



Between Moscow and the African Atlantic

The Comintern Network of Negro Workers

Holger Weiss

IN **MONDE(S)** 2016/2 N° 10 , PAGES 89 TO 108

PUBLISHER **PRESSES UNIVERSITAIRES DE RENNES**

ISSN 2261-6268

DOI 10.3917/e.mond1.162.0089

Uploaded: 12/19/2016

Article available online at

<https://shs.cairn.info/journal-mondes-2016-2-page-89?lang=en>



Discover the contents of this issue, follow the journal by email, subscribe...
Scan this QR code to access the page for this issue on Cairn.info.



Electronic distribution Cairn.info for Presses universitaires de Rennes.

You are authorized to reproduce this article within the limits of the terms of use of Cairn.info or, where applicable, the terms and conditions of the license subscribed to by your institution. Details and conditions can be found at cairn.info/copyright.

Unless otherwise provided by law, the digital use of these resources for educational purposes is subject to authorization by the Publisher or, where applicable, by the collective management organization authorized for this purpose. This is particularly the case in France with the CFC, which is the approved organization in this area.

Between Moscow and the African Atlantic

The Comintern Network of Negro Workers

Holger Weiss

Åbo Akademi University

Presses universitaires de Rennes | Downloaded on 06/09/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.217.92)

Résumé

Entre Moscou et l'Atlantique noir. Le réseau des travailleurs noirs du Komintern

Cet article étudie la nature de l'interaction entre le Comité syndical international des travailleurs noirs et le Komintern. Cette organisation, également appelée Comité de Hambourg, fut une tentative de construire un réseau radical dans l'Atlantique noir, c'est-à-dire en Afrique, aux Caraïbes et aux États-Unis. Cela n'a cependant pas débouché sur une « internationale noire ». Il s'agit plutôt de la création par le Komintern d'un organe d'agitation et de propagande amené à coopérer avec l'Internationale syndicale rouge (ou Profintern), le Secours rouge international, la Ligue contre l'impérialisme et le Secours ouvrier international.

Mots-clefs : Anti-impérialisme – Anticolonialisme – Afrique – Syndicats – Propagande.

Abstract

This article discusses the relationship between the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW) and the Comintern. The ITUCNW or Hamburg Committee was an attempt to establish a radical network in Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas, i.e. the African Atlantic. It was no "Black International", but was conceived by the Comintern as an organ of propaganda and agitation intended to collaborate with the Red International Labour Union, International Red Aid, the League Against Imperialism and International Workers' Relief.

Keywords: Anti-imperialism – Anti-colonialism – Africa – Trade unions – Propaganda.

In Hamburg, on 14 June 1931, International Workers' Relief organised a *Tag der Internationalen Solidarität* or International Solidarity Day alongside the German Communist Party, the Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition and the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers. It was marked by a mass demonstration, culminating in speeches by party and union leaders, including party chairman Ernst Thälmann.¹ Several foreign guests addressed the meeting, criticising conditions in the colonies and the exploitation of Africa and Asia by the imperialist powers. One of the foreign comrades present at the rally was Sierra Leonean seaman Forster Jones. He probably spoke without a prepared text and the content of his message to the audience has not been recorded. However, a photographer was present and took a picture of Jones as he addressed the rally. A few days later, the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung* published a photomontage of the event that included photographs of Jones and Thälmann.²

Some months later, another photograph of Jones at the Hamburg rally was published by George Padmore in *The Negro Worker*. This was the organ of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW), which had been established in

July 1930 and whose headquarters had been located in Hamburg since November 1930. Initially, the organisation portrayed itself as an independent, radical organisation whose aim was to organise the black workers of Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas, that is, of the African Atlantic, though one that collaborated with radical Left-wing anti-imperialist organisations such as the Red International Labour Union (since commonly known in English as the "Profintern", from the Russian acronym), International Red Aid, the League Against Imperialism and International Workers' Relief. It also made a point of its collaboration with the Hamburg-based International of Seamen and Harbour Workers, officially an independent radical trade union, though a Comintern related organisation.³

Padmore had been appointed editor of *The Negro Worker* in November 1931. He had earlier been head of the Profintern's Negro Bureau in Moscow and had therefore not been present at the Hamburg rally. His first issue of the journal was devoted to the struggle against colonialism and he wanted to tell his readers about the importance and impact of the ITUCNW. Padmore used the picture of

1. "Tag der Solidarität", *Welt am Abend*, n°136, 15 Juni 1931.

2. "Tag der Solidarität", *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung*, n°26, 1931, p. 522.

3. The International of Seamen and Harbour Workers was established in October 1930 and had its headquarters in Hamburg. See further Ludwig Eiber, *Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in der Hansestadt Hamburg in den Jahren 1929 bis 1939: Werftarbeiter, Hafenarbeiter und Seeleute: Konformität, Opposition, Widerstand*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 2000.

Forster Jones in a photomontage, his head in profile being superimposed of an image of a crowd at a mass meeting. The caption read: “Comrade Forster Jones, leader of African Seamen, greeting a meeting of German Workers in Hamburg”. The caption to another illustration of the same event was more bombastic: “International solidarity with Negro Workers, 100,000 workers demonstrating at Hamburg, Germany, for international solidarity and against imperialism in Africa”.⁴



Illustration 1. International solidarity – On May 1st at Hamburg, Germany, 100 000 revolutionary workers carried the above banner in their demonstration for international solidarity and against imperialism in Africa. Published in *The Negro Worker*, special colonial issue (1931/10-11), p. 32. This photo was also published in George Padmore, *Negro Workers and the Imperialist War* (Hamburg: International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, 1931), p. 9.



Ill. 2. Comrade Foster Jones, leader of African seamen, greeting a meeting of German workers in Hamburg. Published in *The Negro Worker*, special colonial issue (1931/10-11), p. 43.

What Padmore did not tell his readers was that the Hamburg rally was not actually about colonial conditions in Africa. A close look at the second picture reveals a different story: it shows a large crowd of white, male participants, most probably local Germans, and is dominated by a banner with the following text: “Negro Seamen! Join the Fight For Better Conditions on Ships! Down with Imperialism in Africa! For International Solidarity join the ISH, the Fighting International of Seamen!” Why was the picture used in *The Negro Worker*, and why is there no reference to the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers in the journal?

As we shall see below, Padmore’s use of the picture from the mass rally in Hamburg testifies to the complex character of the ITUCNW; and the aim of this article is to bring out its dual if not divided nature by examining its position within the Comintern “solar

4. *The Negro Worker* (1931/10-11), p. 32, 43.

system” on the one hand and within the radical African Atlantic on the other.⁵ Within the Comintern system, the ITUCNW was a third order unit at best and had to follow orders from the Comintern and the Profintern headquarters in Moscow. At the same time, it was one of the driving forces within the radical African Atlantic in the first half of the 1930s.

The historiography of the ITUCNW generally depicts the organisation as a radical expression of political Pan-Africanism. Previous accounts of the Pan-African Movement (Geiss, Eckert), radical African agitators (Derrick), Black Marxism (Robinson) and radical Black internationalism (Makalani, Adi) present a “grand narrative” of Black radicalism that starts in the United States with the formation of radical groups and associations such as the African Blood Brotherhood during the 1920s. With George Padmore’s rift with the Communists in 1933-1934, the narrative then shifts to London and the establishment of various Pan-African organizations culminating in the Fifth Pan-African Congress organized in Manchester in 1945.⁶

5. The expression “solar system” was first used by the Finnish Communist Otto Ville Kuusinen in his description of the Comintern and its affiliated organisations at the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern in 1928. For more on this see Fredrik Petersson’s contribution in this volume.

6. Immanuel Geiss, *The Pan-African Movement: A History of Pan-Africanism in America, Europe and Africa* (New York: Africana Publishing, 1974); Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Andreas Eckert, “Bringing

Such an account of the “radical African Atlantic” puts the focus on its intercultural and transnational origins, on the trans-cultural and international movement, and on the hybridity and intermixture of ideas that constituted the “Black Atlantic”. In his discussion of the formation of the Black Atlantic, Paul Gilroy highlights how Black “double consciousness” spurred African American, Caribbean and African intellectuals to develop a vision transcending not only race but also the particularity of the nation state.⁷ For them, the anti-colonial and anti-racist language of the Comintern was initially inspiring, even raising hopes for the establishment of a separate colonial or even Black international. According to Brent Hayes Edwards, “Black diasporic radicals” in interwar London and Paris, such as George Padmore and Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté, strove to establish a “Black International” or a radical international anti-colonial and antiracial alliance

the ‘Black Atlantic’ into Global History: The Project of Pan-Africanism”, in Sebastian Conrad, Dominic Sachsenmainer, eds., *Competing Visions of World Order: Global Moments and Movements, 1880s-1930s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.237-258; Jonathan Derrick, *Africa’s “Agitators”: Militant Anti-Colonialism in Africa and the West, 1918-1939* (London: Hurst, 2008); Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa and the Diaspora, 1919-1939* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2013).

7. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London & New York: Verso, 2003 [1st ed. 1993]).

of peoples of African descent through their “uneasy, shifting affiliations” with the Comintern.⁸

Although appealing, such an African-Atlantic-centred approach to the activities of the ITUCNW usually leads to downplaying the dominant role of various actors within the Comintern apparatus and the structural constraints on both the ITUCNW and its participants, as I have shown in my own research. The present article condenses the main arguments set out in my recent book.⁹ However, rather than merely summarizing previous research, it draws on new sources, namely the articles and photographs published in *The Negro Worker*. These add a new dimension to my claim that the ITUCNW was the brainchild of the Comintern and that it never operated as a Black International. A further objective is to locate the ITUCNW within the Comintern system by highlighting the various units within the Comintern and Profintern apparatus in Moscow, Berlin and Hamburg that directed and monitored its activities. Last, in the fourth part of the article, I argue that the ITUCNW never developed into a mass organisation or a

platform for radical politics in its own right. Rather, the Hamburg Committee served as a centre or node in a communication network.

Brainchild of the Comintern

The history of the ITUCNW is short and reflects the vicissitudes of the Comintern in the so-called Third Period. Its founding secretary, that is, the person in charge of activities at the Hamburg headquarters, was the African American Communist trade union activist James W. Ford (1893-1957). He had been an activist in the Chicago Postal Workers Union during the early 1920s. In 1925, he was recruited to the newly founded American Negro Labor Congress. One year later, in 1926, he joined the Communist Party in Chicago, becoming an industrial organizer in the Southside of the city. Thereafter, he rapidly rose through the Party hierarchy, although his chief engagement was in the Trade Union Education League. With his experience of trade union work, he was nominated as US delegate to the Fourth Congress of the Profintern, held in Moscow in March-April 1928.¹⁰

Ford had charge of the Hamburg Committee from November 1930 until September 1931, when he returned to Moscow and was replaced by the African Caribbean

8. Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 243-244.

9. Holger Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic: African American Agency, West African Intellectuals and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers* (Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2014).

10. James Ford, *Life and Activities*, dated 20 April 1932, p. 1-10, Archives of the Communist International, Russian State Archives of Socio-Political History, Moscow (RGASPI) 495/261/6747.

political activist George Padmore. Malcolm Ivan Meredith Nurse, alias George Padmore (1900-1959), had been born in Trinidad. He had a middle-class background, and had worked in the early 1920s as a journalist. In 1924, Nurse left the island for the USA, enrolling at Fisk University in 1925. The following year, he moved to the Law School at University of New York and then, in 1927, to Howard University. Living in New York, he started to engage with radical African Americans in Harlem and joined the Communist Party in 1927. In December 1929 he arrived in Moscow, where he stayed until his transfer to Hamburg in October 1931.¹¹

Following the Nazi seizure of power in Germany, the ITUCNW's headquarters were moved to Paris in February/March 1933. Padmore was replaced in February 1934 by the Surinam-born political activist and Communist Otto Huiswoud (1893-1961). Huiswoud had immigrated to the USA in 1910 and had been a founder member of the Communist Party of America in 1919. In November 1922, he attended the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in Moscow as an official delegate. By 1929, Huiswoud was on the Central Committee of the American party, in charge of its newly established Negro

11. James H. Hooker, *Black Revolutionary: George Padmore's Path from Communism to Pan-Africanism* (New York: Praeger, 1967); C.L.R. James, "Notes on the life of George Padmore", in Anna Grimshaw, ed., *The C.L.R. James Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p.288-295.

Department. Party rifts however saw him removed from the Central Committee and put in charge of the New York District Negro Department. This position he retained until the end of 1930, when the Party sent him to Moscow, and when Padmore was transferred to Hamburg in October 1931, Huiswoud took over his position at the Profintern's Negro Bureau.¹²

Institutional Beginnings

The ITUCNW was the offspring of the combined efforts of the Comintern, the Profintern and a handful of African Caribbean/American activists. Initially, the Comintern maintained a lukewarm attitude towards the African Atlantic. Its various so-called Negro Theses between 1922 and 1924 were mainly concerned with the "Negro Question" in the USA and South Africa.¹³ Sub-Saharan Africa was a blind spot for the Comintern, which believed that the conditions for successful agitation and propaganda for working-class radicalisation existed rather in Asia, primarily in China and India. The Comintern was not blind

12. Otto Huiswoud, *Handwritten Autobiography* (Moscow) 28 May 1937, RGASPI 495/261/557; Maria G. van Enckevort, "The Life and Work of Otto Huiswoud: Professional Revolutionary and Internationalist (1893-1961)", Ph.D., University of the West Indies, Mona, 2000; Joyce Moore Turner, *Caribbean Crusaders and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

13. Jacob A. Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919-1929* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014), p.287-364.

to race, but rather caught in the Marxist-Leninist strait-jacket: class, not race being the prime mover of history. Also, as activists in Moscow could identify not a working class but only a movement of petty-bourgeois nationalists in the colonies of Sub-Saharan Africa, the question then was whether this group could become the spearhead of a forthcoming radical anti-colonial and anti-imperial movement.

It was the Negro Commission appointed by the Organisational Bureau of the Comintern in 1923 that made the first attempt to convene a World Negro Congress. In contrast to the existing Pan-African conferences, the object of this congress was to rally a wide spectrum of radical African American, African Caribbean and African activists and organisations, but excluding bourgeois nationalists. Nothing, however, came of these early plans. A new attempt was made in 1925. This time it was to be organised by the newly-established American Negro Labor Congress (ANLC). Although the ANLC made efforts to establish contacts with organisations in the Caribbean, West Africa and South Africa, its congress in Chicago in October 1925 was a purely US affair.¹⁴ However, the ANLC's contacts with the Caribbean and Africa were mobilised a year later when the League Against Colonial Oppression began to

organise its own anti-imperialist world congress. This congress was held in Brussels in February 1927 and resulted in the foundation of the League Against Imperialism and for Colonial Independence.¹⁵

All co-operation between Communist and non-Communist organisations came to an end with the introduction of the new "class-against-class" policy at the Comintern's Sixth World Congress in August 1928. A month earlier, a new radical organisation had been launched at the Fourth World Congress of the Profintern, focussed on agitation and propaganda among the workers of the African Atlantic. This was the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers of the Red International of Labour Unions (ITUCNW-RILU), to give it its formal title. Like other Profintern trade union committees set up in the 1920s, such as the International Propaganda and Action Committee of Transport Workers (which included seafarers), this organisation was more of a co-ordinating secretariat than a membership organisation. However, another difference between the existing trade union committees and the ITUCNW-RILU was that the latter was never conceived as a comprehensive umbrella organisation nor did it ever become

14. On the ANLC, see Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights 1919-1950* (New York: Norton, 2008).

15. Fredrik Petersson, *Willi Münzenberg, the League Against Imperialism, and the Comintern, 1925-1933* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013).

a platform for radical trade union activity by the Black toilers of the African Atlantic.¹⁶

James Ford's top priority was to convene an International Congress of Negro Workers. This could only be arranged outside the Soviet Union and any links between the organisers and the Comintern had to be carefully camouflaged, as Communist trade union activity was banned throughout the colonies of the African Atlantic. The first step was to establish a new organising committee for the congress. This was done at the "Negro Trade Union Conference" that Ford organised during the Second World Congress of the League Against Imperialism in Frankfurt am Main in July 1929. This meeting resulted in the appointment, under Ford's chairmanship, of the Provisional International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (somewhat confusingly titled, given that ITUCNW-RILU already existed, and often called the Provisional International Committee). At the end of the year, Ford moved to New York, taking the Provisional International Committee headquarters with him,¹⁷ while George Padmore and the Russian Communist Grigori Naumovich Slavin (1891-?) took over operations at ITUCNW-RILU in Moscow.¹⁸

16. On the Profintern, see Reiner Tosstorff, *Profintern: Die Rote Gewerkschaftsinternationale 1920-1937*, Paderborn, Schöningh, 2004.

17. H. Haywood, "Forward to the London Conference of Negro Toilers", *The Negro Worker* (1930/6), p. 3.

18. Holger Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*, *op. cit.*, p. 198 (cf. note 9).

The class-against-class policy affected the composition of the Provisional International Committee. At first it consisted of 15 members representing US, Caribbean, African and European trade unions and political associations, among them William Pickens representing the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.¹⁹ However, after a fierce attack on Pickens by African American Communists in Moscow in the aftermath of the 1929 World Congress of the League Against Imperialism, the Association was removed from the list of affiliated organisations and Pickens expelled from the Provisional International Committee. In addition, with Ford's re-location to New York and his appointment as head of the Negro Department of the Trade Union Unity League (the industrial union umbrella organisation of the CPUSA), the Committee's relationship to the Profintern was obscured.²⁰

The original plan had been to call for a World Congress of Negro Workers in London.²¹ However, due to a rather cryptic response from the British government, not an outright rejection but not an acceptance either, Hamburg was chosen as the

19. "Call for International Trade Union Conference of Negro Workers", *The Negro Worker* (1929/4), p. 1.

20. *Report of Proceedings and Decisions of the First International Conference of Negro Workers* (Hamburg: International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, 1930 [Hereafter: ITUCNW, *Report of Proceedings*]), p. 1.

21. "An Appeal to Negro Workers of the World", *The Negro Worker* (1930/1), p. 1.

venue. In early July 1930, perhaps some 17 participants from the USA, the Caribbean and Sub-Saharan Africa²² joined Ford and Padmore at the International Seamen's Club at 8, Rothesoodstrasse, close to Hamburg docks. This was also the home of the Port Bureau of the International Propaganda and Action Committee of Transport Workers, which together with the Comintern's West European Bureau was responsible for practical arrangements for the congress.²³

The World Congress of Negro Workers resulted in the official establishment of the ITUCNW. Euphorically, the published report claimed that the 17 delegates represented 20,000 workers, 7 countries, 11 different trade unions, 2 national trade union centres, one national political party and 2 non-trade union organisations. On the final day of the Hamburg conference, the delegates nominated a new leadership for the organisation. The composition of the Presidium reflected the delegates' desire to have all parts of the African Atlantic represented. In fact, as compared to the African American bias of the Provisional International Committee, the

22. The actual number of participants is something of a puzzle. According to the report Ford had prepared in July 1930, there were 19 delegates and three fraternal delegates: "The international conference of Negro workers", report dated 29 November 1930 (no author), RGASPI 495/155/87, 246. Most authors, on the other hand, follow the "official" version of 17 delegates as stated in the published account of the Hamburg Conference.

23. See further ITUCNW, *Report of Proceedings*, p. 40.

newly-elected body had a markedly African focus.²⁴

A Black International or Not?

The initial composition of the ITUCNW leadership reflected Ford's and Padmore's ambition to establish a collective body embracing all parts of the African Atlantic: Sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas. Their ambition was to develop the ITUCNW into the "Black International" Padmore envisaged in 1930:

"[The Conference] will be the first time that the broad toiling masses of Negroes in the United States, Africa, the West Indies and Latin America, will come together and organise into a powerful International Movement, on the basis of a genuine revolutionary program in order to carry on the struggle more effectively for the liberation of the brutally oppressed Negro race from the fetters of white capitalist-imperialist domination".²⁵

Although this plan might reflect a Pan-African vision, the agenda and objectives of the organisation were exclusively class-based rather than class-inclusively race-based in character: it was to be an organisation for Black toilers only, not for the Black bourgeois.²⁶ The latter were heavily criticised

24. ITUCNW, *Report of Proceedings*, p. 40.

25. George Padmore, "The Negro Liberation Movement and the International Conference", *The Negro Worker* (1930/1-2), p. 7.

26. "What is the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers?", *The Negro Worker* (1931/10-11),

by Padmore for betraying the cause of the “Negro toilers” and time and again he loosed broadsides against them in his writings. “The Negro petty-bourgeois politicians and national reformist ‘leaders’ are today taken [*sic*] a more and more active part in betraying the struggles of Negro workers and peasants than ever before”, he declared in one of his pamphlets.²⁷

The “class-against-class” policy determined the orientation of both the ITUCNW and its RILU predecessor: it was never to link up with Pan-Africanism or even to emerge as a “Black International”. Its goal was to “develop a spirit of international solidarity among the Negro workers in their common struggle with the workers of other races and countries against world imperialism”; its task was to

“direct and stimulate the activities of the revolutionary trade unions in organising Negro workers into the trade union movement [and] to promote the revolutionary trade union movement in Africa and West Indies”. Last but not least, its mission was to “combat Negro bourgeois nationalism”.²⁸

p. 45. Also [Max Barek, ed.,] *What is the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers? A Trade Union Programme of Action* (Hamburg: Graphische Industrie Hamburg GmbH, n.d. [ca. 1931]).

27. George Padmore, *Negro Workers and the Imperialist War. Intervention in the Soviet Union* (Hamburg: International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, 1931), p. 13-15.

28. “Statement to our readers”, *The Negro Worker*, Special Issue on the Fifth Congress of the Profintern (1st November 1930), p. 1.

Padmore also gave expression to a radical and militant version of the Comintern’s official “class-against-class” policy in the ITUCNW journal, *The Negro Worker*. In August 1931, for example, an article signed G.P. vehemently attacked Marcus Garvey and his United Negro Improvement Association—the most influential Pan-Africanist organisation of the 1920s and 1930s. Accusing Black politicians inside and outside Garvey’s movement as traitors to “the oppressed millions of their race”, he announced that freeing the oppressed Black workers of the African Atlantic “can only be done by striving for the unity of workers of all colours and all oppressed peoples on the basis of the programme of militant class struggle, represented by the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers”.²⁹ In the first number Padmore edited in Hamburg, readers were reminded that “Exploitation knows no colour-line. A capitalist and landlord is the same bloodsucker, no matter what colour he might be”.³⁰

The possibility of launching the ITUCNW as an ostensibly independent class organisation was debated at length in Moscow in late 1930 and 1931, and it was indeed decided that its links to the Profintern apparatus should be camouflaged and the organisation presented as a vehicle for joint activity by

29. “Editor’s Note”, *The Negro Worker* (1931/8), p. 9.

30. “War in the East: Negro Workers, defend the Soviet Union and the Chinese Revolution!”, *The Negro Worker* (1931/10-11), p. 3.

“organisations of Negro workers” in Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean.³¹ As a result, the ITUCNW-RILU was re-named the RILU (Profintern) Negro Bureau, whose role would be to work with the American, English, French, Belgian, Latin American and South American sections of the Profintern and also supervise the activities of the new ITUCNW formally established at the World Congress of Negro Workers.³² With its headquarters in Hamburg, the ITUCNW, in turn, was expected to become the rallying point for the forces of the African Atlantic, including the USA and South Africa. In addition, the ITUCNW was to be a vehicle for Soviet foreign policy and a tool for the popularisation of the social and economic policies of the USSR.³³

In contrast to the global ambitions nourished by the ITUCNW itself, the Profintern Secretariat envisioned a far more limited role for the organisation. Firstly, the ITUCNW was to work much more closely with the various Profintern sections than had previously been planned. Secondly, and more importantly, its responsibilities and activities were to be far more limited, focussing only on Africa and

the Caribbean. The Profintern Secretariat’s critique of the notion of a Black International was formulated in two memoranda, the first in June 1931 and the second in late September 1931.³⁴ Both texts emphasised the hierarchical subordination of Hamburg to Moscow. The September memorandum, in particular, clearly located the ITUCNW in the sphere of trade union activity, not that of parties or other organisations. Nor was it to develop into an independent body, but rather its activities in Hamburg were to be controlled by the International of Seamen Harbour Workers and by the Profintern’s European Secretariat in Berlin. In early October 1931, the Profintern Secretariat decided that any association, group or labour union of Negro workers in Africa or the Caribbean not affiliated to either the (Socialist) Amsterdam International or the Profintern would be entitled to join the ITUCNW as full members. This plan was, in turn, attacked by leading members of the Comintern’s Eastern Secretariat, who claimed that the Profintern’s decision was a dangerous deviation from the official “class-against-class” doctrine.³⁵

31. Resolution of the Organisation and Functions of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, 24 January 1931, RGASPI 495/155/96, 10-11, hereafter: ITUCNW January 1931 Resolution.

32. George Padmore, Plan of work of the Negro Bureau of the Profintern for the first quarter beginning 1st October to 31 December, 1930, RGASPI 534/1/164, 4-5.

33. ITUCNW January 1931 Resolution, RGASPI 495/155/96, 11-12.

34. Concrete proposals on Report of Work of Hamburg Committee, filed as 52/52.129.5.WWC, dated 10 June 1931, RGASPI 534/3/668, 25-27; Secretariat of the Profintern, Negro Workers’ TU Committee of the Profintern, Concrete Proposals on Report of Work of Hamburg Committee, filed as 52/52.141.sec.3, dated 30 September 1931, RGASPI 534/3/615, 123-124.

35. Letter (German translation) from G. Safarov to the Political Commission, 11 October 1931, RGASPI

The various suggestions for the re-organisation of “Negro work” prompted the Executive Committee of the Comintern to change the political character of the ITUCNW. On 13 October 1931, the Comintern’s Political Commission intervened in the debate that had emerged between the Eastern Secretariat and the Profintern on the need to develop the ITUCNW as a Black International, rejecting the idea. Rather, the ITUCNW was to concentrate on activating “Negro” workers only in the African colonies and in the Caribbean. And only those “Negro” organisations that could not connect with existing Communist parties, trade unions or organisations were to affiliate to the Hamburg Committee, the case of each organisation being decided by the Executive Committee of the Profintern.³⁶

The ITUCNW within the Circuit of the Comintern

The Profintern never intended that the Hamburg Committee should emerge as an independent actor. Instead, the Hamburg Committee was to discuss and plan its work with the Profintern’s European Secretariat, the German party, and the *Revolutionäre Gewerkschaftsopposition*—the communist trade

495/4/145, 30.

36. Protokoll Nr. 187 der Sitzung der Politischen Kommission des Pol.Sekr. am 13. Oktober 1931, §3 Meinungsverschiedenheiten zwischen dem Ost-LS des EKKI und der Profintern betr. den Charakter des Hamburger Komitees der Negerarbeiter, RGASPI 495/4/145, 1, 2.

union established in Germany in 1929, following the Third Period turn.³⁷

The intimate organisational connections between the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers (ISH) and the Hamburg Committee were integral to Moscow’s strategy. The Hamburg Committee’s office was located in the ISH headquarters building. The ISH Secretariat and the local International Seamen’s Club were to be assisted by the Hamburg Committee in their “special work” among African and African Caribbean seamen.³⁸ Both organisations received funding from Moscow via the same intermediary in Berlin, the Profintern’s European Bureau. Monthly payments were sent from the Comintern to Berlin and then on to the ISH account in Hamburg; the activities and the salaries of the Hamburg Committee personnel were paid from the ISH account. The transfer of funds from Moscow to Germany neatly reveals the relative positions of the various organisations in the Comintern system: at the top, the central apparatus in Moscow, next the Profintern Secretariat, then

37. “Plan of Work and Immediate Tasks of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers at Hamburg”, undated and no author, RGASPI 534/3/668, 6-7. This document is date-stamped 28 Februar 1931 and was most probably prepared by George Padmore.

38. Duties and Tasks of [ISH] Secretariat Members (undated) directives issued in Moscow, filed 17 March 1931, RGASPI 534/5/220, 128-129. On the duty of cooperation between the ISH, the Hamburg Committee and the RILU Negro Bureau see Letter from Padmore to Walter, 21 July 1931, RGASPI 534/3/668, 96.

the Profintern European Bureau, then the ISH and the Hamburg Committee.

Co-operation in practice, however, proved to be far more difficult. During Ford's time as Secretary of the Hamburg Committee, the ISH leadership regarded the ITUCNW merely as one of its branches, rather than as an independent organisation. In fact, readers of *The Negro Worker* were informed in July 1931 that the demonstration planned for 1 August marked the International Day of Struggle Against Imperialist War. That year its focus was to be on "the Negro workers and especially sea workers", highlighting that "international capital and the ship-owners" were stirring up white, black, and colonial seamen against each other, with the support of the reformist trade union leaders of the International Transport Federation. Therefore,

"The 1st of August campaign must be utilized with a view of organizationally strengthening the ISH (International of Seamen and Harbour Workers) among the colonial seamen, the recruiting of new members from among the colonial seamen must be in the forefront of our work of mobilizing these seamen against war preparations and for the fight to better their living conditions and for the defense of the Soviet Union".³⁹

At the mass demonstration that followed, banners urging "Negro seamen" to join the

ISH were carried through the streets of Hamburg.

When Padmore took over, the relationship between the two organisations became more evenly balanced, though the Hamburg Committee was still expected to assist the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers in its agitation and propaganda work among seamen. Mutual understanding had its limits, however, as Padmore saw the ITUCNW's work among Black seamen in European ports as being for that organisation's own ends—an idea opposed by Albert Walter (1985-1980), the German secretary of the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers, who claimed that any work among seamen was meant to strengthen the national sections of the ISH, not to establish sub-committees of the ITUCNW. The case of Garan Kouyaté's in Marseille is revealing: Ford and Padmore claimed that he was the head of the ITUCNW sub-committee in Marseille, responsible for work among Black seamen and harbour workers in the port. On the other hand, Kouyaté had also been charged with the organisation of its work in Marseille by the French section of the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers.

The Profintern's instructions to the ITUCNW also directed the Hamburg Committee to collaborate with the League Against Imperialism and International Red Aid. The League Against Imperialism intended to expand

39. "August First and Negro Workers", *The Negro Worker* (1931/7), p. 4-6.

its operations into the West African colonies, though for various reasons its hopes of establishing sections there were never fulfilled. Part of the project was also to enlist African students for training in Moscow. As the League's African connections were non-existent, the Hamburg Committee was to assist them. While Ford had been chiefly occupied by work among seamen in the port of Hamburg, Padmore focussed on the recruitment of African students and demanded that the task be formally transferred to the ITUCNW as the League had proved incapable of doing it. He was rather more successful and managed to send a number of Africans to Moscow in 1932, among others Jomo Kenyatta and I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson.

In spite of the few months he spent studying in Moscow in 1932-1933, Jomo Kenyatta (c. 1891-1978) was never a Communist. Between 1929 and 1946, he lived in the United Kingdom. He was an active member of the anti-colonial International African Service Bureau (IASB) and became the first President of Kenya after the country's independence. Born in Sierra Leone, the journalist and union activist Isaac Theophilus Akunna Wallace-Johnson (1894-1965) had also been active in Lagos, Nigeria, before his own brief visit to Moscow. After returning to West Africa, in 1935 he established the West African Youth League. Both Kenyatta and Wallace-Johnson collaborated with Padmore

within the IASB after Padmore's break with the Comintern in 1934.

Collaboration between the Hamburg Committee and International Red Aid was more successful. Like the League, International Red Aid planned to establish sections in Sub-Saharan Africa, a scheme that was intended to be put into effect after the International Red Aid World Congress in Moscow in late 1932, with the Hamburg Committee providing the link to Africa. However, the Nazi seizure of power in Germany put paid to the plan. More effective was the Hamburg Committee's involvement in the global campaign in defence of the Scottsboro Boys organised in 1931-1932 by International Red Aid and its US section, International Labor Defense.⁴⁰

The ITUCNW in the African Atlantic

The ITUCNW's goal was to raise the consciousness of the African Atlantic's working class. Profintern secretary Aleksandr Lozovski stressed in 1931 that "there is no colony where there are no wage workers.

40. The "Scottsboro Boys" were nine young African Americans who had been charged with the rape of two white girls in Scottsboro, Alabama in March 1931. When the local court sentenced them to death in April 1931, a nationwide wave of protest against lynch justice in the US South erupted and resulted in a global campaign orchestrated by International Red Aid. See James A. Miller, Susan D. Pennybaker, Eve Rosenhaft, "Mother Ada Wright and the International Campaign to Free the Scottsboro Boys, 1931-1934", *The American Historical Review* (2001/2), p. 387-430.

This means that the question of the formation of trade unions is now ripe for all countries”, pointing out that the conditions were right at least in the Gambia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, Nigeria, the Belgian Congo, Kenya, Guadeloupe and Martinique.⁴¹ The chief instrument of agitation and propaganda was *The Negro Worker*, the organ of the ITUCNW. Established in 1928 as the bulletin of the “International Negro Workers’ Information Bureau in Moscow”, in January 1931 the journal reappeared as *The International Negro Workers’ Review* published by the ITUCNW in Hamburg. By March that same year, however, it was once again called *The Negro Worker*. Both Ford and Padmore hoped to establish the title as a mass publication. The first eight issues of *The Negro Worker*, however, were printed in a run of a thousand.⁴² In early 1932, Padmore decided to distribute the journal for free in order to expand its readership. The campaign was successful, circulation increasing steadily to reach 5,000 copies per issue by the end of 1932.⁴³ However, decisions made in Moscow to cut the funding of the various units of the Comintern and Profintern that had been relocated from Germany following the Nazi takeover in 1933 also affected the circulation of *The Negro*

41. Alexander Losovsky, “ABC of Trade Unionism for Negro Workers (Preface)”, *The Negro Worker* (1931/7), p. 12.

42. [Ford], ITUCNW Report 1930-1931, RGASPI 534/3/669, 224.

43. [Padmore], ITUCNW Report 1931-1932, RGASPI 534/3/753, 125.

Worker. When Huiswoud took over as editor-in-chief in March 1934, he had to reduce the print run to 2,000 copies in an attempt to cut costs.⁴⁴

The Negro Worker and the pamphlets published by the ITUCNW reached the Black Atlantic through two distribution channels. To countries such as the USA and the UK, where Communist activities had not been banned by the authorities, they were sent by post. Subversive and anti-colonial activities however were generally banned in the Caribbean and African colonies, including Communist agitation and propaganda. The journal was therefore smuggled into these countries using the ISH’s courier system, a covert network of ship-based cells established on German, British and other vessels calling at ports in the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific oceans.

The publications of the Hamburg Committee were all written in English and thus limited to the Anglophone African Atlantic. Initially, *The Negro Worker* was also to be translated into French and published as *L’Ouvrier nègre*, but the plan was shelved in May 1932 for lack of funds. Instead, Garan Kouyaté’s journal *Le Cri des Nègres* was developed as the ITUCNW’s French magazine. It was regularly supplied with articles in French translation as well as pictures from *The Negro Worker*, while Kouyaté in return would send

44. Holger Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*, *op. cit.*, p. 633 (cf. note 9).

pictures and material to be used in *The Negro Worker*.⁴⁵ Plans for a Brazilian (Portuguese) edition never materialised.

While it is clear that *The Negro Worker* succeeded in achieving a certain distribution, it's a totally different question whether served as the voice of the exploited and oppressed of the African Atlantic. While published by the Hamburg Committee, at least, *The Negro Worker* gave expression to voices from Africa and the African Diaspora.⁴⁶ However, the voices of the Profintern's Negro Bureau were also to be heard: Padmore (while he was in charge in Moscow), Otto Huiswoud, who replaced him there, and Aleksandr Zusmanovich (1902-1965), the Russian Africanist and head of the section for African and African American students at the University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV) who had replaced Slavin at the Negro Bureau in 1931 and who would remain there until 1935. Throughout its existence, the guiding principles of *The Negro Worker* were determined by the Profintern's Negro Bureau in Moscow rather than by the journal's editor-in-chief. Ford, Padmore and Huiswoud all received articles written by comrades in Moscow for publication in the journal. Some issues, those of 1935, for example, were entirely written in Moscow.

With articles about the plight of Africans in the Atlantic world, the express aim of the editors was to establish *The Negro Worker* as the leading radical political Black magazine of its time. In Brent Hayes Edwards' view, the journal emerged as the key vehicle for Padmore's radical Pan-African vision; for Edwards, Padmore's intention was to make *The Negro Worker* a space to express the "points of view" and "daily life" of workers of African descent, rather than for the Communist hierarchy to debate the "Negro Question".⁴⁷ However, scholars such as Edward T. Wilson stress Moscow's influence and authority, referring for example to Rolf Italiaander's interview with the Soviet Africanist Ivan Izosimovich Potekhin (1903-1964) who declared that much of the editorial work was actually done by the Profintern's Negro Bureau: "We determined its direction from Moscow".⁴⁸ However, in his overall assessment of the journal, Wilson admits to being impressed, despite his criticisms. It was the first such journal ever to circulate among Africans and although the British colonial authorities tried their best to prevent its distribution in Africa, *The Negro Worker* was able to grow a readership. Most importantly, Wilson even considers the journal to have had an effect in

45. Practical Decisions on the Discussion of the International Trade Union Committee, 23-26 May 1932, RGASPI 534/3/753, p. 112.

46. This is highlighted in Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism*, *op. cit.* (cf. note 6).

47. Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, *op. cit.*, p. 257 (cf. note 8).

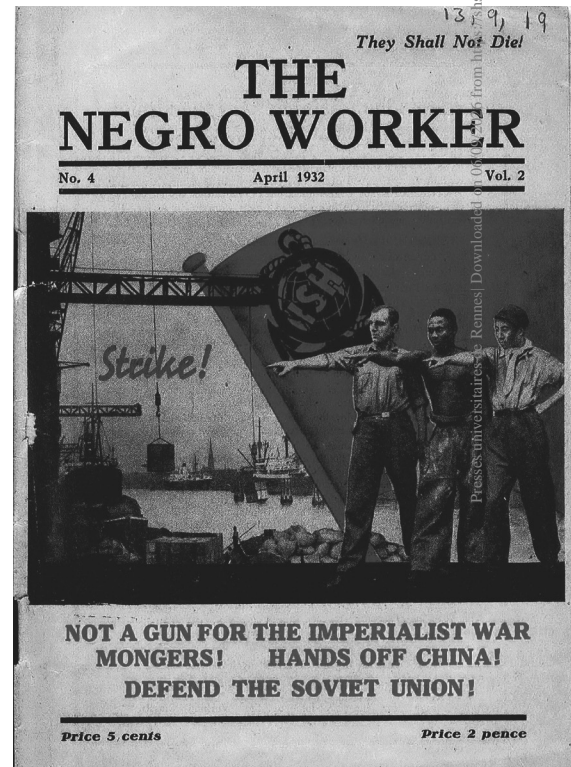
48. Rolf Italiaander, *Schwarze Haut im roten Griff*, Düsseldorf, Econ-Verlag, 1962, p. 74; Edward T. Wilson, *Russia and Black Africa Before World War II* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1974), p. 214.

radicalizing indigenous political attitudes in Africa: "Through the Negro Worker's polemics, moreover, the more educated strata of the African population were encouraged - some perhaps for the first time-to promote the cause of colonial independence".⁴⁹

Yet *The Negro Worker* was not ever an advocate for a radical, even militant Black mass organisation or "International". On the contrary, a close reading of its content, even during Padmore's heyday in 1932, shows that the journal never called for the establishment of radical Black or African political organisations, whether parties or unions. Perhaps Padmore had been criticized by ISH headquarters for presenting the ITUCNW as the champion of Black seamen in the October-November 1931 issue of *The Negro Worker*. Five months later, the front cover of the April 1932 issue featured a photomontage addressing a class-conscious message to the reader: a White, a Black and an Asian maritime worker standing before a red flag bearing the badge of the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers, pointing in unison at the watchword, "Strike!" Inside, an "Appeal to the Negro Seamen and Dockers" from the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers urged Black seamen "to join ship and dock committees of the International Seamen and Harbour

49. Edward T. Wilson, *Russia and Black Africa*, *ibid.*, p.214-216.

Workers Union which are fighting for the... demands of the Negro seamen and the sailors of other races and colours".⁵⁰



III. 3 Cover of *The Negro Worker* (1932/2, vol. 2): "Strike ! Not a Gun for the Imperialist War Mongers! Hands Off China! Defend the Soviet Union!" Voir la couverture couleur sur: http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/inventories/inv_pdf/A1715/AD1715-13-9-19-001-jpeg.pdf (consulté en septembre 2016).

Huiswoud's attempts in 1934 to re-build the ITUCNW's Atlantic connections were

50. "Appeal to the Negro Seamen and Dockers", *The Negro Worker* (1932/4), p.24.

only partially successful. The ineffectiveness of the ITUCNW became evident during the Italian-Ethiopian crisis in 1934/1935: Huiswoud wanted to use the ITUCNW to spearhead a “Hands off Abyssinia” campaign but received little backing from either headquarters in Moscow or other Comintern bodies. At the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in 1935, “class-against-class” was abandoned, to be replaced by the Popular Front policy, providing once again the opportunity for co-operation with other socialist and reformist parties and organisations. The Profintern’s oppositional politics were shelved; instead the amalgamation of the Profintern and the red labour unions and the Socialist (Amsterdam) International was envisaged and promoted.

These new political directives also affected the ITUCNW. Its attacks against “bourgeois” Negro leaders and organisations were to end, and the organisation was to develop into a rallying point for radical associations throughout the African Atlantic, into a “Black International” of sorts. However, at this point the ITUCNW was nothing more than the Paris office run by Huiswoud and his wife. An evaluation of the Comintern’s “Negro work” in 1936 merely stated what was already obvious: the ITUCNW was not and had never been a mass organisation; its only impact on the African Atlantic had been through *The Negro Worker*. After the dissolution of the

Profintern, the fate of the ITUCNW was decided: it was quietly liquidated in 1937.

Manchester 1945 and the Legacy of the ITUCNW

The impact and legacy of the ITUCNW is difficult to assess. Internal evaluations in Moscow mainly portrayed it as a failed attempt to radicalise the African Atlantic. Like other international organisations created in the Third Period, the ITUCNW never succeeded in establishing lasting links with anti-colonial and anti-imperial activists and associations. From an organisational point of view, then, the ITUCNW left few, if any, traces in the African Atlantic. Its ideological legacy, on the other hand, was more tangible and longer-lasting. Its journal, *The Negro Worker*, was widely distributed and read throughout the African Atlantic, raising awareness of the exploitation of Black workers in different parts of the African Atlantic and disseminating radical political ideas about the common cause of the Black toilers. In their correspondence and especially through the publication of *The Negro Worker*, Ford, Padmore and Huiswoud did indeed provide a platform for the radical African Atlantic.

It was not the ITUCNW but the organisations established by Padmore and others in the 1930s and 1940s that emerged as the spearheads of the radical African Atlantic. Padmore’s expulsion from the Comintern

in 1934 resulted in his developing a “third space” for anti-colonial and anti-imperial agitation and propaganda, with his shift to radical political Pan-Africanism. In September 1945, the Fifth Pan-African Congress was held in Manchester. What is most striking about this is its organisation, bearing close similarities to the congresses and conferences organised by the Comintern and its associated organisations in the 1920s and 1930s. Among its organisers one finds some of the core members and affiliates of the Hamburg Committee,

including earlier guests of Moscow: Padmore, Wallace-Johnson, Kenyatta. Two were missing: Ford and Huiswoud, who did not break with Moscow in the 1930s. In retrospect, therefore, it could be said that the July 1930 Hamburg Conference launched the idea of a radical African Atlantic, but that it was the September 1945 Manchester Congress that laid its foundations. By then, Moscow had been paying no attention to the African Atlantic for a decade or so, and the 1945 Manchester Congress was neither conceived nor planned in Moscow.

