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African Labour's Cold War: The Conflict Over Trade Union Independence in Ghana, 1950s–1966*

Abstract

This article examines the conflict over "free" trade unionism within the Ghana Trades Union Congress (GTUC) during the 1950s and early 1960s. It demonstrates how labour leaders sought to anchor economic rights in ambitious development planning and extend their influence across the continent in the wake of decolonization. In contrast to colonial-era concepts of free trade unions as apolitical associations, anti-colonial and postcolonial leaders recognized the transformative political potential of labour organizing. On the basis of GTUC publications and the correspondence of its leadership with the International Conference of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in Brussels, this article shows how Ghanaian labour leaders attempted to leave behind colonial-era dependencies while subordinating Cold War rivalries to what they perceived as the special, historically unique situation of newly decolonized countries. Ghanaian leaders eschewed existing models for international trade unionism, leading to a brief period of disaffiliation from the Western-oriented ICFTU as they attempted to chart their own path by mobilizing labour across the African continent. Ultimately, these attempts failed, and the forceful bid for a pan-African labour alliance under the Nkrumah government alienated many other African nations as leadership experienced increasing protest at home.

Keywords: *trade unions, labour, Ghana, Gold Coast, Cold War, Africa, Ghana Trades Union Congress (GTUC)*

In 1963, a young Ghanaian woman by the name of Sally Johnson returned to Accra after a trip to Berlin with a delegation from the Ghanaian Trades Union Congress (GTUC) and addressed a letter to the West German Ambassador to Ghana. It was in the nature of such organized trips to facilitate meetings with local counterparts and

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to shepherd visitors around to sites of general interest. On the occasion of Johnson's visit, her West German hosts did not miss the opportunity to highlight the oppression in the East and the trauma of German division by arranging a visit to the Berlin Wall. In her letter, Johnson expressed great concern over a report circulated by the West German Europress Information Service that had been picked up by several newspapers. According to the report, upon seeing the "unfree" Eastern sector of the city, her eyes had welled up with tears. Johnson, however, recalled things very differently. She repudiated this version of the events, writing, "it is unfortunate that my visit to Berlin during the course of the seminar should be linked up with someone else's opinion about the conditions in the Eastern sector […] I hate to be used as a pawn in the Cold War."[1] She roundly rejected her instrumentalization, denounced the spurious report as "embarrassing" to the West German cause, and further warned that the incident had profoundly affected her political outlook. Beyond her personal objections, the report represented an affront to the policy of her country, which maintained a position of neutrality and non-alignment.

Sally Johnson's incensed response to the portrayal of her visit was emblematic of the way that the GTUC struggled to forge its own separate path as the fronts of the Cold War hardened during the late 1950s and 60s. Johnson worked at the GTUC centre in Accra, and, like many trade unionists, she had become deeply invested in Ghanaian politics through the anticolonial struggle that culminated in Ghanaian independence in 1957. Her close friend, Kofi Batsa, was the editor-in-chief of a prominent pan-African magazine, *Spark*, and close counsel to Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah.[2] Drawing on Batsa's contacts, Johnson's note made its way into the news bulletin of the GTUC, and also to the head of the East German *Allgemeine Deutsche Nachrichten* (ADN) Bureau in Accra. The ADN bureau chief sent the report along to the ADN directorate in Berlin, explaining that he wished to bring it to the attention of the public. The circulation of Ms. Johnson's repudiation of Europress's emotional—and apparently embellished—retelling of her visit, which made its way from Johnson's desk to the West German embassy, the GTUC, *Spark*, and eventually the East German ADN, highlights the forces of the global Cold War that played out in Ghana in the first decade after Ghanaian independence in 1957. It shows that, despite sustained efforts to co-opt African labour organizations, enrol them in international federations, and instrumentalize them in the conflict between East and West, Ghana's labour leaders persistently leveraged their own visions for the future of labour on a non-aligned continent to advance their interests.

1 BArch DC 900 3832, Sally Johnson, TUC to Secretary, Press and Cultural Affairs, Embassy of the FRG, Accra. June 20, 1963.

2 Kofi Batsa, *The Spark: From Kwame Nkrumah to Limann* (London: Rex Collins, 1985).

Pursuing non-alignment required frequent deliberations and negotiations regarding how, and when, to best engage with bilateral partners and international networks. While international assistance could confer material advantages in the form of financial or technical assistance, it could also constrain possibilities for action and rankle official foreign policy, as Johnson's story shows. In particular, the relationship of Ghana's trade unions to the large postwar international trade union federations, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), demonstrates how Ghanaians labour leaders attempted to carve out their politics of non-alignment after independence. These federations served as important reservoirs of expertise and funding that helped to modernize the Ghanaian labour force. The rivalry between the two federations, which pitted the "free" trade union federations of Western, capitalist countries against the socialist "Second World," provided the backdrop to Ghanaian manoeuvring. As Carolien Stolte, Gerard McCann, and others have highlighted, focusing on Afro-Asian engagement with trade union internationalism during 1950s allows us to recover a sense of multidirectional exchange among decolonizing countries during the early years of the Cold War.[3] Trade unions played an important role not just in organizing labour, but also in forging links between actors involved in national, regional, and increasingly global union representation in the struggle against neo-imperialism and economic dependency.[4]

Anticolonial leaders sought more than national sovereignty. As Adom Getachew has argued, they also pursued a universalist project in the name of forging a more equitable international community.[5] The GTUC took on a leading role in articulating these objectives, as it sought to forge new geographies of solidarity beyond the borders of the nation-state. Between independence in 1957 and the coup that toppled Kwame Nkrumah in 1966, Accra became a hub for postcolonial self-assertion and a hotbed of pan-African trade union activity.[6] Ghanaian trade unions increasingly espoused a continental orientation and sought out partnerships across Africa in defiance of East-

3 Carolien Stolte, "Introduction: Trade Union Networks and the Politics of Expertise in an Age of Afro-Asian Solidarity," *Journal of Social History* 53 (2019): 331–347, here 331; Gerard McCann, "Possibility and Peril: Trade Unionism, African Cold War, and the Global Strands of Kenyan Decolonization," *Journal of Social History* 53 (2019): 348–377.

4 See Gareth Curless, "Introduction: Trade Unions in the Global South from Imperialism to the Present Day," *Labor History* 57, no. 1 (2016): 1–19.

5 Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 1–14.

6 Matteo Grilli, *Nkrumaism and African Nationalism: Ghana's Pan-African Foreign Policy in the Age of Decolonization* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 213–260; Grilli, "Nkrumah, Nationalism, and Pan-Africanism: The Bureau of African Affairs Collection," *History in Africa* 44 (2007): 295–307; Frank Gerits, *The Ideological Scramble for Africa: How the Pursuit of Anticolonial Modernity Shaped a Postcolonial Order, 1945–1966* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023); Gerits, "'When the Bull Elephants Fight': Kwame Nkrumah, Non-Alignment,

West orthodoxies. A closer look at their aims and exchanges highlights the way that the labour movement saw itself embedded in a wider, pan-African struggle to remake continental politics upon an equitable economic and social foundation.

Ghana's trade unions were one of the early sites in the battle for a pan-African consciousness, providing the intellectual engagement alongside the framework of the social movement. This article examines the conflict over "free" trade unionism in Ghana during the 1950s and early 1960s to explore how GTUC leadership redefined the mission of trade union congresses. In contrast to the dominant, colonial-era concept of "free" trade unions as apolitical associations for modest improvement, anticolonial and later postcolonial leaders recognized the transformative potential of labour organizing. By examining GTUC publications and the correspondence of its leadership with the International Conference of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in Brussels, we can see how Ghanaian labour leaders attempted to leave behind colonial-era dependencies while also subordinating Cold War rivalries to what they perceived as the special, historically unique situation of decolonizing and newly postcolonial countries. Their hyper-awareness of their historical situation strained their relationship with Brussels and other Western countries, ultimately leading to a brief period of disaffiliation from the ICFTU in 1959, as they attempted to mobilize like-minded unions across Africa. Ultimately, these attempts failed in no small part due to avowedly democratic—but practically authoritarian—behaviour, both at home in the wake of protests against restrictive measures after 1961, and on the international stage. Nonetheless, the episode illuminates how GTUC leaders sought to anchor economic rights in ambitious development planning and extend their influence across the continent in the wake of decolonization.

Trade unions played a crucial role in the colonial Gold Coast's struggle for independence. The organizations traced their formal origins to the colonial period, when they were promoted as part of the liberalizing policy of the Colonial Office after 1929 though, by the early 1950s they had distanced themselves from these roots.[7] African workers organized themselves in a way that moved beyond the British metropolitan model of wage labourers and collective bargaining. As many workers in the Gold Coast operated outside of the traditional wage labour economy, they embraced trade

and Pan-Africanism as an Interventionist Ideology in the Global Cold War (1957–1966)," *International History Review* 37 (2015): 951–969.

7 Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Richard Jeffries, *Class, Power and Ideology in Ghana: The Railwaymen of Sekondi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). For an assessment of the British Labour government's approach to colonial trade unions as a mechanism for stabilizing colonial rule, with a particular focus on activities in Kenya, see Paul Kelemen, "Modernising Colonialism: The British Labour Movement and Africa," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 34 (2002): 223–244.

unionism as a means of improving services and representing their interests to the colonial state, as Jennifer Hart has expertly demonstrated in the case of self-employed driver-entrepreneurs before independence.[8] Over the course of the 1930s and 1940s, union membership grew, and many unions developed elaborate administrative structures to accommodate the new members.[9] In 1945, fourteen unions joined together to found the Gold Coast Trades Union Congress, which went on to organize district Trade Councils of Labour in the three large cities of Accra, Kumasi and Sekondi. These councils tackled issues ranging from a minimum wage to housing and health standards for workers.[10] Government employees and transport workers became union members early on, directing their grievances regarding wages and working conditions towards the state.[11]

As these trade unions became increasingly well-organized and networked within the Trades Union Congress, they mounted significant challenges to the colonial state. In 1949, an affiliate of the Gold Coast TUC mounted a strike against the government. In response, the government took repressive action against members of the union—these retaliatory measures prompted the Convention People's Party (CPP), which was concurrently agitating for self-determination, to throw their support behind the union and its workers, launching its "positive action" campaign of nonviolent resistance, non-cooperation, and educational campaigns aimed at dismantling British rule in the Gold Coast. In the early weeks of 1950, the CPP joined forces with union leaders to call for a general strike that paralyzed the country for twenty-one days.[12] Two crucial features of the positive action campaign and the struggle for independence would accompany the GTUC throughout its early years: first, the unions had become accustomed to playing an adversarial role vis-à-vis the colonial government. The 1950 general strike and positive action campaign represented the apogee of this opposition. However, once colonial rule had been ended, they did not transition easily into a partnership with the new government and instead retained elements of their oppositional character. Second, the trade unions had briefly aligned with the CPP in their commitment to overthrowing colonial rule during the general strike. Recognizing the power of coordinated action, the CPP sought out a more sustained

8 Jennifer Hart, "Motor Transportation, Trade Unionism, and the Culture of Work in Colonial Ghana," *International Review of Social History* 59, no. 22 (2014): 185–209.

9 E. A. Cowan, *Evolution of Trade Unionism in Ghana* (Accra: Trades Union Congress, 1969).

10 Naaborko Sackeyfio-Lenoch, "The Ghana Trades Union Congress and the Politics of International Labor Alliances, 1957–1971," *International Review of Social History* 62 (2017), 194.

11 Godfrey A. Pirotta, "The Growth of Trade Unions under British Colonialism – A Comparative Study," *Economic and Social Studies* 1 (1982): 29–40.

12 Cowan, *Evolution of Trade Unionism in Ghana*, 1–16.

and formalized structure to preserve this harmony of interests; its elusive character created considerable frustrations for both sides throughout the Nkrumah years.

Gold Coast trade unions received assistance from the British Trade Unions Congress beginning in the 1930s. British guidance in the colonies drew on liberal theories of trade union activity and explicitly denied that unions were organizations with political aims; instead, they were promoted as paths to incremental improvement and a path to self-governance in a distant future.[13] However, as members sought to distance the unions from colonial structures and dependencies, they turned towards international organizations for assistance. The shift from a relationship with the colonizer toward free association with other organizations, as Naaborko Sackeyfio-Lenoch has argued, represented an important and self-conscious step towards achieving autonomy. In particular, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), which provided educational and financial assistance to African trade unions with the aim of cementing their Western-oriented ideological and political commitments, proved to be a ready partner.[14] In 1949, the ICFTU became the leading body for free trade unions, after it was reconstituted following a split with the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), which had come to be dominated by the Second World influences of the communist Eastern Bloc.[15] While this early split transformed international, primarily Euro-American, labour movements into a battleground within the Cold War competition for hearts and minds, it also opened up access to resources for Third World nations. The Brussels-based ICFTU was to become an early and ready assistant to labour organizers in the decolonizing world, providing technical and financial assistance and opening up paths of mobility for trade unionists from decolonizing African and Asian countries.[16] The Gold Coast applied for affiliation, and the application was accepted in July 1951.[17] Ghanaian trade unionists attended international conferences and benefited from consultations with the ICFTU and International Labour Organisation in Geneva. In 1951, John Tettegah, General Secretary of the Ghana Trades Union Congress, became the first African to be named to the ICFTU's executive board.[18] While the Gold Coast also had a number of trade unions affiliated with

13 From a handbook, *What is a Trade Union?,* written by J.S. Patrick, a colonial trade union advisor in Kenya. Cited in Jack Woddis, *Africa, The Lion Awakes* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1961), 53.

14 Dorothy Nelkin, "Labor: Stumbling Block to Pan-Africanism," *The Maghreb Digest: North African Perspectives* 4, no. 11–12 (1966), 22–44.

15 IISG ICFTU ARCH 00622 394–397; Allen, 289–312.

16 John Riddell, *Die Freien Gewerkschaften im Kampf für die Freiheit Afrikas* (Brussels/Lagos: IBFG Afrikanischen Regional-Organisation, 1961), 5–11.

17 IISG ICFTU ARCH00622 4261, ICFTU General Secretary to Gold Coast Trades Union, 26 July 1951.

18 IISG ICFTU ARCH00622 4261, Tettegah, "Annual Report to Gold Coast Trades Union, 1955," 21.

the communist-backed WFTU, between 1949 and Ghanaian independence in 1957, relationships and affiliations with the West took on increasing importance in advising and shaping organizing activities.

Behind these two fronts, there was also a good deal of strife. To speak of trade unionism was not to speak of a single set of ideas and practices. Despite the increasingly dense bonds between the ICFTU and the GTUC, which were forged through study trips, trainings, and financial aid, the leadership of the GTUC remained sceptical towards the international federation. And for good reason: Although the ICFTU presented itself as the face of international labour action, the reality of the organization in the 1950s reflected the conflict between the anti-communist priorities of its US-based members and the priorities of the British TUC, which continued to protect its own interests in Commonwealth territories from its privileged position in the ICFTU leadership. As labour movements moved to the centre of postwar European states and took on significant roles in their respective governing coalitions as part of the broader postwar settlement, they advanced their commitment to domestic social reform by jettisoning much of their foreign policy—in particular their anti-colonialist agenda.[19] As Anthony Carew has written, "international labour action conducted exclusively through the ICFTU was, then, the aim of the purists, while independent activity by national centres was often the reality of trade union internationalism."[20] In the British case, the BTUC pursued its line of controlling the colonial labour situation by distancing it from wider political and nationalist ferments.[21] Their attempts to "depoliticize" trade unions led Ghana's new leadership to conclude that their concerns were not being taken seriously within such bodies and encouraged them to distance themselves from the hangover of colonial-era reformist projects in favour of more radical solutions for political, social, and economic transformation. Exposure and interaction with a variety of available national models helped crystallize thinking about the role of the GTUC.

The question of party-trade union relations remained of central importance in the divide between the free trade union federation of the West and their Eastern counterparts. The issue put the GTUC increasingly at odds with the free trade unions, as represented by the ICFTU and the American AFL-CIO, which insisted that trade unions should not become government-controlled institutions, since they derived their authority from voluntary participation and decision-making autonomy.[22] How-

19 For a comprehensive overview of the Left's role in the postwar settlement, see Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 278–329.

20 Anthony Carew, "Conflict within the ICFTU: Anti-Communism and Anti-Colonialism in the 1950s," *International Review of Social History* 41 (1996), 153.

21 Carew, "Conflict within the ICFTU," 169.

22 Vic Allen, *Power in Trade Unions: A Study of their Organization in Great Britain* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1954); discussed in Cowan, *Evolution,* 99–100.

ever, even one of the leading organizers and theorists of trade unionism in Britain, Vic Allen, conceded that it was doubtful that many trade union leaders understood their task as the fulfilment of the formal aims of the early unions, which were informed by the radical and socially transformative plans of early Socialists.[23] Within the confines of the postwar landscape in Europe, Allen noted that most union membership consisted of voluntary members who needed to be provided with frequent material evidence to demonstrate why they should continue to participate; this need for validation accounted for the more modest aims of improved living standards and worker protections that triumphed over revolution and "grandiose intentions."[24] The goals of Western European trade unionism had become more incremental, according a greater importance to the role and comforts of the individual in labour's struggle.

In Ghana, the relationship of trade union members, their federation, and the party followed a different course. Among much of the leadership of the CPP, the issue of consonance between party and trade unions was seen as fundamental to ensuring the basis for a workers' state and realizing their vision of African socialism; proponents referred to the unions and the party as "Siamese twins."[25] On the occasion of the Twelfth Annual Conference of the TUC in 1955, a resolution to formalize the alliance between the two was adopted, on account of the fact that "the policy pursued by Colonial Labour Advisers in the past about Trade Union neutrality [had] resulted in the misunderstanding of the political aims of the Trade Union Movement."[26] Without a political arm, which had been denied to them under the colonial yoke, the trade unions' possibility for social transformation remained stunted, so the argument. Some critics at home and abroad charged that the labour movement should consist of voluntary non-political organizations that acted as an economic pressure group. Nonetheless, the leadership of the CPP and the GTUC pushed ahead with their pursuit of a unity of purpose and action, and dismissed principles of voluntary association as colonial-era hangovers. Two years later, at the Fourteenth Annual Conference of the TUC at Cape Coast, Tettegah publicly aired his disdain for this model and its proponents: "We do not want to be bothered with Cambridge essays on imaginary ILO [In-

23 Vic Allen, *Trade Union Leadership*: *Based on a Study of Arthur Deakin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 13.

24 Allen, *Trade Union Leadership*, 13–14.

25 Cowan, *Evolution of Trade Unionism in Ghana*, 91. African socialism, in Ghana and across many decolonizing African states, was not avowedly Marxist-Leninist in nature, though certain proponents also engaged with these ideas. It had multiple meanings and often referred to a search for an indigenous model of economic development among groups wary of Western-style capitalism. Emanuel Akyeampong, "African Socialism: Or, the Search for an Indigenous Model of Economic Development?" *Economic History of Developing Regions* 33 (2018): 69–87; Nana Osei-Opare, "The Red Star State: State-Capitalism, Socialism and Black Internationalism in Ghana," PhD thesis, University of California, Los Angeles (2019).

26 Cowan, *Evolution of Trade Unionism in Ghana*, 93.

ternational Labour Organization] Standards, with undue emphasis on voluntary associations."[27] In highlighting its historically unprecedented character and task, Ghana's trade union leadership sought to chart its own course specific to the African situation.

Although the GTUC leadership emphasized the singularity of the postcolonial situation, they also eagerly gathered information about various organizational structures by engaging with international and national bodies. Two national centres, in particular, attracted John Tettegah's interest in the late 1950s: Israel and the Federal Republic of Germany. In 1957, Tettegah travelled to Israel, where he heaped praise on the Israeli labour organization Histadrut for its centralized and comprehensive structure, its expansive membership, and its integration into the political sphere.[28] Here, he saw a stark contrast to the weakness of the British model that Ghana had inherited.

After concluding his visit to Israel in 1957, Tettegah continued on to West Germany, where he visited Düsseldorf, East and West Berlin, and Frankfurt am Main.[29] Despite dramatic differences to the Israeli situation, Tettegah believed the West German Confederation of Trade Unions (DGB) could offer some practicable solutions. The DGB proved to be a dependable supporter of their Ghanaian counterparts, especially under the chairmanship of Willi Richter (1956–1962), who welcomed Tettegah in Düsseldorf and lobbied for more attention and resources in order to improve relations with developing countries.[30] Tettegah's visits abroad also helped him to think through the much-discussed reorganization of Ghana's trade unions. In a speech following the tour, he noted significant economic differences between Israel and West Germany, yet still appraised the DGB's more centralized structure, in which there were sixteen federally-recognized industrial unions, as a potential model. While the size and power of the Histadrut made it an attractive model for Ghana, the West German DGB presented a way to think about the thorny problem of the relation of trades union congress to political parties. Tettegah wrote, "According to the explanation given by the German Movement, the problem of democracy in our modern world is not the same as it was a hundred years ago. Modern economy has gained such an importance in this technical age that this it is in fact able to determine the character and substance of the State."[31] Despite the dramatic differences in historical experiences, Tettegah and others, including Nkrumah, often drew comparisons between Ghana's postcolonial situation and West Germany's postwar one when addressing German audiences. They emphasized the experience of historical rupture, the need to cultivate democratic

27 IISG ICFTU ARCH00622 4253c, "Tettegah Speech at Trades Union Congress on the Occasion of the 14th Annual Conference at Cape Coast" (25 January 1958).

28 Tettegah, *A New Chapter for Ghana Labour* (Accra: TUC 1958), 18–20.

29 Tettegah, *A New Chapter for Ghana Labour* (Accra: TUC 1958), 20.

30 B Arch DY 34/5524 ILO Nachrichten, IAA 17. Juni 1958 "Willi Richters Ansprache an die Internationale Arbeitskonferenz."

31 Tettegah, *A New Chapter for Ghana Labour* (Accra: TUC, 1958) [pamphlet], 22.

practices, and, above all, a commitment to the project of economic and social reconstruction that lay at the heart of both states: the success of the West German economic miracle made its expertise in labour organization and technical assistance appealing.[32] After his return, Tettegah drew lessons from his time with the DGB about trade union structures and the relationship between political parties and unions.[33] Though there was significant overlap in both personnel and interests between the leadership of the GTUC and Nkrumah's CPP, the relationship between the two had not yet been formalized in 1957, though the process of binding the two organizations together had been discussed heatedly in the run-up to and the wake of independence.[34] Tettegah had sought out the counsel of the ICFTU in reforming and drafting new labour legislation for the GTUC beginning in 1957. In Tettegah's drafts, the party and TUC were tightly bound together by their overlapping mission. This encroachment of party interests into TUC affairs repeatedly provoked the objections of the ICFTU, who advised against such a fusion of interests and struck it from early drafts, arguing that it flew in the face of modern democratic principles of free trade unions.[35] Looking to the West German case, Tettegah noted that there was no constitutional relationship between the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the DGB, but that this did not prevent the DGB from cooperating with the SPD. At the time, he described this as "the parallel position to what now obtains in Ghana," though this loose arrangement was not to endure.

Though the GTUC had gained much in the way of technical and financial assistance from the ICFTU and other Western-oriented groups, including bilaterally with

32 See B Arch B 161/283 "Vertrauliches Memorandum von Ghanas Staatschef. Handelsblatt-Gespräch mit Botschafter Asara. Accra hat 'unbegrenztes Vertrauen' zu Bonn," *Handelsblatt* (22 March 1960).

33 Ukandi Damachi, *The Role of Trade Unions in the Development Process with a Case Study of Ghana* (New York, 1974), 21; B Arch DY 34/3474, Tettegah's Speech in Dar es Salaam, 1965; B Arch 34/ 21837, Internationales Gewerkschaftskomitee für die Solidarität mit den Werktätigen und dem Volk Südafrikas, Accra, 196.

34 Early ICFTU contacts noted the CPP's desire to take control of the trade unions. As David Newman noted in 1953: "The CPP's failure to achieve this control was due not so much to the strength or wisdom of the TUC leaders but to an instinctive feeling on the part of the average trade union member that the participation of the trade union in the positive action campaign, while it may have helped with the political advance in the country, did little to improve his working conditions […] the leaders of the TUC have been aware of this ever since the TUC was re-formed at the end of 1951." IISG ICFTU ARCH00622 4261, David Newman to Jay Krane, 27 Aug. 1953.

35 See IISG ICFTU ARCH00622 4261, TUC of the Gold Coast to General Secretary of ICFTU, "Disaffiliation from the ICFTU," 15 September 1953. On assistance in drafting new labour legislation in 1957, see IISG ICFTU ARCH00622 4263b, "Tettegah–Millard–Newman talk at headquarters on 2 August 1957" and IISG ICFTU ARCH00622 4270-4271, also mentioned in Tettegah, *New Structure*, 27.

the Histradut, the DGB, and the American AFL-CIO, these partnerships became strained as Nkrumah consolidated power at home and Ghana increasingly sought to assert itself on the world stage. While in the mid-1950s a turn away from the British Trades Union Congress in search of other models in Israel and West Germany represented the severing of colonial ties, factions in the Ghanaian leadership saw the unions as having not gone far enough in their rupture with imperialism and in the search for an alternative. Their alternative vision hinged on first settling the question of the relationship between labour organization and the ruling Convention People's Party, and also developing a more distinctive—and authoritative—approach to internationalism. These two questions were intimately linked, as Nkrumah and his circle sought to develop the "African personality" alongside a means of organizing workers that was commensurate to the postcolonial situation.[36]

The first point came to a head at the Fourteenth Annual Convention of the Ghana Trades Union Congress in Cape Coast in January 1958. It was here that John Tettegah, still General Secretary of the GTUC, presented the so-called "New Structure," which went into effect in April 1959. The peculiarities of Ghana's economic situation had initiated discussions, beginning in 1954, about how best to mobilize these organizations. As Tettegah noted, "the worker's struggle, does not always and everywhere, assume the same form. There was a time when in fighting their employers, the workers smashed machines and set fire to factories. To them machines were the cause of poverty […] In Ghana today […] we have not the factories to smash; it is our responsibility to help create them and to give work to the masses of our people."[37] Postcolonial labour organizations thus carried the traditional responsibility of representing workers and guaranteeing their rights, while also bearing the weight of the additional imperative to support industrialization and national economic development. This double burden of ensuring worker welfare while spurring economic growth and development presented, per Tettegah, a historical novelty. In light of this, Ghanaian labour leaders—and African trade unionists more generally—saw themselves faced with a fundamentally different task, one that called into question the validity of available models in the West.

For his part, Tettegah increasingly stressed a departure from developmental models wherein one "underdeveloped" nation came under the tutelage of others, and instead advocated for a radical departure to match the experience of political, economic, and social rupture of decolonization. The binding of the unions to the CPP represented an important step. This reorganization was carried out through the implementation of the New Structure within the TUC itself, as well as reforms to labour legislation through a series of Industrial Relations Acts that were promulgated between 1958 and

36 Joe-Fio N. Meyer, "Foreword," in Tettegah, *New Chapter*, 8.
37 Tettegah, *New Chapter*, 26.

1960.[38] The acts organized all trade unions into twenty-four national unions along industrial lines and created the central body of the Ghana TUC as a coordinated labour front. It also substantially curtailed workers' freedom of association, allowing the governor-general to determine whether the TUC had "taken any action which is not conducive to the public good."[39] Further, at the 1958 General Council of the TUC, the body adopted a resolution that encouraged national unions to seek direct affiliation with the party, making the TUC an integral part of the CPP. While Western organizations reacted to these changes with muted alarm, Tettegah and his colleagues set out to court new allies in the East, where the existence of the "Siamese twins" of party and unions was accepted without further comment. In May 1958, Tettegah sent May Day greetings to the East German Freien Deutschen Gewerkschaftsbund (FDGB). A delegation of three Ghanaians travelled to East Germany for the celebrations, visited several industrial sites, and discussed closer cooperation between the two countries with FDGB Chairman Hermann Warnke.[40] Ghana, like many other newly independent African nations, was keen to extract benefits from both sides of the East-West divide.[41] East German interests centred on offering educational and technical assistance as a means of subverting the Federal Republic of Germany's Hallstein doctrine, which stipulated that it would suspend diplomatic relations with any country recognizing the German Democratic Republic.[42] In particular, GTUC leadership was particularly impressed by the GDR's success in integrating women and girls into the workforce in line with their Seven-Year Plan; reports on the achievements appeared in national newspapers.[43] The office of the ICFTU in Brussels was outraged to learn of the visit.[44] The ICFTU office noted that one of member of the delegation, Lawrence Ofor-Ankrah, had attended a conference in Munich and visited the ICFTU office in Brussels on a return trip from Scandinavia the previous year. With barely concealed

38 Paul Komlah Pawar, *The Ghana Trades Union Congress: A Brief Report* (Accra: Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 1979), 5.

39 Pawar, *Ghana Trades Union Congress: A Brief Report,* 7.

40 IISG ICFTU ARCH00622 4263c, News clippings and notes on, "Grüße aus Ghana," *Die Tribüne*, 4 May 1958.

41 Eric Burton, *In Diensten des Afrikanischen Sozialismus. Tansania und die globale Entwicklungsarbeit der beiden Deutschen Staaten, 1961–1990* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2021), 108–129.

42 For a discussion of the Hallstein Doctrine and the GDR's efforts to circumvent it, see Hermann Wentker, *Außenpolitik in engen Grenzen: Die DDR im internationalen System 1949–1989* (Oldenbourg: DeGruyter, 1997), 170–179 and William Glenn Gray, *Germany's Cold War: The Global Campaign to Isolate East Germany, 1949–1969* (Chapel Hill; UNC Press, 2003).

43 IISG ICFTU ARCH00622 4263d, "GDR Seven Year Plan provides technical courses for girls," *Ghanaian Worker* (no date), 2.

44 IISG ICFTU ARCH00622 4263c, "Gewerkschaftler aus Ghana beim FDGB," *Die Tribüne*, 25 May 1958.

dismay, the ICFTU contacted General Secretary Tettegah to remind him pointedly that, although "there [is] no infringement of your affiliation in the fact that delegates from your organization should visit countries behind the iron curtain. It is just something which the Board of the ICFTU thinks it is unwise to do."[45] Despite the warning about the breach of protocol, the GTUC continued to push ahead on its own path.

Figure 1: Clipping from the FDGB newspaper *Die Tribüne* showing members of the Ghanaian delegation shaking hands with Chairman Herbert Warnke.[46]

The reorientation of the GTUC heralded a broader shift in Ghana's foreign policy. From the early 1950s, Nkrumah and the CPP had expressed scepticism towards the ICFTU, smearing it as an "agent of capitalists and bankers," and repeatedly demanding that the organization cease operations in the Gold Coast.[47] The ICFTU weathered these early attacks by remaining silent on the issue and continuing to provide financial and material support. But the GTUC's "New Structure," inaugurated in 1958, represented a more extreme vision and foregrounded its continental responsibilities at the expense of Western internationalism. The reforms aimed to establish an African alternative to European trade union federations that would ultimately be suitable for pan-African partnership and development. The close cooperation between Ghana and

45 IISG ICFTU ARCH00622 4263c, General Secretary of ICFTU to Tettegah, 15 July 1958.
46 ICFTU ARCH00622 4263c "Gewerkschaftler aus Ghana beim FDGB," *Die Tribüne*, 25 May 1958.
47 IISG ICFTU ARCH00622 4261, Hammerton (West African Trade Union Information and Advisory Centre, ICFTU) to Oldenbroek, Accra, 16 June 1963, and Memo to the General Secretary Oldenbroek, 3 August 1953.

Sekou Touré's Guinea over the course of the autumn of 1958 gestured to this possibility: After Guinea was subjected to economic blockade by the French as retribution for their "no" vote on the question of immediate independence in the referendum on French Union in September 1958, Ghana provided swift economic assistance.[48] The Ghanaian press celebrated this display of solidarity during the period of blockade as a strong message for "the community of African countries, whose basis has been laid by Ghana and Guinea, [which] will have a far greater attraction from Africans than all the pseudo-communities or federations founded in Paris or London."[49] By contrast, Western organizations, including the ICFTU, found Ghana's push into the affairs of other African countries alarming because of its potentially destabilizing effects.

After the accelerated passage of the Industrial Relations Act in December 1958, the ICFTU responded internally with outrage. Jay Krane of the ICFTU noted the restraint the organization had shown over the years as Ghana's labour leaders flouted international norms. For the ICFTU, the situation represented a moment of crisis: for the first time in its existence, an affiliated organization had introduced repressive legislation and insisted its actions were acceptable, as they had been initiated by a sympathetic government. The ICFTU remained critical: Krane wrote, "surely it should have occurred to some people that governments and men change. Moreover, in our fight for trade union freedom and human rights in totalitarian countries such as the Soviet Union, Hungary and Spain, we are always told that the restrictions on the exercising of freedom of association mean nothing because the governments are the governments of the workers."[50] Ultimately, the international federation took no immediate action aside from reminding the GTUC of their affiliation. In an April 1959 meeting, the Steering Committee of the Ghana TUC decided that there was no need for it to "entangle itself in East or West conflicts and that since the Ghana Government has made a policy statement of one of non-alignment," the GTUC should follow a similar line.[51] These pronouncements also generated concern in the United States from the AFL-CIO, which had a long history of advising and financing GTUC projects and scholarships.[52] Despite these ominous rumblings, the GTUC did not immediately disaffiliate. Instead, in speeches by Tettegah and President Joe-Fio Meyer in April 1959, the two emphasized their gratitude to a hodgepodge of labour organizations cutting across the Cold War divide, mentioning the Histradrut, the AFL-CIO,

48 Alessandro Iandolo, *Arrested Development: The Soviet Union in Ghana, Guinea and Mali, 1955–1968* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022): 83–87.

49 IISG ICFTU ARCH00622 4273, "Significance of Ghana-Guinea Declaration. Moscow in French for Africa," 8 May 1959.

50 IISG ICFTU ARCH00622 4263c, Jay Krane to S. Dawson, 10 Dec 1958.

51 IISG ICFTU ARCH00622 4263c, Dawson to Millard, 6 April 1959.

52 IISG ICFTU ARCH00622 4263c, Gen Secretary to Michael Ross, Director of International Affairs, AFL CIO 13 April 1959.

the DGB, and "friends from East Germany" by name. Meyer, in particular, marked out this new course by boldly proclaiming that,

> the Western concept of Democracy is wrong as far we know it in Africa today. It is entirely different from Ghanaian democracy […] hitherto African Trade Unions have been admitted to International Organisations as puppet affiliates on payment of token fees and their mass support has then been used by rivalry factions to play power politics, to the stage their cold war and to justify their political ideologies.[53]

The ICFTU's West Africa representative Seth Dawson summarized this position as "the TUC intends giving its full support to the UGTAN [Union Générale des Travailleurs d'Afrique Noire, the first pan-African labour organization founded by Sekou Touré] as a stepping-stone to the creation of an African International. At the same time, they are desirous of maintaining the existing link between their organization and our International."[54] Recognizing that they had much to gain from non-alignment, Meyer, Tettegah, and the rest of the GTUC leadership sent a clear signal to the West that they intended to forge their own path to "Ghanaian democracy."

Official disaffiliation from the ICFTU came later that year, in December 1959. Though the GTUC submitted a letter requesting recognition of their withdrawal, it did not go into effect immediately as a result of a bureaucratic snare.[55] The ICFTU responded with a short reminder of the GTUC's duty to pay its dues. Dawson, the local ICFTU representative, advised that the reaction was better left to local affiliates, many of whom strongly objected to the move to disaffiliate.[56] In the interim, Dawson recommended that the organization continue to send ICFTU publications so as not to entirely cut off the free trade union movement and to leave the region exposed to Eastern Bloc publications and influence.[57] His suggestions represented a continuation of the ICFTU's longstanding policy of "wait and see" with respect to Ghana that had been in practice since the independence struggle in the 1950s.[58] The ICFTU noted in internal correspondence that it "has from the beginning, when Government control over the trade unions was established, deliberately refrained from publicly comment-

53 IISG ICFTU ARCH0062 4263c, Joe-Fio Meyer, "Trades Union Congress. Presidential Address by Comrade Joe-Fio Meyer to the Official Inauguration of the Trades Union Congress Under the Industrial Relations Act of 1958, 19 April 1959," 7.

54 IISG ICFTU ARCH0062 4263c, Dawson to Millard, 21 April 1959.

55 IISG ICFTU ARCH0062 4263c, "Disaffiliation of Ghana TUC."

56 Since the ICFTU bylaws stipulated that no organization could be recognized if its membership fees were in arrears, the GTUC's disaffiliation was not accepted. IISG ICFTU ARCH0062 4263c, Dawson to Millard, 8 October 1959.

57 IISG ICFTU ARCH0062 4263d, Inter-Office Memorandum from P. de Jonge to F. Fröhlich, 24 March 1960.

58 CITE IISG 1953 DOCS.

ing on the deteriorating situation, mainly in view of Ghana's position as one of the first colonial territories in Africa to attain independence and the appeal it thus had in the rest of Africa."[59] Ghana's status as the first postcolonial state in sub-Saharan Africa made the situation a litmus test for further developments in the region, and Ghanaian leaders wielded this substantial power quite consciously as they sought connections and resources across the continent.

It is important to note that the move to disaffiliate from the ICFTU was not simply a leap into the void. Instead, the GTUC planned to replace these networks with an African trade union movement that corresponded more closely with its own concerns as a greater number of African states gained independence. This should also be understood as a grab for power in the region and a bid for influence in these new states as they emerged. In partnership with Guinea, the GTUC announced the creation of the All-African Trades Union Federation (AATUF) in October 1959 to further the cause of nationalist movements and to "represent Africa on international non-partisan and non-ideological organisations such as the United Nations, the International Labour Organisation, etc."[60] The organization, which was to be headquartered in Accra, planned to hold its first meeting in Casablanca in May 1960. In order to enforce the non-alignment of African labour organizations, the leadership promoted a policy of non-affiliation. The GTUC requested its disaffiliation from the ICFTU, though they claimed that they were not hostile to the organization.[61]

The stated intent to maintain friendly relations contrasted with the GTUC's—and by proxy, the AATUF's—behaviour. The *Ghanaian Worker*, the official publication of the GTUC, began publishing slanderous attacks on foreign leaders of ICFTU-affiliated organizations, including Tom Mboya, Kenyan nationalist leader and General Secretary of the Kenya Federation of Labour, and Lawrence Borha, a Nigerian labor leader. One editorial from November 1959 charged that "Mboya and others chose to play foreign fiddle while Africa burns."[62] Mboya relayed his own impression to the Brussels office that Ghana was, "going all out to fight the ICFTU," both publicly and behind closed doors, by disbursing money to splinter groups across West and East Africa.[63] To stem the tide of Ghana's interference, Mboya called for more generous ICFTU support for African initiatives to reinforce African unions against communist

59 Indeed, the crisis sharpened as the CPP put down strikes and cracked down on the opposition in following months. IISG ICFTU ARCH0062 4263d "ICFTU Executive Board Meeting: Agenda Item 9(a)(iv): Ghana," Brussels, 30 October–2 November 1961.

60 IISG ICFTU ARCH0062 4263c, Press Release, Formation of AATUF, 26 October 1959.

61 IISG ICFTU ARCH0062 4263d, J.H. Oldenbroek General Secretary, ICFTU to Eiler Jensen 18 Feb 1960.

62 *Ghanaian Worker* (14 November 1959).

63 IISG ICFTU ARCH0062 4263d, Tom Mboya to General Secretary Oldenbroek, ICFTU, 2 May 1960.

influences. Besides, he noted, this intrigue made Ghana unpopular with its neighbours and resulted in conflict, such as the dispute in 1960 with Nigeria, when Nigerian ICFTU-backed labour leader Borha warned "it would be disastrous to the unity of the African people if any one African state tried to buttress its political ambition for leadership of Africa by using Pan-Africanism for rallying support."[64]

Despite these disagreements and the splintering of African labour, leaders attempted to forge a foundation for African cooperation. In November 1960, on the occasion of Tettegah's visit to Kenya, Tettegah and Mboya signed a joint declaration, proclaiming the need for effective free trade union organization in all parts of Africa and outlining the crucial role of unions in their respective countries, as well as across Africa generally:

> Before independence unions have a real contribution to make in the nationalist struggle in addition to their normal task of championing workers' interests […] After independence the unions have even an increasing responsibility and part to play in the national affairs. They must respond to the immediate needs of their new country in an effort to help consolidate the independence gained as well as help translate into tangible terms the new benefits that workers look forward to after independence. Both organisations recognize the need for cooperation, collaboration and maximum harmony between the trade union movement and the governments especially in our newly independent states so as to facilitate the prosecution of the national task—that of economic reconstruction and social advancement.[65]

Their shared vision highlighted how African trade unionism could not blindly emulate foreign models and instead required responses that reflected African problems and personality. While both leaders agreed that the AATUF itself should not affiliate with any international organizations, they did not take a position on the question of affiliation of member organizations—this was to change in the lead-up to the first conference in Casablanca.

The first conference of the AATUF in Casablanca in May 1960 attempted to sidestep these disagreements by excluding unsympathetic rivals and embarking on a rapid path to a United States of Africa.[66] Drawing on funding from the WFTU and Eastern bloc trade union centres, the GTUC set up fictitious trade unions in opposition to established ones in Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda and insisted on recognizing them

64 IISG ICFTU ARCH0062 4273, From ICFTU Nigeria Office News Report. "Borha Warns Ghana Republic," 1 September 1960.

65 Tettegah and Mboya, "Joint Declaration on Behalf of the Ghana TUC and the Kenya Federation of Labour" (21 November 1960), 23–34.

66 Grilli, *Nkrumaism and African Nationalism*, 165–211.

as national representatives.[67] Members of the AATUF, led by Ghana, advanced their vision of trade unions that submitted to the control of governments and political parties.[68] As a corollary, membership was made conditional upon disaffiliation from other labour federations, in particular the ICFTU. They also avoided votes on questions of substance, instead allowing the Steering Committee to dictate the agenda. By the end of the conference, all parties in attendance from outside of Ghana had walked out, leading the international community—including many African organizations—to regard the AATUF as a "sham organization" and to await renewed attempts at coordination on the continent under the auspices of the ICFTU.[69]

Shortly after Ghanaian independence in 1957, the GTUC fused with the ruling CPP, thus institutionalizing the relationship between the "Siamese twins" of party and union congress. While many historians have read this moment as a cynical power play by Nkrumah, it can also be seen as an earnest attempt to forge a new way forward towards development *for* and *by* the workers. This act of union represented a major breach with the norms of Western free trade unions and inaugurated an era in which Ghana sought to position itself as first among equals in a new pan-African constellation defined by the interests of rapidly decolonizing states. It sought out assistance from both Western and Eastern blocs, espousing an official foreign policy of non-alignment as seen in the machinations of the GTUC vis-à-vis the ICFTU. Yet this policy of non-alignment did not immediately mean disaffiliation from international federations—in fact, their disaffiliation from the ICFTU only lasted several months, and the GTUC maintained productive exchanges with a number of other Western organizations, including the AFL-CIO. Instead, non-alignment as seen through the lens of the GTUC indicated the freedom to pursue more varied affiliations, free from instrumentalization by the Cold War actors that Sally Johnson decried.

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67 African Trade Union Confederation (ATUC), *The Panafrican Labour Movement: Origins—Elements—Conflicts* (Dakar: ATUC, 1965), 4.

68 ATUC, *Panafrican Labour Movement*, 4. See also Robert Anthony Waters Jr., "Kwame Nkrumah and the All-African Trade Union Federation: Labour and Emancipation in Africa," in Grilli and Gerits, eds., *Visions of African Unity: New Perspectives on the History of Pan-Africanism and African Unification Projects* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020): 77–105.

69 ATUC, *Panafrican Labour Movement*, 8.