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'Unite in International Solidarity!'

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2 ‘Unite in International Solidarity!’ The Call

3 of the International of Seamen and Harbour

4 Workers to ‘Colonial’ and ‘Negro’ Seamen

5 in the Early 1930s

6 *Holger Weiss*

7 This chapter outlines the rise and fall of communist agitation and prop-
8 aganda among colonial maritime workers during the interwar period.
9 The employment of colonial maritime workers of different ethnic back-
10 grounds on European and US vessels had gained momentum during
11 the second half of the nineteenth century. Especially during the era of
12 the steam ship, Asian, Arab, African and Caribbean seamen were hired
13 for unskilled work on board. During the first decades of the twentieth
14 century, their number counted already tens of thousands. The largest
15 group were the so-called Laskars or Indian seamen who made up about

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16 one-quarter of seamen working on board British vessels in 1937, while
17 the total number of colonial seamen was estimated to be nearly 235,000
18 in the 1930s.¹

19 Colonial maritime workers had not been a target group for national
20 and international trade union organisations. The organisation of sea-
21 men in trade unions had been a slow process, as union activity was
22 mainly land based while seamen worked on ships that seldom called at
23 their home ports. Also, seamen were long regarded as an unruly, indi-
24 vidualistic and internationalist group who had little interest in organised
25 union activities. A further challenge was with unemployed seamen living
26 ashore. Especially during the 1920s and 1930s, they constituted a prob-
27 lematic group for the labour unions: receptive to radical—that is, com-
28 munist—agitation and propaganda, they could turn into a ‘fifth column’
29 at union meetings and push for a politicisation of trade union activities.
30 Another handicap was that both Social Democratic and Communist
31 party and trade union leaders regarded the waterfront as a second-
32 ary field of work; in sheer numbers, the maritime workers constituted
33 but a small portion of the work force.² Also, as Peter Cole and David
34 Featherstone have underlined, apart from the radical international syn-
35 dicalism of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and their Marine
36 Transport Workers’ Industrial Union, the official maritime trade unions
37 in the United States, Britain and elsewhere were predominantly exclu-
38 sionary and segregationist.³

¹Jonathan Hyslop, “Steamship Empire: Asian, African and British Sailors in the Merchant Marine c. 1885–1945,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 44, no. 1 (2009): 49–67; Gopalan Balachandran, “Conflicts in the International Maritime Labour Market: British and Indian Seamen, Employers, and the State, 1830–1939,” *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 39, no. 1 (2002): 77.

²Ludwig Eiber, *Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in der Hansestadt Hamburg in den Jahren 1929 bis 1939. Werftarbeiter, Hafendarbeiter und Seeleute: Konformität, Opposition, Widerstand* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997); Dieter Nelles, *Widerstand und internationale Solidarität. Die Internationale Transportarbeiter-Föderation (ITF) im Widerstand gegen Nationalsozialismus* (Essen: Klartext-Verlag, 2001).

³Peter Cole, *Wobblies on the Waterfront: Interracial Unionism in Progressive-Era Philadelphia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); David Featherstone, *Resistance, Space and Political Identities: The Making of Counter-Global Networks* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); and Peter Cole, David Struthers, and Kenyon Zimmer (eds.), *Wobblies of the World: A Global History of the IWW* (London: Pluto Books, 2017).



39 Racial discrimination and white chauvinism gained momentum in
40 Britain when a post-war slump in British trade and shipping resulted in
41 racial tension and conflicts, leading to riots and attacks on Indian and
42 black (African and Caribbean) seamen in the UK.⁴ The British gov-
43 ernment responded to the 'race riots' of 1919 by introducing the
44 Coloured Alien Seamen's Order in 1920, aiming to regulate and restrict
45 the employment of foreign, especially Chinese, African and Caribbean,
46 seamen. Little help was received from the National Union of Seamen
47 (NUS), who instead backed discriminatory government policies, culmi-
48 nating in the amendment and expansion of the Coloured Alien Seamen's
49 Order in 1925 and the introduction of the PC5⁵ card in 1930 as a sys-
50 tem to register seamen looking for work.⁶

51 If the life of colonial seamen was marked by chauvinism, discrimina-
52 tion and racism in Britain and on board British ships during the 1920s
53 and early 1930s, the situation was not much better elsewhere. In the
54 United States, black maritime workers were discriminated against by Jim
55 Crow legislation in the US South and by white chauvinism and blatant
56 racism in the seamen's unions.⁷ Chinese and Japanese maritime work-
57 ers suffered in equal terms on the US Pacific.⁸ The only exception was
58 the IWW, which tried to enlist Asian and black seamen and strived for
59 interracial unionism. However, by the mid-1920s the IWW had lost
60 its momentum.⁹ In France, too, black and Asian seamen and harbour

⁴Neil Evans, "Across the Universe: Racial Violence and Post-War Crisis in Imperial Britain, 1919–25," *Immigrants and Minorities* 13, nos. 2–3 (1994): 58–88.

⁵Under the PC5 or Port Consultant system, any seamen who wanted to get a job needed an identification card signed by the Shipping Federation and the National Union of Seamen (NUS). See further Hyslop, "Steamship Empire."

⁶Laura Tabili, "The Construction of Racial Difference in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order, 1925," *Journal of British Studies* 33, no. 1 (1994): 54–98.

⁷Gerald Horne, *Red Seas: Ferdinand Smith and Radical Black Sailors in the United States and Jamaica* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005).

⁸Josephine Fowler, *Japanese and Chinese Immigrant Activists: Organizing in American and International Communist Movements, 1919–1933* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

⁹Ralph Darlington, *Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism: An International Comparative Analysis* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008).



61 workers were regarded as second-class, unskilled workers.¹⁰ A common
62 nominator among white maritime workers was the fear of losing their job
63 to colonial workers, thus the task of the national unions was to defend
64 the position of their members instead of propagating the unrealistic
65 gospel of international or even racial solidarity. Consequently, the Wall
66 Street Crash in 1929 and the global depression that followed in the early
67 1930s resulted in the hardening of discriminatory and chauvinist policies
68 of the national trade union leaders. Nevertheless, it was also the start of
69 communist trade union activists and leaders calling for radical interna-
70 tional solidarity and for unity among maritime workers regardless of race,
71 creed or colour.¹¹

72 Communist agitation among colonial maritime workers gained
73 momentum with the establishment of the International of Seamen
74 and Harbour Workers (ISH) in 1930. The ISH was envisioned by the
75 Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) as a counterforce to the
76 International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF). This was part of
77 the 'Class-Against-Class' doctrine, when Moscow branded Reformist/
78 Socialist/Social Democratic parties and unions 'Social Fascist'. The
79 key objective of the RILU and ISH was to establish a so-called revolu-
80 tionary trade union opposition, either as a communist-controlled unit
81 within a labour union or as an independent radical/communist-led
82 labour union. With the official turn to the so-called Popular Front tac-
83 tics at the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in 1935, the ver-
84 bal onslaughts against Reformist-led labour unions came to an end.¹²
85 However, for the ISH and other Comintern and RILU organisations
86 which had their headquarters in Germany, the Nazi takeover in 1933
87 and the change in Soviet foreign policy in 1934 marked the beginning
88 of a change in tactics. Not least, the former vehemently anti-colonial

¹⁰G rard Noiriel, *Immigration, antis mitisme et racism en France (XIX^e–XX^e si cle). Discours publics, humiliations privies* (Paris: Karthala, 2007).

¹¹Joachim C. H berlen, "Between Global Aspirations and Local Realities: The Global Dimensions of Interwar Communism," *Journal of Global History* 7, no. 3 (2012): 415–437.

¹²See further Rainer Tosstorff, *The Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) 1920–1937* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016).



89 and anti-imperialist agenda of the ISH was downplayed if not skipped
90 altogether.¹³

91 David Featherstone's study on the hidden histories and geographies of
92 maritime anti-colonial, anti-racist and anti-fascist agendas and activities
93 has highlighted the complexities of radical (communist) articulation of
94 class and race.¹⁴ Focusing on the British and Black Atlantic context, he
95 as well as Marika Sherwood, Hakim Adi and Christian Høgsbjerg have
96 unearthed the discrepancy between the political call of colour-free and
97 class-based radical maritime internationalism in public and in print by
98 the ISH and the racial attitudes and everyday racism that black, Indian
99 or Chinese seamen and harbour workers were confronted with in their
100 workspace and from communist trade union activists and party leaders.¹⁵
101 The objective of this chapter is to add a further dimension and to address
102 the articulations of radical international solidarity of the ISH and its pre-
103 decessor, the International Propaganda Committee of Transport Workers
104 (IPC-Transport), towards colonial maritime workers during the late
105 1920s and early 1930s.

¹³See further Holger Weiss, "The International of Seamen and Harbour Workers—A Radical Global Labour Union of the Waterfront or a Subversive World-Wide Web?" in *International Communism and Transnational Solidarity: Radical Networks, Mass Movements and Global Politics, 1919–1939*, ed. Holger Weiss (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017): 256–317; Holger Weiss, "Against Japanese and Italian Imperialism: The Anti-War Campaigns of Communist International Trade Union Organizations, 1931–1936," *Moving the Social: Journal of Social History and the History of Social Movements* 60 (2018): 121–146.

¹⁴David Featherstone, *Solidarity: Hidden Histories and Geographies of Internationalism* (London: Zed Books, 2012).

¹⁵Marika Sherwood, "The Comintern, the CPGB, Colonies and Black Britons," *Science & Society* 60, no. 2 (1996): 137–163; Hakim Adi, "The Comintern and Black Workers in Britain and France 1919–37," *Immigrants and Minorities* 28, nos. 2–3 (2010): 224–245; Christian Høgsbjerg, "Mariner, Renegade and Castaway: Chris Braithwaite, Seamen's Organiser, Socialist and Militant Pan-Africanist," *Race & Class* 53 (2011): 36–57; and David Featherstone, "Maritime Labour and Subaltern Geographies of Internationalism: Black Internationalist Seafarers' Organising in the Interwar Period," *Political Geography* 49 (2015): 7–16.



AGAINST COLONIALISM, DISCRIMINATION, RACISM AND WHITE CHAUVINISM

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107

108 Anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism and anti-racism were the catch-
109 words of the RILU and its auxiliary units, such as the IPC-Transport.
110 Nevertheless, communist agitation and propaganda work among black
111 and colonial maritime workers was slow to gain momentum. In com-
112 munist rhetoric, ‘coloured’ and colonial maritime workers referred to
113 black—that is, African American, African Caribbean and African—as
114 well as North African and Arabian, Indian, Vietnamese, Indonesian and
115 Chinese seamen and harbour workers.¹⁶

116 Established in 1922, the IPC-Transport was the RILU’s unit for
117 coordinating the activities of communist-led ‘revolutionary opposi-
118 tion’ groups within the national unions of land and maritime transport
119 workers, including those of the railway workers, lorry and tram drivers,
120 harbour workers, stokers and seamen. A critical assessment of its activi-
121 ties and outreach followed at the Fifth International Conference of
122 Transport Workers which convened in Moscow in April 1928. While the
123 revolutionary opposition groups in Europe had achieved some success,
124 the impact of the communists in land and maritime trade unions in the
125 Americas was meagre, at best. Almost nothing had been achieved in the
126 United States. A promising start had been lost in the Latin American
127 countries; the IPC-Transport had participated at an IWW-organised
128 international congress for maritime transport workers in Montevideo in
129 1926, but contacts with the various radical maritime transport unions
130 had thereafter been cut. While the Caribbean islands seemed promising,
131 the French and British colonial authorities as well as trade union func-
132 tionaries did their utmost to prevent communist agitation.¹⁷

133 News from Asia was equally disturbing. The Chinese Communist
134 Party, established in 1921, had faced a backlash when the Guomindang
135 leader Chiang Kai-shek cut his ties with the Communist Party, expelled

¹⁶John Callaghan, “Storm Over Asia: Comintern Colonial Policy in the Third Period,” in *In Search of Revolution: International Communist Parties in the Third Period*, ed. Matthew Worley (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004): 18–37.

¹⁷“Begrüßungsansprachen,” in Internationales Propaganda- und Aktionskomitee der revolutionären Transportarbeiter, *Die 5. Internationale Konferenz der Revolutionären Transportarbeiter Abgehalten in Moskau im April 1928* (Moskau: Internationales Propaganda- und Aktionskomitee der revolutionären Transportarbeiter, 1928): 11.



136 all Russian advisers, declared the Party illegal and launched an attack on
137 Chinese communists in 1927. Still, clandestine communist trade union
138 activity registered a major success when the various Chinese maritime
139 associations amalgamated into one union in January 1928. The pro-
140 gramme and status of the new Chinese maritime workers union, the
141 All-Chinese Seamen's Union, had been drafted by the IPC-Transport.
142 However, due to the onslaught of the Guomindang, communist activ-
143 ities within the new union in China were hampered by the illegality of
144 the Party. The Dutch colonial authorities, in turn, had smashed a com-
145 munist uprising in Indonesia in 1926. Here, too, communist activities
146 were declared illegal, but the transport workers had managed to organise
147 local strikes during the following years. Even less promising was the news
148 from India: according to the Indian delegate, there hardly existed any
149 revolutionary opposition among the maritime workers there.¹⁸

150 Another challenge was communication between the headquarters
151 of the IPC-Transport in Hamburg and Moscow and communist activ-
152 ists and units in East and South-East Asia. Delegates from China had
153 attended earlier conferences of the IPC-Transport, but they had been
154 arrested on their way home. Similarly, connections between Moscow and
155 Indonesia had been cut after 1926. The Chinese and Indonesian dele-
156 gates at the Moscow Conference therefore proposed that propaganda
157 material in Chinese, Indian and Malay languages was printed at the IPC-
158 headquarters in Hamburg and disseminated through colonial seamen to
159 ports in India, Indo-China, Indonesia and China. Their main call, how-
160 ever, was for the IPC-Transport and the revolutionary opposition groups
161 in the national maritime unions in Europe to start focusing on Chinese
162 and Asian seamen in European and American ports.¹⁹

163 The harshest critique on the pitfalls of work among colonial maritime
164 workers of the IPC-Transport came from French communist Auguste
165 Dumay. He accused the RILU of neglecting the colonial question in
166 the maritime industry and of downplaying the potential impact of colo-
167 nial maritime workers in both anti-colonial and anti-imperial activities.
168 In France, he noted, African and Caribbean seamen constituted the
169 majority of the colonial seamen, but most of them were organised in the

¹⁸“Tätigkeitsbericht des IPAK,” in Internationales Propaganda- und Aktionskommittee der revolutionären Transportarbeiter, *Die 5. Internationale Konferenz der Revolutionären Transportarbeiter Abgehalten*: 19, 33, 37, 43, 48.

¹⁹“Tätigkeitsbericht des IPAK”: 30–31.



170 Fédération Nationale des Laboueurs de la Mer, where the communists
171 had no influence whatsoever. Why where there no representatives from
172 Africa or the Caribbean at the conference, he attacked the organisers
173 by asking, and why where there no representatives of the Arab seamen?
174 Dumay was backed in his criticism by the British communist and trade
175 union activist George Hardy, who targeted the IPC-Transport and its
176 European sections to focus on work among colonial seamen in European
177 ports.²⁰

178 Dumay and Hardy's criticism resulted in a reorientation and reorgan-
179 isation of work among colonial seamen. The new objectives of the IPC-
180 Transport declared that the organisation of colonial seamen was to be
181 top priority. The task of the revolutionary trade union opposition groups
182 within the national maritime trade unions was to challenge the trade
183 union leaders and shipowners by demanding that union membership was
184 to be based on class, not race or nation. Maritime transport workers who
185 had emigrated to and resided in another country were to be allowed to
186 join a national union in accordance with the principles of equal rights
187 and equal standing.²¹

188 However, the IPC-Transport never formulated any directives or
189 instructions on work among colonial seamen at the 1928 Moscow
190 Conference. In part, this might have been due to the total redirection
191 of communist agitation which followed the Sixth World Congress of the
192 Comintern in July–August 1928. In late 1927, the Executive Committee
193 of the Comintern (ECCI) had initiated the 'left turn' calling for 'inten-
194 sified class struggle', warning about 'the treachery of social democ-
195 racy' and demanding a 'radicalisation of the working class'. According
196 to the new interpretation, bourgeois stabilisation was to give way to a
197 new wave of class struggle due to the believed imminent radicalisation
198 of the working class. Conditions for revolutionary work in the colo-
199 nies and 'semi-colonies', India and China, were discussed at the Sixth
200 World Congress of the Comintern in 1928. The discussions resulted in
201 a new strategy outlined in the *Theses on the Revolutionary Movement in*
202 *the Colonial and Semi-Colonial Countries*, better known as the 'Colonial
203 Theses'. The ultimate objective, the Colonial Theses declared, was
204 the unconditional and complete independence and sovereignty of all

²⁰“Tätigkeitsbericht des IPAK”: 39, 41.

²¹“Tätigkeitsbericht des IPAK”: 55–56.



205 colonial people. In contrast to the previous ‘united front’ policy of the
206 Comintern, the new strategy heavily criticised both European Social
207 Democrats and the colonial national bourgeoisie for betraying the
208 anti-colonial struggle and for seeking rapprochement with the imperialist
209 powers and capitalist governments. Instead, the Colonial Theses stressed
210 the unity between the socialist world revolution and the labouring
211 masses, the proletariat and the peasants, and the colonies. Consequently,
212 the Colonial Theses called for the creation and development of
213 Communist Parties as well as workers’ and peasants’ unions in the col-
214 onies and rejected all collaboration with nationalist movements. The
215 performance of the Communist Parties in the colonial metropolises was
216 again both criticised and highlighted: too little had been done; too many
217 hidden racial barriers existed. Instead, the colonial work of the metro-
218 politan parties was to be crucial: they were given the task to expand their
219 activities into the colonies, to support the formation of colonial centres
220 of trade union activities and to make a special effort to give a revolution-
221 ary character to the existing peasant movements.²²

222 The ‘ultraleft turn’ of the Comintern and its ‘class-against-class’
223 doctrine also affected the RILU and its affiliates. The IPC-Transport
224 was renamed the International Propaganda and Action Committee for
225 Transport Workers (IPAC-Transport) in April 1928. In October 1930,
226 work among maritime transport workers was separated from the IPAC-
227 Transport with the establishment of the ISH. Although the ISH had
228 been established as an umbrella organisation for revolutionary mari-
229 time trade unions, the need to reach out and enlist colonial seamen in
230 its national sections was identified to be one of its most important tasks.
231 Ultimately, the target was to urge the national sections of the ISH to
232 create colonial units and to adhere to strict colour-blindness. Therefore,
233 one of the first task of the ISH Secretariat was to draft the guidelines for
234 work among colonial seamen, termed Resolution on the Colonial Work
235 of the Sections of the ISH in the Capitalist Counties (hereafter ISH
236 Colonial Resolution), to which all national sections had to commit them-
237 selves and which was to be published and disseminated among colonial
238 seamen.²³

²²See further Fredrik Petersson, “Imperialism and the Communist International,” *Journal of Labor and Society* 20, no. 1 (2017): 23–42.

²³Bericht über die Exekutiv-Sitzung der internationalen Seeleute und Hafentarbeiter, 3.10.1930, 534/5/219, RGASPI.



239 According to the ISH Colonial Resolution, the capitalist class was
240 splitting the workers' ranks globally and nationally and preventing
241 national and international solidarity. It further attacked the trade union
242 bureaucracy for assisting the shipping industry and its owners in the
243 exploitation of the colonial masses and in preparing war against the rev-
244 olutionary working class and the Soviet Union. The national sections of
245 the ISH, therefore, were ordered to reject all forms of race prejudice and
246 white chauvinism and to counteract the splitting tactics of the shipown-
247 ers and trade union officials.²⁴

248 The main target of the verbal onslaught was the ITF, which was
249 accused of splitting the ranks of the maritime workers throughout the
250 world and blocking the fight for colonial independence. Therefore, the
251 ISH Colonial Resolution called for the enrolment of colonial seamen in
252 the national maritime unions. Most important, however, was the need to
253 establish local branches of African, Indian, Chinese and other national
254 seamen's unions in European posts and link them to the national sea-
255 men's unions. In praxis, these local extraterritorial colonial/semi-colonial
256 branches were to be attached to the national headquarters in a country
257 where such unions existed, notably the UK, France, the Netherlands,
258 Belgium and the United States.²⁵

259 The ISH Colonial Resolution was a binding document and was
260 intended to serve as guidelines for agitation and propaganda work
261 among colonial seamen by the ISH Secretariat and its national sections.
262 However, it took over a year before the resolution was finally adopted at
263 the World Congress of Maritime Transport Workers in May 1932.²⁶

²⁴Resolution on the Colonial Work of the Sections of the I.S.H. in the Capitalist Counties (hereafter: ISH Colonial Resolution), 495/25/1334, 1-2, RGASPI.

²⁵ISH Colonial Resolution, 2-4.

²⁶Adolf [Shelley] to 'Werte Genossen', Hamburg, 24.11.1931, 534/5/223, 86, RGASPI. For a full text, see Resolution on the situation and struggles of the seamen and harbor workers in the colonial and semi-colonial countries and the tasks of the sections of the ISH, in: [ISH], *The World Unity Congress of the International Water Transport Workers and Its Decisions* (Hamburg: International of Seamen and Harbour Workers, 1932): 16-19.



WORK AMONG COLONIAL MARITIME WORKERS: PROMISES AND PITFALLS

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266 The core unit for work among colonial maritime workers was the
267 International Seamen's Club or Interclub. Originally established in the
268 1920s by the IPC-Transport, these were reorganised in 1931 and were
269 subordinated to the ISH Secretariat in Hamburg. Only a few of them
270 existed outside the Soviet Union before 1930, namely in Hamburg,
271 Copenhagen, Bordeaux, Marseilles, Rotterdam and New York. The
272 ISH pushed their expansion eagerly and by 1931 more than 20 new
273 Interclubs had been established throughout the world.²⁷

274 Among the best organised was the Hamburg Interclub, located at the
275 same premises as the ISH headquarters at 8 Rothesoodstrasse. Initially,
276 work among colonial seamen in Hamburg was mainly directed towards
277 Chinese crew members and was carried out by Liao Chenghzi, who
278 worked as a special functionary at the Interclub. His main task was to
279 produce communist leaflets in Chinese and to develop an underground
280 communication network between China and various European ports.²⁸
281 He was rather successful in 1930 and ISH Secretary Albert Walter
282 boasted in his communication to Moscow that numerous new cells had
283 been established and direct communications had been secured with
284 China.²⁹ However, the impact was superficial and fragile and the com-
285 munist impact on Chinese seamen remained limited; the majority stuck
286 to a mixture of nationalist and anti-colonial sentiments.³⁰

287 Work among other colonial seamen in Hamburg was weak if it was
288 conducted at all. In part, this was due to the low number of colonial sea-
289 men visiting the Interclub, but the main problem was the lack of foreign

²⁷See further Weiss, "The International of Seamen and Harbour Workers": 267–268, 293.

²⁸Annual Report of the Hamburg Interclub for 1930, 534/5/216, 77–81, RGASPI. On Liao Chenghzi, see Gregor Benton, *Chinese Migrants and Internationalism: Forgotten Histories 1917–1945* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007): 55.

²⁹Bericht über die Arbeit unter den chinesischnen Seeleuten, 1–31.3.1930 & 3–28.4.1930, 534/5/216, 36–37, RGASPI.

³⁰Lars Amenda, "Between Southern China and the North Sea: Maritime Labour and Chinese Migration in Continental Europe, 1890–1950," in *Asian Migrants in Europe: Transcultural Connections*, eds. Sylvia Hahn and Stan Nadel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014): 69.



290 functionaries.³¹ In January 1931, however, Liao started to cooperate
291 with the African American trade union functionary James W. Ford and
292 they established the colonial section at the Interclub.³² Ford's main duty
293 was to run the office of the International Trade Union Committee of
294 Negro Workers (ITUCNW), established in 1930 as a unit of the RILU
295 for agitation and propaganda work among black toilers in the Atlantic
296 world. His task was to cooperate with Albert Walter, the ISH and the
297 Interclub and he was immediately assigned by Walter to work among
298 African and Caribbean seamen. Ford was rather successful and half a year
299 later he had already been able to establish cells on more than a dozen
300 ships. However, Ford was critical of the workload; instead of concentrat-
301 ing on his work as ITUCNW Secretary, his main job was to assist the
302 Interclub in its agitation and propaganda work.³³

303 Work among colonial seamen continued in Hamburg in 1932, but
304 remained problematic. George Padmore had replaced Ford as Secretary
305 of the ITUCNW and was lukewarm in cooperating with the ISH and
306 the Interclub. Instead, he directed his energy towards strengthening his
307 own network throughout the Atlantic world. While the ISH Secretariat
308 acknowledged the fact that Padmore's main interest was in the radicali-
309 sation of all workers throughout the black Atlantic, they underlined that
310 work among black seamen was to be directed by the national sections of
311 the ISH and not the ITUCNW. Not surprisingly, frictions rather than
312 cooperation soon dominated the relationship between Padmore and the
313 ISH Secretariat.³⁴ Work among Chinese seamen, in contrast, continued

³¹Monthly Report of the Hamburg Interclub for June 1930, 534/5/216, 38–39, RGASPI. According to Aitken and Rosenhaft, an unspecified number of Africans were living in Hamburg during the 1920s, notably in the working-class districts of St Pauli and Neustadt, and were working in the harbour. However, it is unclear to what extent they visited the Interclub. Robbie Aitken and Eve Rosenhaft, *Black Germany: The Making and Unmaking of a Diaspora Community, 1884–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 122.

³²Plan of Work Outlined for the Seamen's International Amongst Colonial Workers. Immediate tasks, no date, filed 28.2.1931, 534/5/220, 77–80, RGASPI; Duties and Task of Secretariat members, 17.3.1931, 534/5/220, 12–19, RGASPI.

³³On the ITUCNW, see further Holger Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic: African American Agency, West African Intellectuals and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014): 341–345, 350–354.

³⁴Walter/Stein/Adolf, Vorschläge zur Stärkung der organisatorischen Arbeit der ISH, Hamburg, 3.3.1932, 534/5/230, 52–55, RGASPI.



314 to pay off, and Liao and other Chinese functionaries were able to estab-
315 lish local branches in Hamburg, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Antwerp,
316 London, and in the United States and the Dutch West Indies.³⁵ Still, all
317 activities came to a standstill in Hamburg with the Nazi takeover and the
318 closure of all communist activities in February/March 1933.

319 Conditions for agitation and propaganda work in UK ports were even
320 more problematic. The attitude of Communist Party and labour union
321 leaders in the UK, especially the functionaries of the Seamen's Minority
322 Movement (SMM), the British section of the ISH, was characterised by
323 a chauvinist if not racial attitude towards colonial seamen. In early 1931,
324 the SMM listed some 3000 members and the Indian Seamen's Union in
325 London was regarded as a 'sympathizing' section of the ISH.³⁶ The ISH
326 Secretariat instructed the SMM that work among colonial seamen was to
327 be top priority. However, nothing came of it. Part of the critique against
328 the SMM was its lukewarm interest in mobilising black, Arab and Asian
329 seamen.³⁷ In addition, Hardy rejected the ISH demand for equal pay for
330 equal work, arguing that it was an unrealistic claim.³⁸ The problems in
331 the UK were finally scrutinised at the World Congress of the ISH in May
332 1932, resulting in a harsh critique of the neglect of work among colonial
333 seamen. However, the ISH's ambitions in the UK proved unrealistic: by
334 the end of 1932 the SMM was more or less dormant and work among
335 colonial seamen had come to a standstill.³⁹

336 The situation was not much better in other parts of the world.
337 Communist activities among colonial seamen had gained momen-
338 tum after the establishment of the ISH. At the ISH World Congress
339 in 1932, work in France, the Netherlands and the USA looked prom-
340 ising. However, the Nazi crackdown on communist organisations and

³⁵Albert Walter, Kurzer Bericht des chinesischen Mitarbeiters im Interklub Hamburg, 12.11.1932, 534/5/231, 72, RGASPI.

³⁶Materials on the Work of the International Committees, no date [ca 1931], 534/2/92, 86–87, RGASPI.

³⁷See further Sherwood, "The Comintern"; Adi, "The Comintern and Black Workers"; Høgsbjerg, "Mariner, Renegade & Castaway"; and David Featherstone, "Harry O'Connell, Maritime Labour and the Racialised Politics of Place," *Race & Class* 57, no. 3 (2016): 71–87.

³⁸George Hardy, *Those Stormy Years: Memoirs of the Fight for Freedom on Five Continents* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1956): 217.

³⁹Featherstone, "Maritime Labour": 11–13; Høgsbjerg, "Mariner, Renegade & Castaway": 36.



341 institutions in Germany during spring 1933 resulted in a shift in inter-
342 national anti-fascist and anti-imperialist agitation and propaganda by
343 the ISH. International campaigns were launched against the Nazi flag
344 in 1933 and against the attack on Soviet China in 1934, culminating in
345 the ‘Hands of Abyssinia’ campaign in 1935. Back in Moscow, the RILU
346 ordered the ISH to halt its attacks on the ITF as early as 1934. Anti-
347 colonial propaganda and agitation among colonial seamen was halted.
348 The turn to the popular front doctrine of the Comintern in August 1935
349 sealed the fate of the ISH as well ending as its calls to colonial seamen.
350 In 1937, the ISH was liquidated. Work among colonial seamen was
351 transferred to the communist sections within the various national labour
352 unions—if they were capable of or interested in doing it.⁴⁰

353

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

354 The ISH was a typical ‘globalisation project’ of the RILU. Established
355 in 1930 as an umbrella organisation for radical maritime labour unions,
356 its main objective was to direct and coordinate the activities of the com-
357 munist-led revolutionary trade union opposition. Only in a few countries
358 where Communist Party and trade union activities were legal did the
359 revolutionary opposition exist as independent unions, among others in
360 Germany, France and the United States. In other countries, such as the
361 UK and the Scandinavian countries, the revolutionary trade union oppo-
362 sition operated within the existing maritime trade unions.

363 The main rationale of the ISH as well as its national sections—that
364 is, the revolutionary trade union opposition—was their radical position
365 towards capitalist shipowners, trade union leaders and, ultimately, the
366 International Federation of Transport Workers. The ISH as well as the
367 revolutionary trade union opposition adhered to the ‘Class-Against-
368 Class’ thesis of the Comintern, both branded Reformism; that is, work-
369 ing for reforms through parliamentary democracy in areas such as the
370 betrayal of the working class. However, in contrast to genuine syndical-
371 ist traditions of self-activity, self-organisation and self-emancipation from
372 below, the communist position of ‘unity from below’ stressed the leading
373 role of the Party.

⁴⁰Weiss, “Against Japanese and Italian Imperialism”.



374 In principle, the rhetoric of the communists emphasised class and the
375 unity of the working class. White and non-white workers were to have
376 the same rights and receive the same treatment: equal pay for equal
377 work. However, such a position was highly contested in the national
378 maritime unions throughout the world in the 1920s and 1930s. The
379 global condition was marked by the rationalisation of the shipping indus-
380 try, which tried to counteract the depressions in oversea export trade
381 by cutting wages and reducing crew members. Maritime trade unions
382 became white seamen-only bastions in all major seafaring nations. The
383 rationale of the national maritime unions was the promotion of the wel-
384 fare and defence of the salaries of their members. Non-members were
385 branded competitors in a shrinking labour market and potential strike
386 breakers were negatively seen as blacklegs or scabs.

387 The communist call for international solidarity and equal pay for equal
388 work was directed towards both white and non-white seamen. During
389 the interwar period, when the Reformist maritime trade union leaders
390 and the socialist/social democratic parties paid lip service to anti-co-
391 lonialism, anti-imperialism, anti-racism and anti-chauvinism, if at all,
392 the communists presented both a political vision and a plan for action.
393 International solidarity was unconditionally colour-free: all were equal
394 regardless of their colour, race, creed, age or gender. Organised and
395 unorganised, employed and unemployed seamen and harbour workers
396 were to unite under the banner of the revolutionary trade union opposi-
397 tion in their common cause against the exploitation of shipping capital-
398 ists and reformist labour union leaders.

399 The realisation of international solidarity in praxis was much harder,
400 if not impossible, to achieve. One unresolved question was the status of
401 colonial crew members: could they become members of national unions?
402 National unions usually applied a strict colour bar: French or British
403 colonial subjects were not allowed membership. The communists tried,
404 in vain, to contest the blocking of colonial subjects in the national unions
405 and appealed to them to join the revolutionary trade union opposition
406 groups or minority movements within the unions. Even more compli-
407 cated was the situation of Indian and Chinese seamen. Branches of their
408 national unions existed in several European ports, but should these
409 branches be affiliated with the revolutionary trade union opposition in
410 the UK, France or Germany? Time and again, the ISH leadership had
411 to remind their national sections about the importance of mobilising the
412 colonial seamen, as well as urging the functionaries of the international



413 seamen's clubs to put a special focus on work among colonial seamen.
 414 What remains an open question is the reaction of the colonial seamen
 415 to the communist call for international solidarity. Many of them were
 416 certainly susceptible to the radical demands, but they were disappointed
 417 when it turned out that even the communists were caught in the mael-
 418 strom of Realpolitik in the 1930s.

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