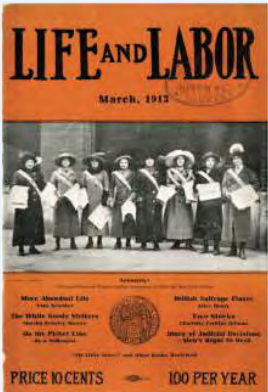
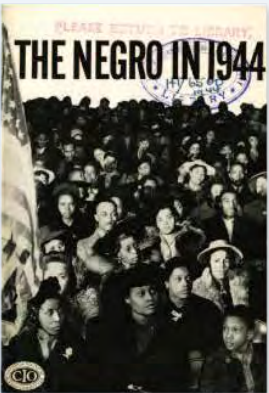
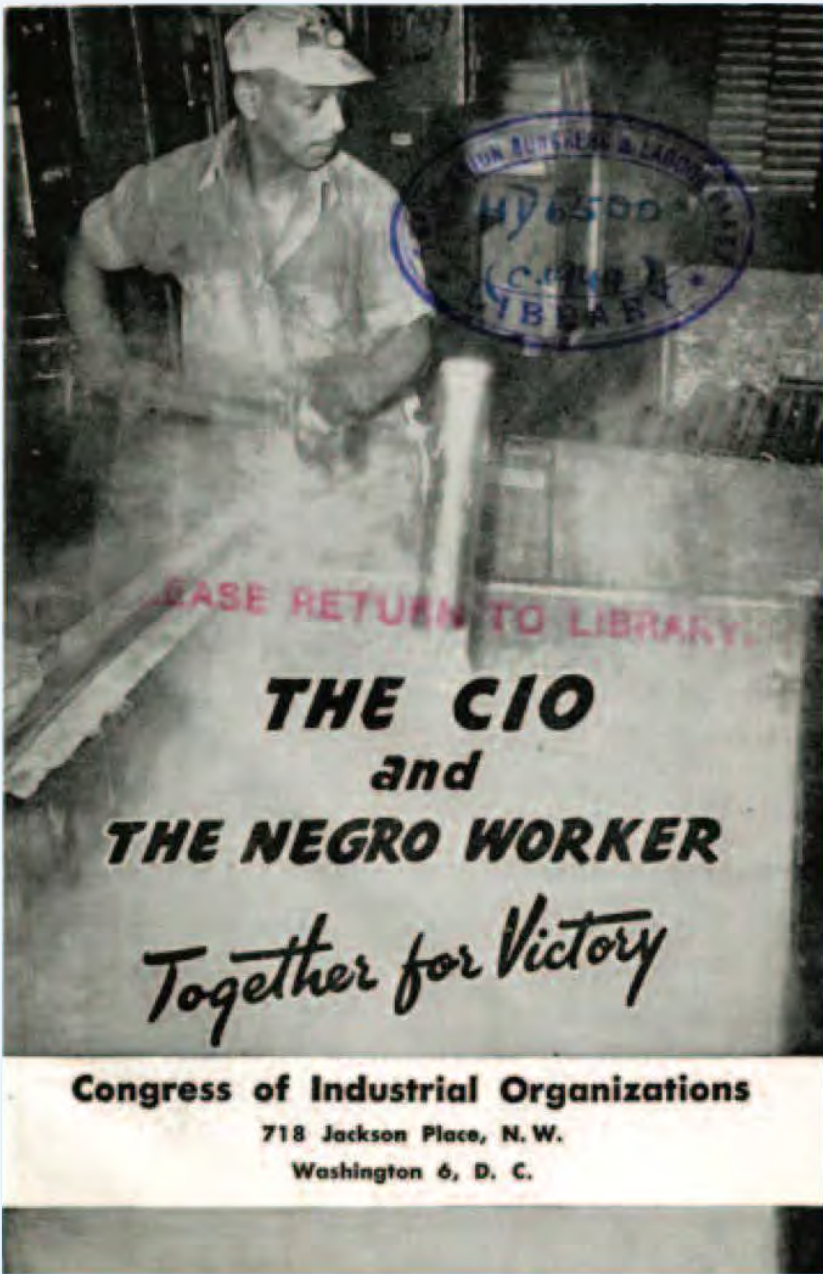
King George VI chats with British, American, Soviet and Chinese delegates to the WTUC. The delegates seem friendly. Soon, however, the British and American labour movements would find themselves on the other side of a cold war from their old allies.

Discrimination

The history of labour's special relationship is more than just the history of connections between white men. Women and black people are an integral part of our story, even if their work has often gone unrecognised. In the nineteenth century they were excluded from many British and American trade unions.

Movements like the Knights of Labor, which organised tens of thousands of women and black workers in the mid-1880s, were an exception and not the rule; and even they did not practise full racial and gender equality. Since then, trade unions in both countries have gradually moved beyond their traditional white male base.

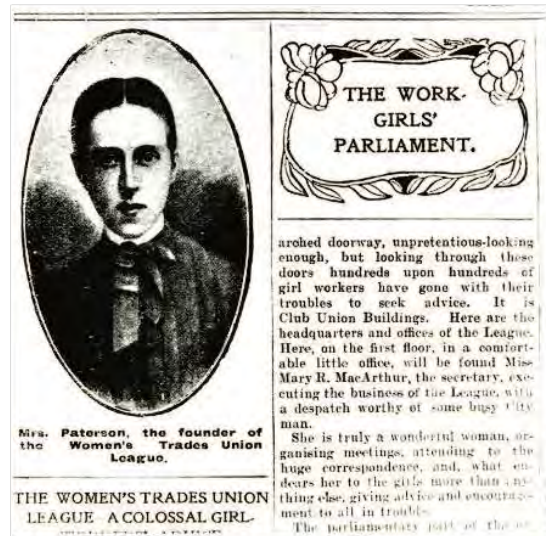
They did so mainly due to pressure from determined women and black people in Britain, the United States and beyond, who fought for their rights and learned from each other's struggles, defeats, and victories.



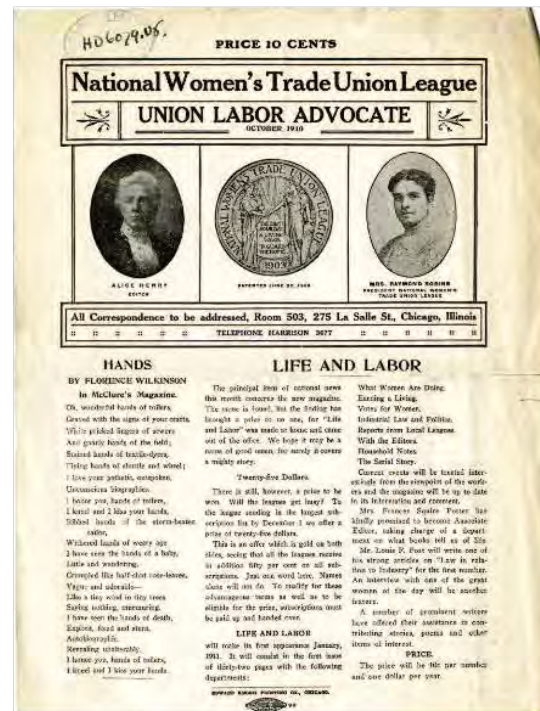
Women workers

In 1874, Emma Paterson *right*, a twenty-six year old women's suffrage campaigner from London, visited America with her husband. She saw first-hand the squalid conditions that women endured in the American textile industry. She also noted their attempts, often successful, to organise into unions.

On her return to London, Paterson formed the Women's Protective and Provident League (later the Women's Trade Union League), which was designed to encourage female unions around Britain. Since then, successive generations of British and American women have forged links with each other to fight for equal pay for equal work, an equal role for women at work and in the labour movement, and other obstacles to real gender equality at home and in the workplace. We know only too well that these fights are not over yet.



▲ This photo right shows the eight female delegates to the General Assembly of the Knights of Labor in 1886. The Knights also set up an unprecedented Department for Women's Work, headed by an Irish-born widow, Leonora Barry.



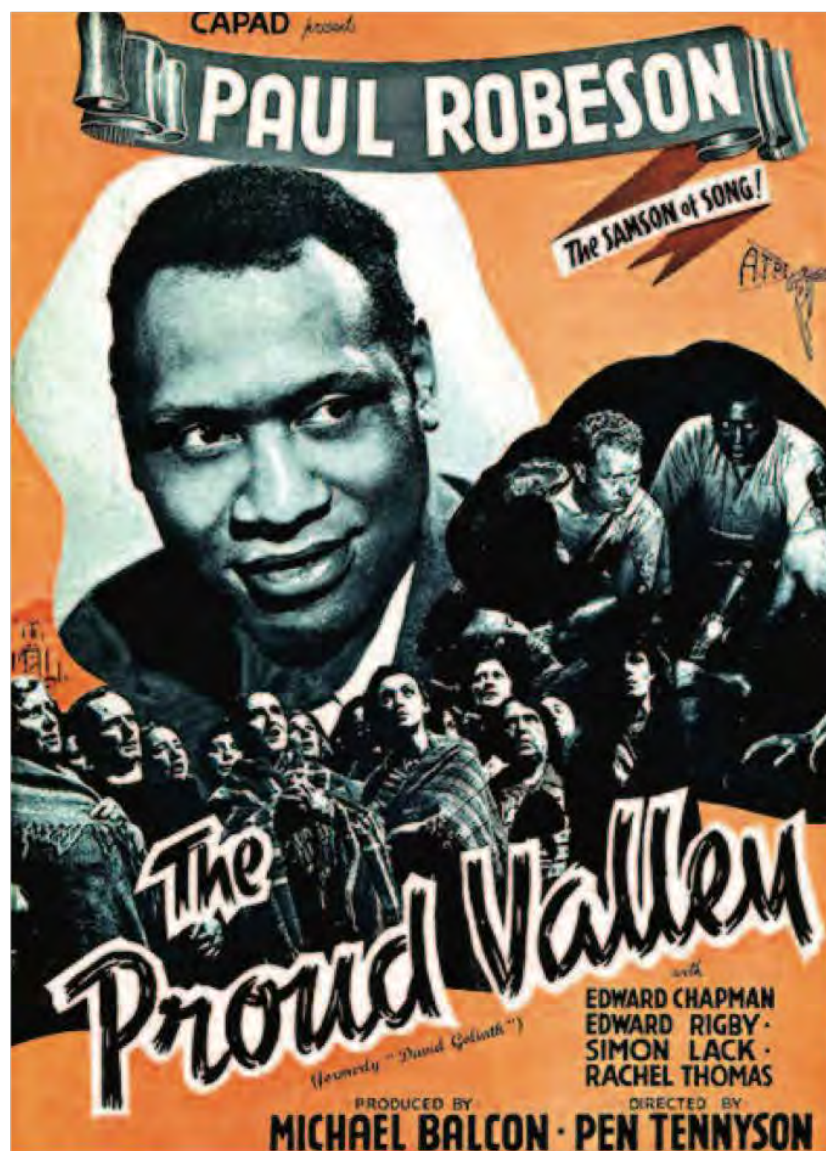
▲ *Union Labor Advocate* and *Life and Labor* were published by the American National Women's Trade Union League, which featured news from their allies in Britain. One advertised a public meeting of that League, with Mary McArthur, President of the British Women's Trade League, as one of the speakers.

Fighting racism

Paul Robeson, an accomplished singer, actor and political activist, is still remembered fondly in Wales forty years after he died in 1976. In 1928, while on tour in London, he met a group of unemployed Welsh miners who had walked to London in protest at conditions at home.

In the next ten years Robeson became a fixture in the mining towns of South Wales. He kept up ties with Welsh miners, even when his Communist sympathies led the US government to revoke his passport during the 1950s.

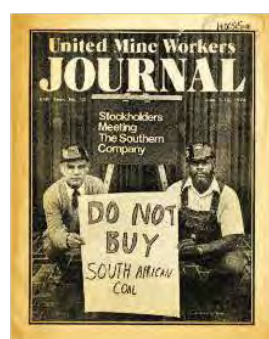
Black British and American trade unionists have followed in Robeson's footsteps. They have worked together, sometimes alongside their white colleagues and sometimes in spite of them, to transform the white trade union movement of the nineteenth century into the diverse movement that now exists in the twenty-first.



Courtesy of BFI/Coral Studio



Workers of African descent in Britain, the United States, and elsewhere have long created their own organisations to resist racial prejudice, promote African independence movements, and encourage trade unionism and left-wing causes around the world. *International African Opinion* was the journal of one of these organisations, the International African Service Bureau. That Bureau brought together people like George Padmore, the Trinidadian-born trade unionist who spent time in Britain, the United States and many other countries, and Jomo Kenyatta, the Kenyan independence leader. The editor of *International African Opinion* was CLR James, the Trinidadian socialist. James is famous for, among many other things, writing a biography of the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture and a history of cricket.



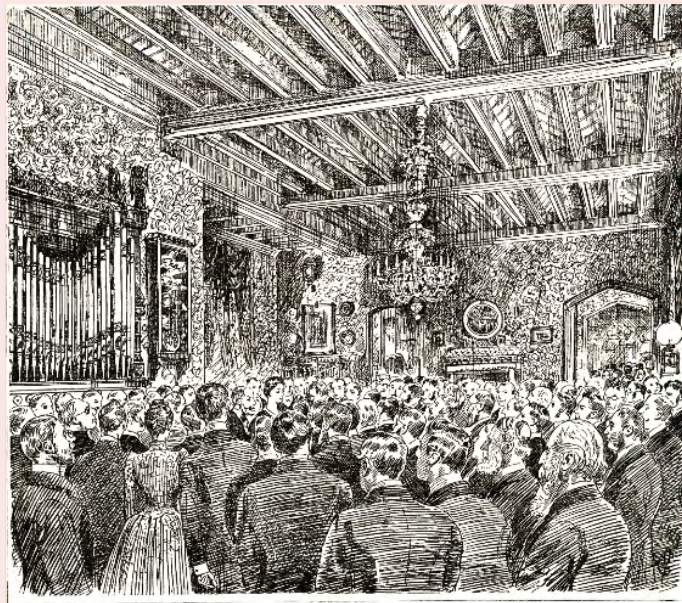
Apartheid in South Africa became a central issue for British and American trade unionists in the 1970s and 1980s. Their revulsion at the South African system of racial discrimination led to boycotts against South African-made goods, many of which were also imported at prices that undercut local products. The cover from a 1970s issue of the *United Mine Workers of America's journal left*, pits white-black unity against South African apartheid. The cover from a pamphlet issued by the *British National Union of Mineworkers*, makes the same point.

Since they first exchanged fraternal delegates in 1894, the British and American unions have changed considerably. Barriers to membership based on race and gender have since disappeared. Women and black people now represent a large fraction, even a majority, of trade union members. Unions now address discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people.

The election of Frances O'Grady as the first female general secretary of the TUC is one symbol of these profound changes. But much remains to be done. The gender pay gap has not yet closed, and harassment and abuse continue in the workplace. Discrimination on racial and sexual grounds still goes on. The labour movements of Britain and the United States, along with their counterparts elsewhere, must continue to fight to end these different kinds of oppression around the world.



ASLEF have taken their LGBT banners on various PRIDE celebrations since 2011.



▲ The leadership of the TUC during the nineteenth century was, like its American counterparts, the preserve of men. This sketch of the Liverpool Trades Union Congress in 1890 appeared in the *Daily Graphic* showing a social occasion where the only women present are the wives of male delegates.



Anti-communism

In 1945, the Second World War ended. The World Trade Union Congress seemed to open possibilities for the solidarity of workers and their organisations around the world. Five years later East was divided from West and the Cold War had begun. British and American unions left the World Federation of Labour and formed the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, which excluded unions from the Soviet bloc. For forty more years the relationships between British and American labour, left and right, were always conditioned by the struggles of the Cold War.

The leadership of the American Federation of Labor was even more united behind its government during the Cold War than the leadership of the TUC was behind the British government. It was also suspicious of its rival, the CIO. In this picture from the AFL's journal, the *American Federationist*, the CIO and some other western union federations are described as a fifth column, controlled by Stalin from Moscow.

The Third World was a crucial arena of conflict during the Cold War. This photo *right* shows representatives of the AFL and TUC at a conference in India with Indian and other Asian and African trade union leaders.



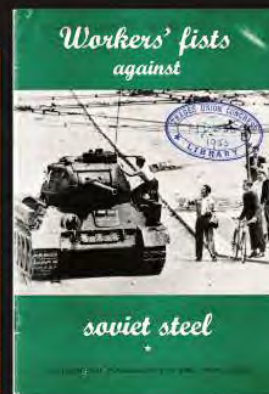
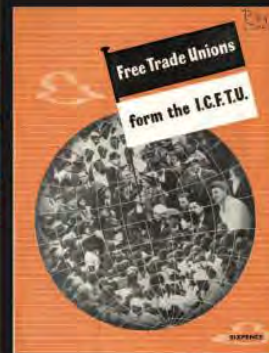
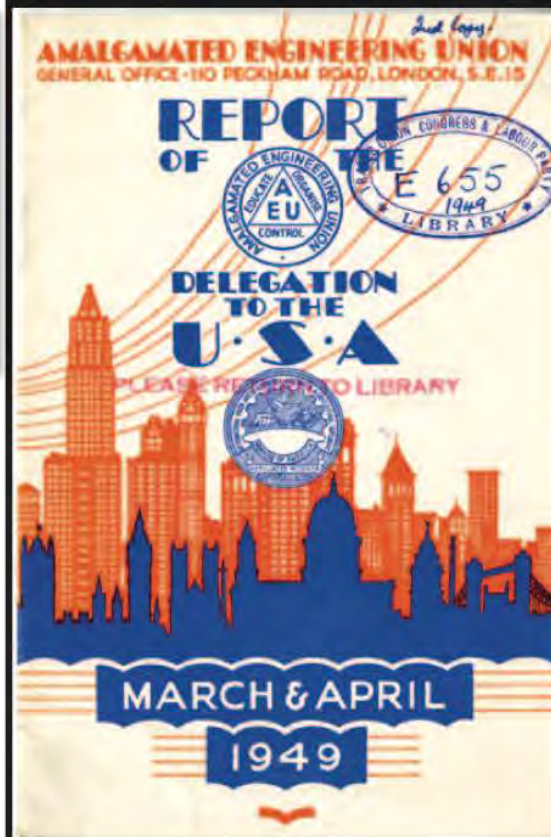


British and American governments saw the unions as a crucial part of the ideological war against the Soviet Union.

They compared the relative freedom of unions in the West with the government control of unions in the East. Yet agencies such as the CIA and MI5 also infiltrated western unions, and the TUC, AFL and CIO (which merged in 1955 as the AFL-CIO) tried to encourage the growth of non-or anti-Communist unions in Western Europe, East Asia and the Third or Majority World.

Intelligence agencies justified their conduct on the grounds that the Soviet KGB, and the USSR in general, had its agents and influence within the British and American unions.

At the same time, some British and American trade unionists became communists. Others resisted the anti-Communist witch hunts that took place, especially in America, from the 1940s onwards. The Cold War was a struggle within the unions too.



RICHARD FLETCHER looks at how the Labour Party and the TUC helped to run the

Ernest Bevin's black propaganda unit

We have the Director-General in 1977 saying that communication often appears as the privilege of a tightly-knit group of professionals or technocrats who hold populations, so to speak, at their mercy and can direct, if not manipulate, them at will.

Mr Chairman, I submit that that is nonsense. I would be very interested to see some support given by UNESCO to the very wide-ranging and high-sounding

may be. Mayhew also arranged that answers to resolutions sent to the Labour Government from Constituency Labour Parties on "familiar communist themes" (including Greece, Eastern Europe, the colonies) would be drafted by JRD on behalf of the departments

minist propaganda" being prepared by a "special research committee" in London, which would be distributed in two main ways. "In the first place a certain amount of this high-grade material can be slipped into the otherwise innocuous... British

It was also suggested that



▲ The alliance between British, American, other Western trade unionists and their Soviet counterparts fell apart soon after the Second World War came to an end. These headlines give a sense of the strong anti-Communist positions taken by the AFL, TUC and CIO as the Second World War gave way to the Cold War, and the withdrawal of Western unions from the World Federation of Trade Unions. Some of them even point to the collusion of union leaders into the anti-Communist activities of their governments.

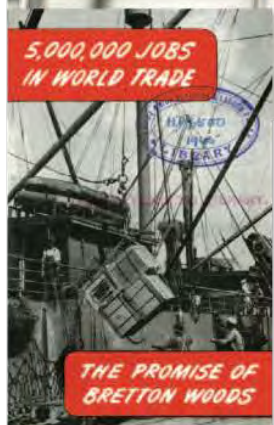
▲ British and American unions dominated the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. The ICFTU took a strongly anti-Soviet position throughout the Cold War, as this pamphlet *Workers' Fists against Soviet Steel* about the 1956 uprising in Hungary against Russian control makes clear. British and American union leaders each tried to use the ICFTU to increase their own influence, and in some cases, the influence of their respective governments, within the trade unions of the Global South.

Collaboration

In 1949, the British Foreign Secretary, Labour MP and former trade union leader Ernest Bevin, put his name to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The ring that he used to seal Britain's part in that treaty had been presented to him by Samuel Gompers as the TUC's delegate to an AFL convention. Bevin also lobbied hard for Britain to receive as much Marshall Plan aid as possible from the United States.

Labour's own relationship was now welded tight to the special relationship of their two governments. In response, unions were allowed to grow and in some cases, to prosper. This was the time of the post-war consensus. In the first thirty years of the Cold-War, many British industries were nationalised, and unions became an integral part of the whole economy. American unions came to represent nearly a third of the total workforce. In both countries wages were higher, and working hours shorter, than any time before or since. When representatives of the AFL-CIO and TUC met they each wielded unprecedented economic and political power at home.

Walter Reuther above right, President of the (American) United Auto Workers, speaking at a gathering of British and American trade unionists.



▲ At a conference in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, in 1944, the Western Allies met to plan an economic order for the postwar world. Trade unionists on both sides of the Atlantic, as this pamphlet from the CIO shows, hoped that this new order would ensure full employment and rising living standards, not the slump and mass unemployment that followed the First World War.



▲ British and American governments from the 1950s to the 1980s were careful to appeal to their respective trade unions. In this photo, President Dwight D. Eisenhower inspects a gift from the TUC to the AFL-CIO. The gift, a wood panel showing the struggles of working people in peace and war, was made with wood taken from the hull of HMS Victory, Lord Nelson's flagship at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805.



▲ When the Second World War came to an end in 1945, trade unionists in Britain, the United States and elsewhere in the world insisted that their governments come up with an economic plan to avoid a return to the depression of the 1930s. This International Trades Union Conference in 1948, pictured above came up with a series of demands designed to ensure prosperity in place of war.

The AFL-CIO and TUC fought these battles more or less alone. And they did not recover from the defeats that followed. TUC membership fell from 13 million in the late 1970s to under 7 million today. AFL-CIO membership fell from 20 million in 1979 to 13 million in 2014.




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British and American trade unions face challenges today that are wide, and deep. Global corporations move production from high-wage to low-wage countries. Robots and automation threaten the jobs that remain. Living standards for most people stagnate or fall.

The economic slump that began with the financial crisis of 2007-8 is not over yet, and new downturns might lead to new lows.

Anti-union rightists in Britain and the United States have been emboldened by the election of Donald Trump, and by the UK's vote to leave the EU.

The special relationship between the British and American labour movements has never seemed more necessary, or seemed so far away.

▲ Thanks to Martin Rowson for his permission



But all is not lost. There are signs of revival in both countries, especially among the lowest-paid, worst treated, and most casualised workers. From cleaners to fast-food workers and casualised university teachers, and more besides, working people are organising, fighting, and often winning.

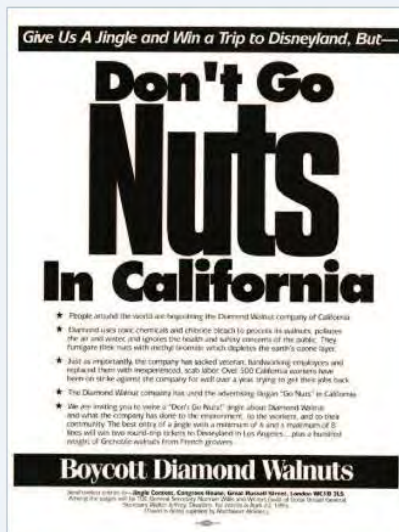
The Fight for \$15 campaign in the United States is one model that British and American workers can learn from. That campaign originated with fast food workers in New York City, spread across the country, and led to \$15 minimum wage laws in cities from Seattle to Pittsburgh, and states from New York to California. There will be others. We can learn from past campaigns, and their successes and failures.

Finally, we can learn from the history of labour's special relationship itself, think of ways to rebuild and revive it, and resist the siren calls of the Trumps and Farages on both sides of the Atlantic.



British and American trade unions have used the boycott against unfair employers for more than a hundred years. Sometimes their boycotts have extended across the Atlantic, as with the ones against grapes and nuts featured here. The boycott still remains an important weapon in the fight for better wages and conditions today as with the one against big anti-union planters in California right.

In 2017 McDonald's faced its first strike since it opened in the UK, as unions and the public protested at several restaurants over pay and working conditions.



The TUC Library would like to thank

Thanks to everyone who helped with this exhibition:

- The Trades Union Congress (TUC) and Thriplow Trust who helped fund this project.
- To those who allowed us to use their images.

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