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Background

Hamburg, early July 1930. A group of Africans, African Caribbeans and African Americans are meeting behind closed doors. They have all responded to a call by the Provisional Board of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW) to participate in a conference. The outcome of the meeting was the formal establishment of the ITUCNW. For the next three years, the organization was to manifest itself as a radical trade union for ‘Negro workers’ throughout the world. British and French Colonial governments labelled the organization as yet another mouthpiece of Moscow and the Comintern, banned its activities and the distribution of its journal, The Negro Worker, in their colonies. Later research has mainly identified it as the key platform for George Padmore during his pre-Pan-African, i.e., communist, activities. By 1933, however, with the Nazi takeover in Germany and Padmore’s quarrel and subsequent rift with the communists in 1934, the ITUCNW lost its momentum and was quietly disbanded in 1937. Among the few traces it left were copies of its journal, which were shelved in the archives and libraries.

The existence and ‘grand narrative’ of the ITUCNW is known to researchers. The organization was part of the transnational apparatus of the Communist International or Comintern. Being a trade union, the ITUCNW was a sub-section of the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU or Profintern), the trade union-wing of the Comintern. The aim of the ITUCNW was to serve as a global or transnational platform to activate and coordinate agitation and propaganda among ‘Negro workers’ throughout the world. In effect, its focus was to establish links to and support African, African Caribbean and African American radical trade union activists. The crucial difference between the ITUCNW and other Pan-African organizations was in the former’s focus on the class aspect: the global struggle of the ‘Negro toilers’ was fundamentally a class, not a race issue.¹

Nevertheless, in view of the ‘success story’ of political Pan-Africanism, the ITUCNW was a mere episode, even a cul-de-sac. Critical observers and academic researchers, such as Roger E. Kanet and Edward T. Wilson, though sympathetic to its aspirations, are negative in their overall assessment of the impact of the ITUCNW. British colonial intelligence were right in their assumption that the organization was orchestrated from Moscow, the Comintern and its trade union wing, the Profintern or RILU (Red International Labour Union), to support anti-colonial anti-imperial agitation and activities. Perhaps as early as C.L.R. James World Revolution 1917-1936 (1937), and definitively with George Padmore’s influential Pan-Africanism or Communism (1956), the challenge posed by communism and the Comintern to the colonial and imperial system were given a critical, if not negative presentation. Whereas James presentation was written from an opportunist or Trotskyist perspective, blaming Stalin and the bolshevization of the communist movement for the betrayal of a world revolution, a critical evaluation of Padmore’s position is more problematic. By the time of writing his book, Padmore had for long emerged as one of the key apologists of political Pan-Africanism. However, between 1928 and 1933, i.e., the zenith of the ITUCNW and its predecessor, the Provisional ITUCNW, he himself was one of the most outspoken critics of the race issue and belonged to the defenders of the ‘class before race’ paradigm. Only with his break with Moscow in late 1933 did he change his position.2

The negative image of the ITUCNW and its short, but hectic, life is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, the few first-hand assessments, such as Padmore’s, were conducted a posteriori during the age of the Cold War and the heydays of African nationalism. From the perspective of the 1950s and 1960s, the ‘road to independence’ of the African states started with movements that had a Pan-African vision, i.e., race, not class was in the end to be the fundament for African political mobilization. Organizations, such as the ITUCNW, which articulated a communist or Marxist ideology challenging the race concept, were labelled as ‘racist’. Later research on the colonial activities of the British and French Communist Parties, even the Comintern itself, during the 1920s and 1930s confirmed this critique.3


Secondly, and tied to my first observation, the negative assessment of the ITUCNW is due to its global character. Being an organization – and network – with a global outreach, attempting to establish a radical platform for ‘Negro workers’ in Africa, in the Caribbean, the USA and Europe, its agenda was difficult to combine with that of especially African nationalists and the political history of African independence movements. In the USA, the ‘Black Belt thesis’, the brainchild of radical Afro-American communists that argued in favour of ‘Black self-determination’ and called for the establishment of a ‘Black State’ in the USA, was accepted by the Comintern in 1928 as the official line. Nevertheless, apart from being adopted by a few radical elements in the USA, the major bulk of the African American population turned its back to such ideas. Even the backing of the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA) was lukewarm at its best. In fact, the ‘Black Belt thesis’ was never unanimously backed even among the African American communists themselves. Not surprisingly, the thesis, too, was quietly scrapped and was thereafter mainly found in academic presentations. A similar situation persists in Caribbean political history writing: it is national, ‘Pan-Caribbean’ or Pan-African, depending on the perspective of the writer.

Thus, seen from the above outline, it could be argued that there is room for a re-evaluation of the ITUCNW, especially if the organization and its network are analyzed from a ‘forward reading’ perspective. Hitherto, most evaluations and analyses of the ITUCNW have taken a ‘backward reading’ perspective, i.e., being an explanation of the ‘failure’ of the organization. However, such a teleological position is problematic as there are few, if any, outright signs of a ‘failure’ before the Nazi takeover in Germany in early spring 1933.

Even more suspicious is the weak source basis on which most of the evaluations of the ITUCNW are based – previous to 1991, none of the studies have been able to make use of documents archived in the Comintern Archives in Moscow. Further confusion is added through the use of Hooker’s biography about George Padmore and C.L.R. James’ statements about Padmore’s activities during the early 1930s. One intriguing question, which has puzzled several researchers, concerns Padmore’s activities and whereabouts during these years: when was he in Moscow, when in West Africa and when did he run the secretariat in Hamburg? Even more challenging has been the reconstruction of I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson’s connections to Padmore. A common claim has been that this West African radical participated at the Hamburg Conference. However, as I have claimed

4 The most passionate defender of the thesis was Harry Haywood, see Harry Haywood, Black Bolshevik. Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist, Chicago: Liberator Press 1978.
in a recent investigation, he did not. A further challenge is posed by the subjective position Padmore is claimed to have had in running and operating the ITUCNW, resulting in downplaying the activities of two other central actors, Otto Huiswoud and James W. Ford.

**Research objectives and hypotheses**

Until the opening in 1991 of the Comintern archives in Moscow, any reconstruction of the ITUCNW network rested mainly on published sources and external evaluations, such as colonial intelligence reports and investigations. Some researchers, among others Adolf Rüger and Ruth Deutschland, even assumed that much, if not all, of the existing correspondence had been lost after 1933. The first blow, it is assumed, was the police raid and closure of the Hamburg secretariat of the ITUCNW in early March 1933. The second is claimed to have occurred during the 1944 Allied bombings of Hamburg: it is assumed that all the confiscated material was destroyed. However, a large part of the correspondence of the ITUCNW is available in the Comintern Archives in Moscow as several researchers have noted. Due to lack of archival sources, research on the ITUCNW has hitherto limited itself to the formation of the organization. Many of the threads that led to establishment of the ITUCNW are known, but the overall picture is still vague. This is mainly due to the fact that none of the studies have focussed on the organization, its activists and their global network itself. Reference to the ITUCNW is given in works that deal with the history of the RILU (Red International Labour Union or Profintern), Afro-American radicalism, Caribbean political history or African political history, but each presentation misses the global network and outreach of the organization and its activists. This is, one could claim, in part due to the nature of the organization and its world wide web. On the one hand, the ITUCNW was part of the Comintern/RILU network, on the other hand, it emerged as a network of articulated radical international (‘Black’) solidarity. Both perspectives have been known, but the lack of original sources, such as correspondence between the secretariat in Hamburg and Moscow as well as the correspondence between Hamburg and activists in the USA, the UK, France, the Caribbean and Africa, has made any deeper investigations futile.

Therefore, the research objectives are as follows:

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9 Rüger 1967; Deutschland 1980, 710 fn 4.
1. To what extent were the ‘Black radicals’ (African Americans, African Caribbeans and Africans) able to establish a ‘radical African Atlantic’, i.e., a global network, during the early 1930s?

2. Was the ITUCNW ever projected to emerge as a ‘Black International’ and to become the spearhead of Black radicalism and radical political Panafricanism in the African Atlantic?

3. How close were the ‘Black radicals’ in challenging British and French colonialism?

4. Were the ‘Black radicals’ individual actors pursuing their own political agenda (as claimed by previous researchers) or were they part of a larger Comintern/RILU-network, i.e., acting as mouthpieces for and implementing strategies in the headquarters in Moscow? Here, my own research has been able to expand and correct the previous positions, viz. that the ITUCNW and especially its Hamburg Committee have to be analyzed as part of a Comintern-network that at least comprises the Hamburg-based International of Seamen and Harbour Labourers (ISH), the Berlin-based League Against Imperialism (LAI) and the Moscow/Berlin-based International Red Aid (Internationale Rote Hilfe, IRH).

5. Most crucially: What happened after 1933? All existing accounts on the ITUCNW stop at 1933 and few have noted the existence of the organization after the Nazi takeover. However, research in the Comintern Archives indicates that the organization tried to reactivate its Atlantic network. What was the outcome of these attempts? To what extent did the ITUCNW make an attempt to emerge as a radical front during the Italian aggression against Abyssinia, and if so, why did it fail?