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By way of introduction I should say that most of my material is taken from Reiner Tosstorff's book, entitled THE RED INTERNATIONAL OF LABOUR UNIONS (RILU) 1920-1937. It is the only book in English on the subject, I think. The subject has been very little studied in the West – unlike communist parties, much studied, communist trade unions have excited little interest over the years. So Reiner Tosstorff made a sensible choice in entering a field that had hardly been ploughed at all.

1 What was it? THE RED INTERNATIONAL OF LABOUR UNIONS or RILU for short. Also named Profintern by analogy with Comintern. Let us examine this title. 'Red' means socialist not necessarily communist – the name was chosen to have a broader appeal than 'communist' – contrast with Comintern – Communist International - which always had 'communist' in its name. 'Red' was also chosen to contrast with 'Yellow' the word the Bolsheviks applied to the Amsterdammers. 'Labour' ? The phrase 'red international of labour unions' was only used in Britain, in all other countries it was called the 'red international of *trade* unions'. Also, after 1945 the RILU's successor was named WFTU – World Federation of Trade Unions (and after the 1949 Cold War split the communist TU federation continued to be called WFTU) . So why 'labour'? I think again it was to broaden their appeal – leave open the possibility of other labour organisations joining not necessarily trade unions. In fact though the main thrust of the RILU's activities was towards trade unions.

2 The RILU was set up by the Bolsheviks in 1921 to coordinate the actions of communist or communist-affiliated trade unions throughout the world. [It had a predecessor, the ITUC – International Trade Union Council – set up in 1920 – or *Mezhsovprof* in Russian] Why was it set up? This is not entirely clear. When the Comintern was created in 1919 it was intended to coordinate the activities of communists throughout the world, and in particular communist parties. There were communist parties in most of Europe at least by then. But there was not much for the RILU to coordinate. There were very few revolutionary trade unions, and if they were they were Anarchist or Syndicalist not Communist. Zinoviev said later: 'The RILU was founded at a time when it seemed that we might be able to break through the enemy front in a head-on attack, and rapidly conquer the trade unions.' The main reason for setting up RILU was to act as a rival to 'Amsterdam', in other words to the IFTU (International Federation of Trade Unions) which was set up in 1920 – [or restored, you could say, as it was the successor of the body set up in 1913 which had been rendered meaningless by the First World War ]– The IFTU was an international association of Social Democratic, socialist, or neutral trade unions, with a headquarters in Amsterdam, and almost all the national trade union centres

were members of it. The RILU would find it very difficult to do what Zinoviev suggested and 'rapidly conquer the trade unions.' But this was the task it set itself.

3 Because of the complexity of international trade union relationships some background is needed before continuing the story.

First, There were a) craft unions in individual countries – craft unions are unions formed by workers in a specific trade – for example in Britain the mineworkers, the metalworkers, the seamen and many many others of course b) They were associated together in National Trade Union Centres e.g. the T.U.C. in Britain or the ADGB in Germany c) these then in turn were associated in a wider body, after 1913 called International Federation of Trade Unions.

So: Craft Unions (individual TUs representing particular trades) > join together to form National Trade Union Centres > and they join together to form an International Federation of TUs. That was one route to follow.

But also,

secondly, there was another route: the Craft Unions in individual countries were also joined together to form International Trade Secretariats, for instance the metalworkers of each country joined the International Metalworkers' Federation, the transport workers joined the International Transport Workers' Federation, and so on. So: all the National Craft Unions joined together to form an International Trade Secretariats for that particular trade. There were 28 of these organisations in 1922.

What did this situation mean for the RILU? It meant that the RILU could insert itself 1) at grass roots level of individual trade union, 2) at the national level and 3) it could intervene at the level of the International Trade Secretariats. To do this it organised International Propaganda Committees or IPCs to agitate directly within these International Trade Secretariats to get them to join the RILU. There were 14 IPCs. The Soviet trade unions also tried to become members of the ITSs, so that they could press them to leave the IFTU and join the RILU, but they did not succeed, with one exception – the International Union of Workers in the Food and Drink Trades, which allowed the Russians in, and temporarily joined the RILU. This failure was not surprising because the executives of all the ITSs were run by Social Democrats committed to the IFTU and they immediately expelled any trade union which joined the RILU.. In other words, the communists had first to campaign internationally to overthrow the executives of the existing ITS's, only then could they move on to getting them to join the RILU.

4 What forces did the RILU represent? Alexander Lozovsky, the head of the RILU, claimed in 1921 that it represented 18 million workers – 6.5 million of these were members of the Soviet trade unions so the figure is not as impressive as it might appear at first – but still that leaves 11.5 million in the capitalist world so it was not far behind its

rival the IFTU, which claimed to represent 17 million workers [in 1919]. The RILU's main support came from communist workers first and foremost. They usually acted as minorities within particular trade unions in each country. They wanted to gain control of their union but never succeeded during this period because as soon as they became strong the existing Social Democratic TU leadership expelled or suspended them – thus presenting them with the choice of knuckling under or founding their own separate communist union. (Where a big trade union did agree to join the RILU – like the Italian CGIL for instance – it always maintained its connection with the IFTU at the same time – which was strictly against the rules.) The usual Comintern line, and also the usual RILU line, was that communists should avoid setting up their own separate union at almost any cost. They should rather submit and wait for better days.

5 But the appeal of the RILU was not limited to orthodox communists and members of the traditional socialist trade unions alone – because:

The worldwide wave of popular revolt after the First World War was not just Bolshevik. It was also Syndicalist and Anarchist. The RILU was intended to appeal broadly to all revolutionary trade unionists. The head of the RILU, Alexander Lozovsky, speaking in 1922, directly and explicitly stated that the RILU was set up to attract non-communists: I quote: 'If it were merely a question of communist cells in the TUs the matter would be very simple, because communist forces in the union movement do not need a new international they already have the Comintern. So why the RILU? Because it unites the revolutionary trade union movement in all its many forms, in all its *diversity*.'

This diversity included groups like the United States-based IWW (Industrial workers of the world) or Wobblies which had many branches outside the United States as well, the CNT (National Confederation of Labour) in Spain, the CSRs (Revolutionary Syndicalist Committees) in France the NAS (National Labour Secretariat ) in the Netherlands the USI (Italian Union of Syndicalists) in Italy and the AAU (General Workers' Union) (left communist) and the FAUD (Free Workers' Union) (syndicalist) in Germany. None of these groups supported Bolshevik-type communism entirely. But they had much in common with the Bolsheviks: they aimed to overthrow capitalism, they did not think this could be done by parliamentary means, they believed in organising workers at the point of production to do this, they were internationalists, they believed in equality, they looked forward to a world without class divisions.

Where they differed was on the question of method: they opposed political parties, even a communist party, they opposed participation in conventional politics of any kind, they thought workers should be organised into one big union rather than on the basis of individual trades, and they thought the only route to victory was through a general strike. Many of them also shared the Anarchist hostility to the state as such they therefore opposed the idea of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat'.

But they greeted the October Revolution with enthusiasm, and they were attracted to the idea of an association between revolutionary trade unionists. The Spanish syndicalists of the CNT (National Confederation of Labour) proclaimed in 1918 that 'Bolshevism is the name but the idea is that of all revolutions. Bolshevism is the new life we are striving for'. Despite this sympathy, the Syndicalists did not want to join the Comintern, or to become subordinate to it. The American syndicalists, the IWW (Wobblies), were opposed to involvement in politics, hence they did not want to become part of the Comintern which they saw as a political organisation composed of political parties. But they found an international association of trade unionists acceptable. The same was true of other syndicalists..

So many syndicalist groups were represented at the first RILU Congress in 1921 that Lozovsky (the Bolshevik who was head of the RILU) decided to develop a method of voting to ensure the communists did not get outvoted by the syndicalists. He did this by grouping all representatives together in *national* delegations, with each nation's delegation having a quota of votes assigned to it.

The association between Syndicalism and Communism was temporary; and most syndicalist support was lost after the first few years. The only large scale syndicalist group to stay within the RILU was the French CGTU. Many individual syndicalists remained with the RILU – such as Nin from the CNT – but that was because as individuals they had moved over to communism. They did not stay syndicalist. You *could* say that the alliance between syndicalism and communism in the RILU was the result of a misunderstanding, because the syndicalists originally had illusions about the meaning of the October Revolution and nature of Bolshevism: but were they really illusions, or did they rather represent the attitudes of both parties at the time. Both syndicalists and communists believed in the necessity for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. This brought them together. They could cooperate on that basis. [There is one remarkable example of this from Germany where the German syndicalists in the Maritime Federation (*Schiffahrtsbund*) set up Port Bureaux in North Germany which took care of sailors when they went ashore and engaged in some conspiratorial activities as well including sabotage actions against the German navy.] The fact remained that in most countries (not all) the syndicalists were small minorities, dwarfed by the large social democratic trade unions, and Lozovsky and the RILU would have much preferred to bring these big unions into the RILU. Moreover, the Syndicalists were not unanimous in joining the RILU. They were opposed by other Syndicalist groups who were critical of Bolshevism and especially of the behaviour of Bolsheviks towards Anarchists and Syndicalists within Soviet Russia. These other Syndicalists set up their own rival international organisation, the IWMA, International Working Men's Association, in 1922.

6 What issues divided the RILU in the 1920s? At the first congress, in 1921, the big issues were the United Front and whether separate unions should be formed. [But before that there was an argument over mandates, in other words on how many voting delegates each organisation could have. This showed the uneasiness of the relationship between the two rival groups of syndicalists and communists; two cases were particularly difficult, the USA and Germany. In the USA there was conflict between the communists led by Earl Browder who were members of the official trade union, the AFL (American Federation of Labour), and the syndicalists of the IWW (Wobblies), represented by George Williams. The IWW, claiming 70,000 members, said it should have most of the seats – but they lost the argument as only supported by the Spanish delegation, dominated by the CNT. They received 3 seats. Similarly, in Germany there were no less than 5 syndicalist or semi-syndicalist organisations represented at the first congress. They claimed to have 300,000 members altogether, and they demanded 10 mandates – but they were only given 5 seats as they were supported only by Spain, Argentina and the Netherlands – the voting was thus on straight Syndicalist versus Communist lines – the rest of the seats went to the communists who were members of the official German trade union, the ADGB (General German Trade Union Confederation). This decision over mandates appeared to be a minor matter, but it prefigured the way decisions would go in the whole congress. The syndicalists at first rejected any connection between the RILU and the Comintern, because this would associate them directly with the communist parties – but they were not unanimous in this, and a section joined with the communists in supporting close links with the Comintern – mainly thanks to the decision of the delegates Maurin and Nin of the Spanish CNT – a very important syndicalist group - to abandon syndicalist principles in this case. ]

Concrete arguments on strategy took place mainly over the United Front question. The United Front contradicted the original conception of the RILU. The RILU was set up to organise internationally against Amsterdam, in other words against the official trade union movements of most advanced industrial nations. Ideally the aim was to get these trade unions to break with Amsterdam (without necessarily becoming communist) and join the RILU. But that usually did not happen. Instead communist, or RILU-inclined minorities grew up within each trade union, never in the majority, always in danger of being expelled, and constantly being accused of splitting the trade union movement. Sometimes they did split off – but this only happened for very short periods, in Germany in 1924 for instance – and the usual line of both the RILU and the Comintern was that communists should stay within social democratic trade unions and try to persuade them to join the RILU. There were two places where the RILU gained an outstanding success. One was France, where the syndicalists were strong enough to split from the CGT and form their own trade union centre, the CGTU: The other was Czechoslovakia. There the communist workers felt strong enough to form a separate trade union centre, the MVS,

which took away about one half of the membership of the Social Democratic trade union centre, the OSCz (Kevin McDermott's book examines this situation).

Most social democratic trade union centres were subject to severe discipline exerted from the top down. Troublesome communist individuals, and troublesome communist groups, were very likely to be expelled from the union. Even so, the RILU was insistent that they tried to stay within the reformist trade unions. Moreover, if they were expelled, the RILU called on them 'to struggle for readmission to the reformist unions.' This advice was a big source of dispute with both the Czechs and the French: in Czechoslovakia the communist-run MVS was repeatedly castigated by Lozovsky and the RILU for encouraging communists to leave reformist trade unions, and in France the communist-run CGTU did exactly the same thing, which led Lozovsky to attack it at the Fifth Comintern Congress in 1924.. In Germany the abandonment of existing trade unions was described by the Comintern in 1924 as 'equivalent to desertion from the revolution.' The establishment of separate communist trade unions, as advocated by William Schumacher in 1924, was absolutely out of the question for the Comintern and the RILU at this time. But that did not really solve the dilemma faced by communists who were expelled from reformist trade unions and not allowed back into them.

In some countries, such as Britain and the USA, the trade unions were less centralised. There the situation was different. There were some opportunities for communists to work within existing TUs. The Shop Stewards' Movement had done this in Britain during and after the First World War. Most of its representatives soon went over to communism, and joined both Comintern and the RILU. In 1921 the South Wales Miners' Federation voted to join the RILU, but a few days later the Miners' Federation of Great Britain voted against, What to do? The Welsh debated whether to join the RILU as a separate organisation, but they decided against it to avoid being expelled from the whole union, though they sent their own delegates to the next RILU congress (Tosstorff, p.317). The situation with the Welsh miners was not repeated in the rest of the country, where communists were far weaker in the trade union movement. In 1922 the British delegate to the 4th. Comintern Congress, John Clarke, stated that 'the CPGB enjoys practically no influence on the trade unions and not one single trade union has joined the RILU' though several hundred local trade union branches did support it. It was on this purely *local* basis that the National Minority Movement was formed in 1924. Its aims were stated by the later communist leader Harry Pollitt as 'to unite the workers in factory committees, and eventually secure workers' control of industry, not (he stressed) to encourage the formation of any new trade unions.'

After 1921, and even more so after 1925, the united front tactic was difficult for the RILU to handle, because it meant cooperating with its Amsterdam rival. Lozovsky tried to make it more acceptable by saying this: 'We are willing to create a united front, but only a front for revolutionary struggle, not for class collaboration.' [Carr, 3.1.p.529] Most advocates of the united front were hostile to the RILU, because it was an obstacle to



cooperation with Amsterdam. Hence when some parts of the KPD moved to the right after the failure of the March Action of 1921, voices were raised calling for the actual *abolition* of the RILU. Paul Levi, the former leader of the KPD, was strongly in favour of getting rid of the RILU, and his supporters inside and outside the party pressed for its abolition. 'Let it return to its maker in peace' said Levi.. 'We cannot see why this tactic of avoiding a split in the trade unions applies only to individual organisations and national trade union federations and is not also valid at an international level' said one KPD trade unionist. 'To split the TU's is absolutely out of the question' said the new KPD leader Reuter-Friesland. Friesland refused to print the RILU's manifestoes in 1922. The RILU survived this attack. Lozovsky's chief argument in favour of keeping the organisation, when he spoke to the 4th. Comintern Congress in 1922, was this: if the RILU just consisted of communists it wouldn't be needed, but the RILU actually unifies 'communists, syndicalists of every tendency, and all left-revolutionary workers'. So to liquidate the RILU would mean 'to narrow the basis of communist action'. (p.560) So the RILU continued to survive despite the continuing united front, and despite the fact that very few syndicalists were left within its ranks after 1922.

Relations with the Comintern were also a source of dispute – some people thought the RILU should simply act as the trade union section of the Comintern – KPD leader Ernst Meyer called for this in 1921 – but Lozovsky insisted that it should be independent, though with close links. How close should these links be? Lozovsky wanted an 'organic link' with the Comintern, but he had to compromise on this, as the French trade union centre, the CGTU, was hostile to the idea, because of its syndicalist roots, which went back to the Charter of Amiens in 1906, according to which the trade unions should never be associated with a political party. So the link between the RILU and the Comintern was informal. In practice it made no difference – there was a committee set up with 3 members of each organisation, plus a representative from the Communist Youth International, which functioned until 1925, but after that the Comintern's ECCI decided that any declaration by RILU would have to be examined by in advance before the RILU was allowed to say anything.

7 To what extent did the RILU play an independent part in events, and what were its main activities? It is clear that the Comintern was quite happy to issue instructions on trade union matters without consulting the RILU. The RILU just had to fall into line. As Zinoviev pointed out in 1921 at the Third Comintern Congress, rather grudgingly: 'The RILU must have a degree of independence. But the Communist International must absolutely retain political leadership.' [Even so, some details of separate activity can be given: The RILU organised international trade union campaigns, such as international days of struggle against unemployment in 1930 and 1931. More importantly, it also stepped outside Europe to agitate in the colonial and semi-colonial world. Its agitation was slightly different from the Comintern's in that it condemned the reactionary

nationalism of the colonial and semi-colonial indigenous bourgeoisie – forces like the Guomindang in China or the supporters of Gandhi in India – and stressed the importance of leading the worker and peasant masses against indigenous bourgeois forces. [p.589 of Tosstorff] whereas for the Comintern to form an anti-imperialist front in the struggle against Western imperialism was the most important task. It was not that the Comintern was unaware of the contradiction between the interests of the national bourgeoisie in colonial countries and the interests of the worker and peasant masses but it placed the accent slightly differently from the RILU.

Reiner Tosstorff discusses these worldwide activities of the RILU but only in footnotes one of which mentions contacts in India (p.739). He looks at China in more detail. In February 1927 a delegation was sent by RILU to give advice to the Chinese TUs and express solidarity with the revolution there. It included Tom Mann from Britain, Earl Browder from the USA Francois Doriot from France and a Soviet representative. Later the same year Lozovsky himself, the head of the RILU, spent some time in China and attended a Pan Pacific Conference in Wuhan, under the protection of the Left Guomindang, which was in control there. At this conference attended by representative of 8 countries the Pan-Pacific trade Union Secretariat was set up to support the Chinese Revolution and fight imperialism all over the Pacific Region. But soon afterwards the Left Guomindang broke with the Communists, and the repression destroyed the movement. There was also the League Against Imperialism, set up in 1927, which received support from the RILU. Latin America should also be mentioned –The RILU was also active in Latin America. The CROM, the main Mexican TU federation, sent delegates to Moscow to ask to join the RILU – but the CROM leadership wanted to keep a foot in both camps, just as the CGL did in Italy, and stay a member of the IFTU, which was not acceptable.] [One thing is clear: the RILU was faced with a tremendous variety of national situations, and the balance of forces varied from country to country – in Spain there was a very weak CP, and a solidly Social Democratic union the UGT, but also a very strong syndicalist movement under anarchist influence, the CNT. In Czechoslovakia there was a very strong CP, and a previously Social Democratic trade union movement which split, forcing a large minority group to establish a separate TU centre, under the name MVS, and join RILU on that basis. In France there was also a strong CP, but the trade unions were under syndicalist influence, so that when the movement split in 1921, the new union, affiliated to RILU, which was the CGTU, was composed of both communists and syndicalists – the syndicalists made up about one third of the total membership.]

8 What was the impact of wider Comintern and Bolshevik policies on RILU? As mentioned earlier, the very existence of the RILU was put in doubt at the height of the united front. It also faded into obscurity during the period of the mid-1920s when there were high hopes that the TUC in Britain would confront the government in the General



Strike and the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee was set up – involving direct cooperation between the Russian trade unions and the TUC which was a member of the Amsterdam centre, the IFTU – based on the illusion that there was a 'left wing' in the IFTU which could be relied on. The Bolsheviks were so keen to pursue this course that the head of the Russian TUs, Tomsy, refused to attend a conference of the Minority Movement in Britain, as originally planned, because he decided it would upset the TUC and thus make unity negotiations more difficult. The ending of this period of cooperation after the failure of the General Strike meant that the RILU was again in fashion.

The left turn of 1928 worked to its advantage. Stalin intervened directly in December 1928 to shift the RILU's line to the left. He said: 'A situation is conceivable in which it may be necessary to create parallel mass organisations of the working class, against the will of the trade union bosses who have sold themselves to the capitalists. We already have such a situation in America. It is quite possible that things are moving in the same direction in Germany as well.' This could be interpreted as an invitation to communists to set up separate unions, and in fact separate communist trade unions were set up in various countries – in the USA a National Miners' Union and a National Textile Workers' Union, and the TUEL (Trade Union Educational League) was converted into a revolutionary federation of unions, which was called the Trade Union Unity League – a move fiercely opposed by William Z. Foster the founder of the TUEL, who had intended its members should stay within the AFL – which was of course exactly the policy the RILU had insisted on during the previous seven years.

In Germany the situation was not quite so clear. The Revolutionary TU Opposition (RGO) was founded in 1929, but it aimed to organise dissentients *within* the ADGB – the reformist trade union centre - not outside it. Some communists wanted to go further. But in February 1930 they were called to order by an ECCI resolution which stressed 'work within the reformist unions'. The head of the Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition, Paul Merker, tried to resist this, but the only result was his removal from office for leftist deviation. A few red unions were set up at this time – Berlin Pipelayers and the Berlin Carpenters - after their members had struck in defiance of ADGB instructions, and been expelled, but they did not last long. In a situation of severe unemployment and with unions in retreat, there was no strong impulse to organise separately, and with the Nazi danger politics took precedence over everything else. [In the two countries where the RILU had mass trade union support – Czechoslovakia and France – the post-1928 shift to the left resulted in a split. In Cz. the MVS split in half, with the left group forming a separate Revolutionary TU Centre. In France the majority of the CGTU went along with the left 'Social Fascist' course, but a minority tried to continue working for trade union unity with the CGT. They were expelled for this, but didn't manage to form their own separate organisation.]

After 1933 the left line was abandoned everywhere. This decision worked against the RILU. It could hardly go against the Comintern though, and the move to the Popular

Front after 1934 was not opposed by the RILU. It now called for 'trade union unification'. Negotiations in France between the two rival unions, the CGT and CGTU, led to unification in 1936. In Spain the communist TUs dissolved themselves. Similar unifications took place all over the world. But this meant the RILU no longer had any reason for existence, as there were no longer any separate communist trade unions for it to administer. There were still communists within the trade unions, but under the Popular Front policy their aim was to combine with the Social Democrats in fighting Fascism. Dimitrov struck the final blow in a 1936 letter to Stalin: 'The RILU not only fails to contribute to international trade union unity but is even a hindrance to it. With the merger of trade unions in France and Spain it has also lost its independent trade union base in the capitalist countries.' Stalin no doubt agreed, and only a few months later, in 1937 the RILU was dissolved. Its head, Lozovsky, was given other work – as deputy foreign minister, and its foreign personnel were sent home – all except the Poles, who were arrested. Its archives were handed over to the Comintern.

9 Did the RILU achieve anything or play a significant part in history? Historians differ on this. E.H.Carr considered that it was the most powerful and independent of the subsidiary organisations of the Comintern. Geoff Swain wrote that it was 'never more than a footnote in the history of the labour movement'. Was this true? Reiner Tosstorff doesn't give an answer to this question [because he is largely concerned with how the RILU was organised, and what disputes there were within it]. He says little about what the RILU actually did. Tosstorff's implied conclusion is very negative. He says that the 'RILU's organisations' did not protect the economic interests of the workers or work to maintain trade union achievements.' Was this always true? Even if true, it could still be argued that the aim of RILU was not to protect workers' interests or defend trade union achievements but to overthrow capitalism. The RILU was also useful to communist trade unionists because it provided a unifying slogan 'Moscow or Amsterdam?' which gave them a clear objective. It should also be added that unlike its rival the IFTU, which had no interest in fighting imperialism, [because of its composition], the RILU was unconnected with colonial powers [unless you count Russia as a colonial power] and agitated against colonialism and semi-colonialism. The general line taken by the RILU for most of its history was to combine four aims –to promote workers' interests, to organise for the overthrow of capitalism, to fight against imperialism, and also, finally, to assist and defend the Soviet Union in any way possible..