

Pursuing Trade Union Internationalism: Australia's Waterside Workers and the International Transport Workers Federation, c. 1950-1970

ABSTRACT

When the Australian Waterside Workers Federation (WWF) decided in 1971 to join the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) it overturned decades of antipathy to the ITF. We ask why union officials held this view and why the union now changed its mind at this particular moment. We argue that while union power was strong in the immediate post-war decades, the WWF was able to pursue its economic goals locally and join international actions for reasons of solidarity. In the following decade, however, union archives reveal that a confluence of technological change and diminishing union strength under a conservative government made international organising a logical and necessary strategy. Under the guidance of General Secretary Charlie Fitzgibbon, the WWF overcame its opposition to the ITF, by then an organisation representing millions of workers worldwide. We concentrate on Fitzgibbon's leadership as a crucial factor in enabling this historic change.

In 1971 the Federal Council of the Waterside Workers Federation of Australia (WWF) made the decision to affiliate with the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF).¹ This was a significant reversal of WWF policy. From its foundation in 1902, the WWF had consistently rejected invitations from the ITF and limited its international actions on behalf of fellow unionists overseas to occasional instances of making donations, launching sympathy actions, paying friendly visits and exchanging information.² It did not seek formal alliances internationally before 1945 which continued after 1945, as an established decades-long

¹ 'Overseas Study to Aid Negotiations,' *Maritime Worker*, (May 27 1971): 1.

² see correspondence in ITF archives, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick; Tom Sheridan, *Australia's Own Cold War: The Waterfront Under Menzies*, (Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 2006), 124-125; Margo Beasley, *Wharfies: The History of the Waterside Workers' Federation*, (Rushcutters Bay, N.S.W.: Halstead Press in association with Australian National Maritime Museum, 1996) 64-65, 150-153, 214

opposition, now nurtured towards the ITF itself, which was by then the oldest and arguably most prominent labour organisation on the global stage.³

The ITF had been established by European seamen's and dockers' unions in the late nineteenth century, and in the early-mid twentieth century had spread its industry coverage by incorporating organised labour from land and air transport sectors. As a result, by the mid-1960s, it united well over a hundred national unions representing the voices of a few million workers⁴ It was, nevertheless, very Eurocentric in its orientation and membership. Only slowly and after World War II would unions in the Asia-Pacific come within its frame of reference. From the mid-1950s there was a strong presence of Japanese unions although Australian and New Zealand unions continued to be under-represented for at least another decade.⁵

The question then is why did the WWF decide to join the ITF in 1971. What prompted the WWF to change its policy in relation to the ITF, what gains did it seek, and why was the decision taken at that particular time? The ITF benefited member trade unions through promotion of global solidarity, representation of their interests in intergovernmental bodies and provision of information and training facilities. ITF affiliation also, however, imposed some burdens in terms of compliance with certain rules and financial obligations along with regular payment of membership fees. The costs and benefits of ITF association to the WWF were therefore relatively static. Explanation thus needs to be found internally within the WWF, and how it was negotiating external pressures. This article contends there were important domestic and local, political and economic, reasons which led the WWF first to

³ International Transport Workers Federation, *Solidarity: The First 100 Years of the International Transport Workers' Federation*, (London: Pluto Press, 1996)

⁴ H.Lewis, *The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) 1945-1965: an Organizational and Political Anatomy*, (PhD thesis, Warwick University, 2003).365 (Table 6)

⁵ Lewis, ITF, 178

reject then to accept the need for international organising promised by affiliation with the ITF. That Australian waterside workers now reversed their attitude can, we argue, be attributed to the leadership and foresight of WWF General Secretary Charlie Fitzgibbon.

Providing answers to the question of why the Australian waterside unionists forged a formal alliance with the global federation of transport industry workers fills important gaps in our knowledge. In viewing the post-Second World War history of Australia's waterfront, previous scholars have provided a comprehensive account of the large political and economic role played by the WWF on a national level.⁶ The union's foreign concerns have been of limited scholarly interest. Some secondary sources have documented well the campaigns of waterside workers against the Vietnam War, the Chilean junta, South African apartheid and some other overseas campaigns.⁷ Such a close academic attention to international solidarity actions launched by the union for social justice reasons, has, however, left unexplored the international industrial actions of the WWF launched on behalf of workers in its own and adjacent industries. Few scholars have examined the issue or the period of Charlie Fitzgibbon's leadership.⁸

While there is a large volume of literature which views the history of organised labour within national borders, just a handful of secondary sources from Australia attempt to examine how

⁶ Sheridan *Cold War*; Beasley, *Wharfies*; Wendy Lowenstein, & T. Hills, *Under the Hook : Melbourne Waterside Workers Remember Working Lives and Class War: 1900-1980*, (Prahran, Vic. : Melbourne Bookworkers, Publishers, 1982); Rupert Lockwood, *Ship to Shore : a History of Melbourne's Waterfront and its Union Struggles*, (Sydney : Hale & Iremonger, 1990); Greg Mallory, *Uncharted Waters : Social Responsibility in Australian Trade Unions*, (Brisbane: Boolarong Press, 2005); J.S. Ahlquist, & M. Levi, *In the Interest of Others: Organizations and Social Activism*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁷ Beasley, *Wharfies*, 216-20, 235; Lowenstein & Hills, *Under the hook*, 168.

⁸ Beasley, *Wharfies*.

local unions have been related to an international organised labour movement.⁹ By putting together evidence on the move of the Australian WWF towards the alliance with the ITF, this article makes a contribution to this international literature. By explaining how and why the WWF became interested in the transport workers' international, the paper ultimately places the history of Australian trade unionism into a global context, a perspective still insufficiently a focus of scholarship.

The article is structured into three sections. The first section contours the position of the WWF in the 1950s to demonstrate why the union lacked incentives to join the ITF at that time. The second section continues the story into the following decade. It looks at changes in the union leadership which coincided with the global technological transformation of the stevedoring industry, by nature a geographically located one, and argues these are the roots of the WWF drive to labour internationalisation. The last/third section investigates the process by which the WWF pursued international labour cooperation and reveals the main steps taken by the union towards integration into ITF structure. The argument is that the reason the WWF joined the ITF lies in two dimensions – economic and political. In the 1950s the WWF was an 'unskilled' yet well-organised union which enjoyed a great bargaining power in industry relations. Technological change in the following decade brought in with the mechanisation of stevedoring operations and the containerisation of shipping posed a clear threat to the professional organisation of Australian wharf workers by shrinking and eroding their ranks. As many industry unions of developed countries were the subject of similar challenges, WWF leaders perceived the need to learn how their overseas counterparts were able to deal with

⁹ S.Le Queux, 'Australian trade union politics in international perspective: Which way forward?', *Labour & Industry*, 21:3 (2011), 555-571; A.Forsyth, 'Worker Representation in Australia: Moving Towards Overseas Models?', *Australian Bulletin of Labour*, 33:1: (2007), 1-31.

the new situation. An ITF membership promised to solve this problem by facilitating information exchange with a number of dockworkers' unions from all over the world.

Politically, also, affiliation with the ITF looked beneficial to the contemporary WWF leadership. This was especially the case for General Secretary Charlie Fitzgibbon who wanted to amend the public impression of the WWF as a pro-communist organisation, and to secure the union a more important role in the international trade union movement. Forging a formal link with the anti-Communist ITF met this objective. While analysing how the Australian waterside workers revised their attitude to the work of the ITF from a position of hostility and antipathy to one of recognition and acceptance, the article places a special focus on Fitzgibbon's leadership. Insight into his motives and goals has been gleaned from extensive use of his unpublished autobiography as well as official correspondence and WWF Council minutes, in the context of contemporary economic and political developments. Factional differences did not deflect the majority of union members who were repeatedly willing to vote for Fitzgibbon as their leader throughout the long period of his secretaryship from 1961 to 1983.

The WWF and opposition to the ITF, 1945-60

Why the WWF affiliated with the ITF in 1971 raises the question of why it had not done so sooner, if not in the period before World War II, then earlier in the post-war period. There were opportunities for it to do so. Other Australian transport unions had become ITF affiliates from the late 1950s – the Australasian Flight Engineers Union and Flight Stewards Association (in 1957), the Federated Clerks Union and Federated Marine Stewards and Pantrymen (in 1958), the Professional Radio Employees Institute (in 1959) the Motor Transport and

Chauffers Association, the Merchant Service Guild and the Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers (all in the mid-1960s) and the Marine Engineers.¹⁰ Australia's Maritime Transport Council affiliated during the war years between 1940 and 1946. This was suspended by the ITF in April 1959 on 'the grounds that it would be in the I.T.F's interest to secure the individual and direct affiliation of Australian maritime organisations.'¹¹

Tas Bull, who served as WWF General Secretary 1984-92, recalled that ITF affiliation was something the WWF had considered from time to time since 1910 although he could not recall any specific reason they had not done so. He explained it more probably as a result of practical problems. 'The fortunes of the ITF had fluctuated over the years and at least once an ITF recruiting visit to the Pacific region had had to be aborted ... and there would have been occasions when we could not have afforded affiliation fees' such as the decade between the strike defeat of 1928 and 1938 when the WWF was 'practically 'out of business'. Furthermore the period of two world wars were not 'conductive to establishing overseas contacts.'¹² There were, in short, obstacles in the way and perhaps little reason for the WWF to do so. In the pre-war period the Eurocentric nature of the ITF made it of little relevance to Australian shore-based maritime workers.

¹⁰ ITF 25th Congress, Amsterdam, 23 July – to 1 August, 1958, Report on Activities for the years 1956 and 1957, p.29; ITF reports 1958-1959 and proceedings of 26th Congress, Berne 26-30 July, 1960, 18-19; ITF. International Transport Workers' Federation. 75th Anniversary and 30th Congress. Vienna 28th July to 6th August 1971, Report on Activities for the years 1968, 1969 and 1970, 23

¹¹ ITF, Report on Activities and Financial Report of the I.T.F for the years 1938 – 1946, 14; ITF reports 1958-1959 and proceedings of 26th Congress, Berne 26-30 July, 1960, 17.

¹² Tasnor Bull, *Life on the Waterfront: an Autobiography*, (Pymble, N.S.W: HarperCollins, 1998), 131

The domestic character of stevedoring industry operations was also a deterring factor. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, those Australian organisations which became ITF affiliates in the 1950s were some small skilled shipping, air transport and trade administration unions with their immediate contacts with global issues. At that time the WWF encountered further political obstacles to international cooperation due to the ideological climate of the Cold War. Even though active supporters of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) never composed a majority among union officials, let alone among rank and file members, the WWF was commonly regarded as a communist dominated organisation.¹³ Jim Healy's leadership of the union contributed a great deal to this common perception.¹⁴ Holding the position of WWF General Secretary from 1937 until 1961, 'Big Jim' Healy was also an active member of the CPA Central Committee from 1945.¹⁵ He, as well as other WWF officials, regularly visited Socialist Bloc countries, publically commenting on the superiority of the local economic and political system to working class people.¹⁶ The *Maritime Worker*, the official journal of the WWF, further enhanced the public image of the WWF as a pro-Soviet agency by regularly publishing materials on various achievements on the communist side of the Iron Curtain which were contrasted sharply with numerous problems of capitalist countries, including Australia.¹⁷ On

¹³ D.Hull, The impact of major technological change on industrial relations in the Australian stevedoring industry 1950-1972, (Ph. D. Thesis, University of New South Wales, 1976), 90; R. Lockwood, *Ship to shore : a history of Melbourne's waterfront and its union struggles* (Sydney : Hale & Iremonger, 1990)

¹⁴ R. Markey and S. Svensen, 'Healy, James (Jim) (1898-1961)' in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 14. (National Centre of Biography, Australian National University 1996); Charlie Fitzgibbon autobiography, typescript, Charles Fitzgibbon Papers, Noel Butlin Archives of Business and Labour, Canberra, (hereafter NBAC) P 102/91, 48; Hull, Technological change, 93.

¹⁵ Beasley, *Wharfies*, 140-141; Robin Gollan, *Revolutionaries and Reformists: Communism and the Australian Labour Movement, 1920-1955*, (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), 282; Sheridan, *Cold war*, 70.

¹⁶ 'General Sec. Writes from Moscow,' *Maritime Worker*, (December 16 1950), 1; 'Unanimous Report by Delegation to Soviet Union,' *Maritime Worker*, (14 March, 1953), 5; 'Report on China by Roach, Young', *Maritime Worker*, (18 May, 1953), 6; 'Soviet Wharfies Now Reaping Fruits of Working Power,' *Maritime Worker*, (November 9 1954), 6; 'New China's Freedom and Speedy Progress Impress Delegate,' *Maritime Worker*, (9 August 1955), 5; 'Moran at May Day in Soviet Union, *Maritime Worker*, (24 May 1955), 7, and others.

¹⁷ Sheridan, *Cold war*, 69-70

frequent occasions it labelled Prime Minister Menzies 'a fascist' or depicted him in a Nazi uniform.¹⁸

The ability of the union to defend the interests of its members successfully by local industrial means, combined with the pro-communist, pro-Soviet alignment of its leadership, greatly influenced the WWF approach to international organised labour as the Cold War took hold in the first post-1945 decade. In that period, the global trade union movement divided along ideological lines. The World Federation of Free Trade Unions (WFTU) which was established immediately after the war of 1939-45, hoped to become a single organisation for global labour.¹⁹ From the very outset it demonstrated pro-Soviet sympathies and willingness to accommodate communism.²⁰ Consequently, many non-aligned or US-aligned unions and peak bodies in western democracies, including the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), left the WFTU in 1949 to form an alternative, non-Communist organisation, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).²¹ The ITF aligned with the ICFTU and its anti-Communist agenda.

The WWF, according with its pro-Communist leanings, initially affiliated with the pro-Soviet WFTU through its Maritime Trade Department covering unions of stevedores.²² In 1952, however, the ACTU demanded that the WWF officially break away from the WFTU. Facing the threat of expulsion from the ACTU and carefully considering the consequences, the WWF leadership took a collective decision in favour of following instead the national organised

¹⁸ 'Menzies – fascist without Shirt!' *Maritime Worker*, (August 24 1946), 4; 'Little Dictator [caricature]' *Maritime Worker*, (June 24 1950).¹

¹⁹ International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, *Twenty Years ICFTU 1949-1969*, (Brussels: ICFTU, 1969), 8.

²⁰ A.Carew, 'The World Federation of Trade Unions 1945-1949,' in Marcel van der Linden (ed.) *The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions*, (Bern, Switzerland: P. Lang, 2000), 172-173; R.F.Staar, *Foreign Policies of the Soviet Union*, (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University), 79.

²¹ A.Carew, 'Towards a Free Trade Union Centre: The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions' in van der Linden (ed.) *The ICFTU*, 195-198.

²² 'International Protest on the prosecution of Harry Bridges,' *Maritime Worker*, (December 24 1949), 3

labour movement.²³ This was a pragmatic, deeply rational, choice. The WFTU could hardly provide any practical assistance to the WWF in its domestic industrial conflicts, while the ACTU's support, as a subsequent national dispute in 1954 was clearly to prove, was of crucial importance. Nevertheless, even though the WWF disaffiliated from the WFTU, it retained some interest in working with this international labour organisation rather than the ICFTU and the ITF. Throughout the 1950s the *Maritime Worker* continued circulating materials related to the WFTU and in 1957 the WWF Sydney branch secretary, Jim Young, attended a WFTU Congress, as an observer and guest speaker.²⁴

In stark contrast to the attention it gave to WFTU affairs, the union journal published no single large article in that decade on the ICFTU or the ITF, which was incorporated into the ICFTU structure. Indeed, there seemed to the *Maritime Worker* editorship, and thus senior union officials, to be no reason to devote much attention to ITF unionists who were labelled by the European communist press as 'fascist beasts', 'foul hirelings of the warmongers', and 'infamous traitors of the working classes'.²⁵ Later on, a former ITF General Secretary, Harold Lewis, recalled that 'political incompatibilities' of that time were the major cause of WWF 'indifference' to ITF existence.²⁶ This, however, overlooks the pre-1945 reluctance of the WWF to join the ITF and how the ideological divide between the two international organisations was combined with the question of practical necessity. A relatively secure position of the Australian union in industrial relations tended to diminish the need for formal

²³ V. Williams, *The Years of Big Jim*, (Willagee, W.A.: Lone Hand Press 1975), 122.

²⁴ 'WFTU Call for Unity of World Unions,' *Maritime Worker*, (August 25 1951) 8; 'Wharfies Need the W.F.T.U,' *Maritime Worker*, (April, 19 1952), 6; 'WFTU Unity to End Poverty, War,' *Maritime Worker*, (July 14 1953), 6; 'WFTO Warns of War Plans,' *Maritime Worker*, (7 June 1955), 8; 'Unions Condemn Raids on WFTU,' *Maritime Worker*, (20 March 1956), 7; 'Australians Attend WFTU,' *Maritime Worker*, (November 5 1957), 1 and others.

²⁵ ITF, *Solidarity*, 111.

²⁶ Lewis, ITF, 178-179.

involvement in the international organised labour movement, thus making affiliation between the WWF and the ITF unfeasible and unnecessary in the 1950s.

The first post-1945 years marked a new period of strength in the history of the wharf labourers' union. In that time the WWF gained an unprecedented influence in their struggles for better conditions on the waterfront. The WWF was able to absorb the Permanent and Casual Wharf Labourers Union – thus ending a bitter competition for recruiting members – and the WWF turned into a single industry-wide organisation with regional branches in all major ports around the country.²⁷ This took place alongside changes in the industry regulatory framework which furnished the union with a greater bargaining power in the labour market. The Stevedoring Industry Act passed by the federal Chifley Labor government in 1947, legitimised a closed shop system in the sector.²⁸ From now on virtually all wharf labourers had to be WWF members which boosted union numbers and also gave the union greater control over the workforce and its workplace negotiations.

The gang system of labour, having long historical roots, further boosted WWF industrial strength. A 25,000 strong workforce was organised into small permanent groups of fifteen to eighteen men each, tightly bound together by specific political or personal preferences. Many gangs played the role of extended families in which fellow workers collectively experienced important events of each other's life such as births, deaths or financial hardships. While fostering the feeling of comradeship between watersiders the system made their union stronger as an industry wide organisation.²⁹ Technologies of the day were also an important factor in forging labour unity. Handling sea cargo then commonly involved hard but simple

²⁷ Sheridan, *Cold war*, 60; Williams, *Years of Big Jim*, 59, 69.

²⁸ Stevedoring Industry Act of 1947, item 27

²⁹ Beasley, *Wharfies*, 118.

manual tasks with little differentiation in skills and knowledge.³⁰ The relative uniformity of work across the waterside labouring community contributed to the similarity of economic interests between its members and, thus, a greater degree of labour solidarity during workplace conflicts with management. In the end, the nature of stevedoring operations in which even minor industrial disturbances imposed high costs on employers added some advantage to the WWF.³¹

Coastal shipowners, managing a sizable fraction of stevedoring operations, were especially anxious about WWF industrial strength. Unlike Australia's international seagoing trade routes, which were dominated by foreign flagged carriers, the coastal trade was localised: it was domestic shipping companies that moved people and goods around the country. In the face of a new and increasing competition from land transport, coastal shipowners used their strong political representation in the federal and state parliaments to demand government protection from 'the full impact of labour market forces' on the waterfront.³² The election of the Liberal-Country Party government of Robert Menzies in 1949 thus placed the union into a very hostile political environment which lasted the long period of Menzies' prime ministership, until 1966. Political pressure exercised by the shipowners, and Menzies' own ideological antagonism to the WWF, meant the Liberal-Country Party government acted against waterside unionists. Rhetoric escalated about the 'Red Menace' as the ruling conservative coalition sought to remove communist influences on the waterfront.³³

³⁰ Fitzgibbon, 'The March of Mechanisation,' *Maritime Worker*, (March 15 1967), 2-3.

³¹ Hull, *Technological change*, 109.

³² Sheridan, *Cold war*, 92; A.Bach, *A Maritime History of Australia*, (West Melbourne, Vic: Thomas Nelson Australia, 1976), 376-377.

³³ Sheridan, *Cold war*, 69.

In the face of WWF radicalism, it is not surprising that the members of the Australian Stevedoring Industry Commission, a permanent government regulatory agency for the sector, indicated in their first report in 1950, 'the really extensive infiltration of the Communists into positions of office within the union'.³⁴ Menzies himself believed that the main danger of the CPA lay in its ability to influence the organised labour movement. He further argued that by drawing on 'cultivated talent for opportunism and leadership', which was combined with threat and abuse, that communists were able to keep control over the membership of key trade unions.³⁵ As a typical negative economic implication of this ideological influence, Menzies cited the attempts of 'the Communist-led Waterside Workers' Federation' to 'cripple' overseas trade by conducting well-organised actions against the vessels of particular shipping companies. He proudly commented that such hostile actions of the WWF were ceased by putting into force anti-strike causes of the Crimes Act.³⁶

Yet, despite all government efforts to undermine the industrial power of the WWF, the union generally managed to stay strong throughout the first decade of Menzies' rule. In 1954, the government's attempt to deprive the WWF of closed shop privilege by amending the Stevedoring Industry Act, sparked a nationwide strike during which the entire Australian waterfront remained idle for nearly two weeks.³⁷ Even though the Parliament voted for the proposed changes, the government was eventually forced to announce in March 1955 that the WWF would continue to exercise control over the recruitment of stevedoring labour.³⁸ The victory was made possible due to active support from the ACTU which adopted a platform

³⁴ Report of the Australian Stevedoring Industry Board, 1950, 16.

³⁵ Robert Menzies, *The Measure of the Years*, (London : Coronet Books, 1972), 131.

³⁶ Man to man: Australia today. Series of speeches by R.G. Menzies, 18 March 1953 cited in C.Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed*, (Hornsby, N.S.W.: George Allen & Unwin Australia, 1979), 334-335.

³⁷ Beasley, *Wharfies*, 168; Williams, *Years of Big Jim*, 133-141.

³⁸ Williams, *Years of Big Jim*, 140.

that employees applying for waterside work outside the WWF would be acted against as 'industrial renegades' by the whole trade union movement.³⁹ So painful was the defeat for the government that it did not endeavour to change stevedoring legislation again until the early 1960s. Apart from preserving a monopoly to regulate entry into the industry workforce, the union was also able to secure comparatively good wages and employment conditions for the membership. The 1956 Industry Award granted watersiders a considerable increase in hourly wages, six hours minimum of work shift, conditional compensation for public holidays not worked and thirty hours of annual sick leave entitlement.⁴⁰ With this industrial strength the WWF had no need for international organising to pursue the goals of its membership.

Facing change: the 1960s 'march of mechanisation'

After the relative stability of the 1950s the following decade of waterfront industrial relations and WWF history was marked by major change. The most important event was the unexpected death in 1961 of 'Big Jim' Healy and the subsequent election of the Newcastle Branch president, Charlie Fitzgibbon, to the position of General Secretary. Former Melbourne Branch President Jim Beggs remembers the 1961 election as a key moment, 'a turning point' in the WWF's history, 'that brought the Union from the far left back to the middle in line with true Labor policy.'⁴¹ It was crucial for the union's history, 'one of the most historic and significant elections on the wharf in Australia,' and it presaged political changes in the labour

³⁹ Williams, *Years of Big Jim*, 139; Hull, *Technological change*, 102

⁴⁰ Sheridan, *Cold war*, 228; Williams, *Years of Big Jim*, 158-59; Hull, *Technological change*, 89.

⁴¹ Jim Beggs, *Proud to be a Wharfie*, (North Melbourne, Vic.: Arcadia, 2013), 112.

movement more broadly.⁴² It signalled that the tide was turning for communist influence in the trade unions.

According to Wilton Brown, a former communist official and editor of the *Modern Unionist*, the period of the 1950s was 'a high point' in the CPA history.⁴³ Indeed, despite anti-communist attacks mounted by the Liberal-Country Party Government, the CPA played a prominent part in the industrial and political struggles of the day. Much of the CPA strength stemmed from communists' standings in the national trade union movement.⁴⁴ ACTU Congresses regularly voted for decisions advocated by communists, including resolutions on Hungary, national stoppages and the nationalisation of some industries. In the late 1950s there were four Party members (including Jim Healy) on the ACTU executive.⁴⁵ By the early 1960s CPA strength was waning, a reflection of global moves that split the CPA in 1963-1964, led to a general decline of Party membership, and reduced to one the number of executive members of the ACTU then belonging to the CPA.⁴⁶ The loss of the 1961 election by the WWF's Communist candidate was followed by a similar setback for Communist candidates in other unions - the Amalgamated Engineering Union, the Ship Painters and Dockers, Furnishing Trades, and smaller craft unions - reducing by one-third the list of unions in which communists had some influence.⁴⁷

In contrast to his predecessor, Fitzgibbon was sceptical about the usefulness of communism, and the strategies of class struggle for mobilising workers. Some decades later, in his

⁴² Beggs, *Proud to be a Wharfie*, 112.

⁴³ W.J. Brown, *The Communist Movement and Australia*, (Haymarket N.S.W.: Australian Labor Movement History Publications, 1986), 183.

⁴⁴ Alistair Davidson, *The Communist Party of Australia. A Short History*, (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution, 1969), 93

⁴⁵ Davidson, *Communist Party*, 142.

⁴⁶ T.O'Lincoln, *Into the Mainstream: the Decline of Australian Communism*, (North Carlton, Vic.: Red Rag 2009), 117-124; Davidson, *Communist Party*, 149.

⁴⁷ Davidson, *Communist Party*, 157.

unfinished autobiography, he heavily criticised Healy for his alleged commitment to the political will of the Communist Party and for being under Soviet control.⁴⁸ Fitzgibbon also emphasised that he 'did not want to be seen or become merely an anti-communist. ... I wanted to succeed as a trade union leader,' he said, 'not committed to revolution but to reforms, not committed to being a "bosses man" but committed to doing my best to improve the [lives] of those [the members] who employed me.' He distinguished his leadership goals and tactics from the communist leadership of Healy. He was he said 'Not committed to the political will of some party or foreign control but to the long term interest of the members of my union'.⁴⁹

Fitzgibbon's election was a political victory for the non-communist factions of the WWF and the 'unity ticket' of the ALP.⁵⁰ Before starting his career as a union official with appointment to the joint position as Vigilance Officer and President of the Newcastle Branch in 1953, Fitzgibbon had already been a member of the ALP for a number of years.⁵¹ He was able to move up the political ladder in the following years while working full time as a union official. The future WWF leader first served as president of the Newcastle Trades and Labour Council in 1957-1959, and then continued as a member of the ALP NSW Executive until 1972.⁵² Membership of the ALP executive opened a door into the national political arena which consequently allowed Fitzgibbon access to 'top politicians and Unionists' and enabled him to establish a good rapport with some of them.⁵³

⁴⁸ Fitzgibbon autobiography, NBAC, P102/91, 65.

⁴⁹ Fitzgibbon autobiography, NBAC, P102/91, 65.

⁵⁰ Beggs, *Proud to be wharfie*, 112;118-9

⁵¹ Fitzgibbon autobiography, NBAC, P102/91, 21-22.

⁵² *Labor Year Book*, (Sydney: Mass Communications Australia Pty. Ltd, 1973), 244; R.M.Martin, 'The ACTU Congress of 1983', *Labour History*, no. 45, (1983) 101

⁵³ Fitzgibbon autobiography, NBAC, P102/91, 39.

Such political connections proved to be valuable to Fitzgibbon in 1961 when he was competing against a communist candidate in the union's election for General Secretary. Aiming, in its own words, to help 'rid trade unionism of everything alien, un-Australian and anti-democratic' the Labor Party rendered Fitzgibbon considerable support to win the leadership of the WWF.⁵⁴ Party officials and ordinary ALP members actively engaged in printing and distributing election materials, providing advice and raising monetary funds for the voting campaign.⁵⁵ Right-wing labour organisations, but especially the Australian Workers' Union, too, aided Fitzgibbon by facilitating his numerous trips around the country to meet the electorate.⁵⁶ External assistance, significant though it might have been, was not, however, the decisive factor in Fitzgibbon's victory. Much more important, in the view of then ACTU President Bob Hawke, were Fitzgibbon's abilities as 'a vibrant, articulate leader' which, Hawke claims, despite Fitzgibbon's avowed political position, made him in the eyes of the union membership, the right man for the job.⁵⁷ Hawke's view is supported by the fact that Fitzgibbon remained in office for more than two decades, until his voluntary retirement in 1983. In the words of former Branch President, Jim Beggs, Charlie Fitzgibbon was 'a wonderful person, a giant in the trade union movement,' who then 'turned the WWF into a well-disciplined and respected organisation.'⁵⁸

Fitzgibbon's ambitions 'to succeed as a trade union leader' were very soon put to the test by the new industrial environment created by a rapid spread of new revolutionised methods of sea transportation. Until that time technologies in the sector were relatively static and

⁵⁴ Fitzgibbon autobiography, NBAC, P102/91, 48; Stephens D., 'Unity Tickets and the Victorian Branch of the ALP,' *Labour History*, no. 44, (1983) 70-71.

⁵⁵ Fitzgibbon autobiography, NBAC, P102/91, 48

⁵⁶ Blanche d'Alpuget, *Robert J. Hawke: a Biography*, (Melbourne Vic. : Schwartz in conjunction with Lansdowne Press 1982), 230-231

⁵⁷ R.J.Hawke, *The Hawke Memoirs*, (Port Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1994), 52.

⁵⁸ Beggs, *Proud to be wharfie*, 118-9

simple. Individual packages or boxes were commonly loaded on pallets, which were moved onto the ship with the aid of simple lifting devices. Waterside workers in the hold of the ship then needed to stow the load carefully to protect it from damage and movement during sea voyage. The cargo would have to be unloaded in the same lengthy way at the destination port. Alternatively, in the case of bulk commodities, such as coal or iron ore, loading as much as discharging involved manual shovelling combined with employment of a ship's gear. Handling both loose and bulk types of cargo was marked by high labour intensity, generating a large number of jobs on the waterfront, especially during economic upturns.⁵⁹

From the late 1950s on, 'the march of mechanisation', as Fitzgibbon himself labelled this process, gathered momentum. The installation of new sugar loading machinery in Queensland ports already made manual handling of bagged sugar almost defunct by the early 1960s.⁶⁰ This brought a first very serious blow to the Federation. Local labour engaged in very hard work was traditionally regarded as 'the roughest and toughest' in the waterside community. Those workers 'owed allegiance to no Company, town or State' but the union, and traditionally the WWF branches of northern sugar ports were very active, well-coordinated and well-financed.⁶¹ Technological changes in Queensland were followed by the introduction of mechanised loaders and dischargers for many other types of large-volume products in ports around Australia and the use of self-trimming vessels.⁶² What was also a

⁵⁹ Fitzgibbon, 'The March of Mechanisation,' *Maritime Worker*, (March 15 1967), 2 ; E.Bonacoch, & B.Wilson, *Getting the Goods: Ports, Labor and the Logistic Revolution*, (Ithaca,NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 50, 172; B.J. Cudahy, *Box Boats: How Container Ships Changed the World*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006),8-10; M.Levinson, *The Box : How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), Chapter 2,16-35.

⁶⁰ Australian Stevedoring Industry Authority (hereafter ASIA) report for the year ended 30th June, 1961, 17; Hull, D. 'Queensland sugar ports: labour and technological change,' *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, No. 6, (1979), 60-72

⁶¹ Hull, Technological change,127.

⁶² ASIA report for the year ended 30th June, 1958, 45; ASIA report for the year ended 30th June, 1963, 22-30.

new practice in the stevedoring industry is that loading operations were becoming an integral part of the production process of some large bulk exporters, which ousted WWF members from cargo handling.⁶³

Other technological advancements were related to a growing use of various mechanical equipment, ranging from fork-lift trucks and frontend loaders to highly specialised cranes which greatly mechanised the process of handling general cargo.⁶⁴ While such improvements fostered productivity they simultaneously reduced the requirement for manpower. Two ten-ton luffing cranes, for example, could unload a vessel with 7,000 tons of scrap iron in around ten shifts, employing around twelve workers in each shift. In the earlier period, before 1960, a similar ship could have taken up to a month to discharge using the labour of around half a thousand men.⁶⁵

The pace of technological change was already putting pressure on the WWF's ability to maintain its bargaining power during Healy's period of leadership. It gathered even more momentum in the decade afterwards. The most important novelty in terms of implications for the Australian waterside workforce came in the late 1960s, in the development of container shipping. It would then take from two to three weeks and around a hundred wharf labourers and foremen to load and discharge a conventional 12,000 ton vessel. By stark contrast, with containerisation the cargo of a container ship of 20,000 tons' capacity could be handled in twenty-four hours by just several employees who needed to operate two shore-based cranes along with some mechanical equipment to move containers on the wharf.⁶⁶ In

⁶³ ASIA report for the year ended 30th June, 1963, 22; Sheridan, *Cold war*, 312-313.

⁶⁴ ASIA report for the year ended 30th June, 1963, 22-23

⁶⁵ Fitzgibbon, 'The March of Mechanisation,' *Maritime Worker*, (March 15 1967), 4.

⁶⁶ 'Union Talks on Containers,' *Maritime Worker*, (June 15 1966), 1

1967 the WWF anticipated that in the five years to 1973 containerisation would have decreased the requirement for manpower in Australian ports by around 70 %.⁶⁷

Apart from reducing employment prospects on the waterfront, new transportation technologies also tended to fragment the structure of the waterside labour force and bring the WWF into demarcation disputes. Container consolidation and deconsolidation were performed in inland depots, and thus could hardly be considered as a typical port operation. This implied that the WWF was as much entitled to work in the depots as other unions, such as the Federated Storemen and Packers Union (SPU), were.⁶⁸ Moreover, even in ports, the growing employment of various machines made it apparent that many WWF members would eventually be substituted by technicians of various kinds who were covered by other unions.⁶⁹

The combined impact of all types of technological change on waterside labour in the timeframe of 1956-71 is summarised by Table 1. The result was a dramatic loss by one third in the number of registered waterside workers and a slump by nearly a half in employment time measured by man-hours. This took place against the background of an increasing volume of cargo, which doubled over the same period.

Table 1 Employment and productivity in Australian stevedoring industry

Year, ending June, 30 th	Number of registered waterside workers (daily averaged)	Total cargo handled by waterside workers ('000 tons)	Man-hours worked ('000)
1956	26,000	25,000	39,000

⁶⁷ Charlie Fitzgibbon, Report on Containerisation and General Shipping Development, NBAC, P 102/92.

⁶⁸ Fitzgibbon, 'The March of Mechanisation,' *Maritime Worker*, (March 15 1967), 4; Hull, Technological change, 256-263.

⁶⁹ S.Deery, 'The Impact of Technological Change on Union Structure: the Waterside Workers Federation,' *Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 25:4,(1983) 401-402; Charlie Fitzgibbon, 'Containerisation And Areas Of Work,' *Maritime Worker*, (July 26 1967), 5.

1961	22,000	28,000	30,000
1966	20,000	37,000	29,000
1971	16,000	47,000	23,000

Source: Annual reports of Australian Stevedoring Industry Authority for respective years.

So far as industrial relations were concerned, ‘the march of mechanisation’ eroded the industrial strength of the union. This was apparent in the ability of the Menzies Liberal-Country Party government to adopt new pieces of legislation, unfavourable to waterside labour. The 1961 Amendment to the Stevedoring Industry Act cut down long service leave entitlements, denied workers an industrial pension, and laid down indirect punitive measures for striking activities, while the 1965 Amendment deprived the union of the right to recruit labour.⁷⁰ In stark contrast to the 1954 national strike, no large-scale public actions of protest followed the new legislation. Indeed, a shrinking membership base and its fragmentation gave little chance to the WWF to use militant resistance as much as it did under Healy’s rule. In the 1960s the amount of time lost by an average worker due to industrial disputes dropped to nearly 300 hours, which was nearly one-third that of the previous decade .⁷¹

The weakening industrial strength of the WWF prompted its leadership to obtain more support at the national level and to promote collective industrial actions in the interests of WWF membership.⁷² Fitzgibbon was keen to take advantage of his influence in the ALP to

⁷⁰ Beasley, *Wharfies*, 201, 213-214, ASIA report for year ended 30th June, 1961, 40-42; ASIA report for year ended 30th June, 1962, 51, 59.

⁷¹ Calculated from ASIA annual reports

⁷² Jim Hagan, *The History of the A.C.T.U.* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1981), 356; Labor Year Book, 1973, 213; ‘Approval for Wharf stoppage,’ *Canberra Times*, (April 5 1962), 13; ‘National Port Halt Approve,’ *Canberra Times*,

defend watersiders' interests against new attacks from the ruling Liberal-Country Party government. Before the 1965 Amendment to the Stevedoring Industry Act was introduced to the Parliament, he and a dozen other senior union officials had a meeting with the representatives of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party's industrial committee to make sure that they would act in the favourable interests of the WWF.⁷³ In the debate in both Houses of the federal Parliament, the Labor Party opposition, indeed, 'put up a **sterner** (sic) fight ... to protect the A.L.P.'s reputation for militancy on the waterfront, for the benefit of the Labor General Secretary of the W.W.F.'⁷⁴

Yet, in the face of the far-reaching consequences of the technological transformation of the waterfront, occasional help from the ALP and the ACTU was hardly enough to enable the WWF to remain an important agent in stevedoring industrial relations. Reflecting on the complexity of the situation and the tasks facing the union leadership, Fitzgibbon stated in 1967, 'The industry is now going through a massive change on an international scale - a change that our Federation cannot prevent or even slow down.' Action was needed but the choice was stark. 'The argument must therefore be considered on the basis of do we resist change, or do we take from change the maximum that is possible to take, having regard to all the circumstances.'⁷⁵ Fitzgibbon's approach was to adopt the latter and seek advantage from the change, not futile resistance.

(May 14 1963), 3; 'Waterside Slate Ruling,' *Canberra Times*, (May 10 1963), 3; 'Watersiders to ask ACTU aid.' *Canberra Times*, (September 27 1965),.3;

⁷³ Hull, Technological change, 226.

⁷⁴ R.Cooksey, 'Political Review', *Australian Quarterly*, Vol.37:4 (December 1965),100-101; J.Gaul, 'Communist Weapon, Bitter Attack on Wharf Bill,' *Canberra Times*, (1 October 1965),1; J.Gaul, 'Waterfront Bill. ALP Fights a Losing Battle,' *Canberra Times*, (7 October 1965), 1.

⁷⁵ Cited in S. Deery, 'The Impact of the National Stevedoring Industry Conference (1965-67) on Industrial Relations on the Australian Waterfront', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol.20:2, (1978) 208.

The 'international scale' of change ultimately demanded that waterside unionists needed to view their challenges from the broader international perspective in order to define what steps should be taken to 'take from change the maximum'. Many of the new problems that technological innovations presented to the Australian waterside labouring community were not a local phenomenon. They were the result of a global complex process which was rapidly advancing across national borders and which was influencing WWF members as much as their fellow unionists in many other developed countries. The changing situation of the 1960s, therefore, provided the union leadership with a much greater incentive to pursue international labour cooperation than the preceding decade had done. Ironically then, it was the labourist reformer Charlie Fitzgibbon who led the WWF into the global sphere of union organising. His vision was to enjoin the WWF to the ITF's campaigns for transport workers worldwide.

First, it required a change in the ITF. Peter DeVries, General Secretary of the ITF visited Australia in 1962 and demonstrated the gulf between the ITF and the WWF when he criticised heavily Australian maritime unionists for their radicalism. The subsequent meeting of WWF Federal Council members adopted a special resolution condemning the ITF for 'completely ignoring the vital social, economic and political interests and problems of the workers' and for its 'interference in the internal affairs of an? Australian Trade Union.'⁷⁶ Council members further claimed that in doing so the ITF served the needs of capital and the Menzies government. That same year the Chairman of the Japanese dockers' union was similarly unimpressed when he met DeVries who 'started denouncing the ILWU and Brother Bridges'

⁷⁶ Minutes of WWF Federal Council Meeting, 19th October 1962 NBAC, N 114/131.

albeit in carefully chosen words.⁷⁷ Fitzgibbon later recalled that DeVries, 'had shown a marked lack of knowledge and perhaps some bad briefing when he had visited Australia.' At that time Fitzgibbon declined an invitation to attend 'a get together to meet DeVries'...In retrospect,' he said, 'it had been a wise decision, because I did not want to be associated with the statement DeVries had made after that meeting.'⁷⁸

A decade later, however, the situation had changed. The ITF elected a new General Secretary in 1968 and was focussing less attention on anti-communism and more on the rapidly increasing problem of Flag of Convenience carriers whose numbers doubled between 1967-1972.⁷⁹ By 1971, WWF union officials were impressed with what the ITF was doing to combat technological change. The enormity of that change and the new attitude, personnel and tactics of the ITF meant the time was now right for the WWF's move.

Internationalisation: a response to change

From the global viewpoint the transformation of Australia's stevedoring industry slightly lagged behind some other developed countries.⁸⁰ While affecting the efficiency of domestic cargo handling operations, this factor, however, yielded the WWF leadership some time to define how government and organised labour elsewhere had already responded to the

⁷⁷ All Pacific and Asian Dockworkers Corresponding Committee, Tomitaro Kaneda to Jack Hall, ILWU Regional Director, 4 May 1962, Folder ILWU History: Trade Union Foreign Relations -Japan, ILWU archives, San Francisco.

⁷⁸ Fitzgibbon autobiography, NBAC, NBAC, P 102/91, 159

⁷⁹ International Transport Workers' Federation, Flags of convenience – the ITF's campaign, London, ITF 1992, p. 20.

⁸⁰ ASIA report for year ended 30th June, 1958, 43.

change and then to learn from that experience. In the late 1960s the newly made amendments in British and French labour legislation immediately caught Fitzgibbon's attention. The new acts granted official support to a redundant workforce through provision of allowance payments and preservation of all pension and superannuation rights. By drawing on this evidence Fitzgibbon called for launching a public campaign in Australia to prompt the government to adopt similar laws.⁸¹

Passively studying international literature could hardly, however, provide a direct insight into the real problems of waterside labour outside Australia. This task required face-to-face interaction with local fellow unionists and personal visits to modernised workplace areas. This became apparent to the union leadership in the late 1950s. When Healy was elected to represent Australian transport unions at the Hamburg Conference of the International Labour Organisation in 1957, the union's officials considered it as an opportunity to fulfil 'the need for closer contact and the necessity for better information with and about the ports and ... brother workers overseas'.⁸² To this aim the WWF allocated funds to allow Healy to visit more than a dozen different destinations in nine countries apart from his participation in the ILO Conference which was subsidised by the Australian government. The result of this investigation was a large technical report presented to the members of the union's federal council.⁸³

In the last years of Healy's tenure as General Secretary, in 1959 and again in 1961, the WWF jointly with the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) on the west coast of the US, and the All Japan Dockworkers' Union, held two large conferences in

⁸¹ Fitzgibbon, 'The March of Mechanisation,' *Maritime Worker*, (March 29 1967),8.

⁸² 'Healy exposes False Attacks on I.L.O tour,' *Maritime Worker*, (February 26 1957),1

⁸³ Sheridan, *Cold war*, 257. WE SHOULD HAVE A REFERENCE to the COUNCIL MINUTES?

Tokyo. The definition of themselves as 'Pacific region maritime unions' included not only Australian, American and Japanese representatives, but also included unionists from some developing countries and the USSR and China. Even though the agenda included political questions, condemning the non-consultative practices and divisive policies of the ICFTU and the ITF, there were discussions of a number of economic problems shared by organised stevedoring labour across the region. These covered new developments in cargo handling, employment conditions, safety issues, medical care, workforce training, joint labour-management programs on new technological methods, and limitations against the right of unions to participate in national and international solidarity strikes. To coordinate consultations for 'the maintenance of fraternal relations, exchange of information, etc.' the 1959 conference set up a corresponding committee in which the WWF also took part.⁸⁴ Even though cooperation between Pacific maritime unionists was then limited to arranging only these two conferences, it did cause the ITF to worry over a potent rival in the region.⁸⁵

Among the delegates to the second Pacific Conference in 1961 was Charlie Fitzgibbon who then still held the position of the Newcastle Branch President. He recalled later that the event gave him - the 'naïve Australian unionist,'- an opportunity to develop some initial understanding of international organised maritime labour.⁸⁶ This experience very soon expanded tremendously since practical learning of developments in the global stevedoring industry with the aid of overseas unionists became one of his priorities as new WWF General Secretary. It all started in 1963 with an invitation from the ILWU to attend a union conference

⁸⁴ 'Parley For Wharfies,' *Maritime Worker*, (December 22 1958), 5; 'Second Pacific Dock Conference in 1960,' *Maritime Worker*, (2 June 1959),3; 'Ted Roach Tells Big Part Played by Japan Dockers,' *Maritime Worker*, (August 30 1961),5; Fitzgibbon autobiography, NBAC, P102/91, 40-42; WWF correspondence with All Japan dockers' union, 1961-1962, NBAC N114/91.

⁸⁵ ITF, *Solidarity*,113.

⁸⁶ Fitzgibbon autobiography, NBAC P102/91, 41-42.

in San-Francisco. At that time, the West-Coast of the United States was not only a world leader in waterfront technological change but the place applying a pioneering framework of industrial relations. This was embedded in the Modernisation and Mechanisation Agreement entered into between the ILWU and employers in 1960.⁸⁷ Fitzgibbon went to the conference and then spent nearly three weeks visiting local ports and liaising with labour to learn 'things of value to the Union for the future, in preparing for what must come.'⁸⁸ That overseas trip enabled him to perceive clearly the full-scale impact on the waterside workforce brought about by containerisation and the advanced industry technologies yet to come in Australia. At that time he became fully aware that the WWF would inevitably face massive demarcation conflicts with other unions and a dramatic reduction in membership with a decreasing size of the workforce in the very near future.⁸⁹

In the following years Fitzgibbon expanded the geography of his overseas trips by adding numerous destinations around western Europe where the stevedoring industry had also developed extremely rapidly.⁹⁰ Virtually, at each place he was able to increase his 'learning curve' by getting both negative and positive kinds of experience. Visiting Genoa he discovered the effectiveness of the local financial incentive scheme to promote safe working by stevedoring labour. The Hamburg port overwhelmed him with the high intensification of waterside work and fast ship turnaround. Yet, Southampton docks left an unpleasant feeling about the poor system of relations between union officials and the ordinary membership. He was, however, most impressed with the Rotterdam port and the assistance of the local union

⁸⁷ Bonacoch & Wilson, *Getting the goods*, 178.

⁸⁸ Fitzgibbon autobiography, NBAC, P102/91, 72

⁸⁹ Fitzgibbon autobiography, NBAC, P102/91, 73-75.

⁹⁰ Charlie Fitzgibbon c.v., NBAC, P 102/26; Bull, *Autobiography*, 105.

which helped to develop a thorough knowledge of the local training program of the workforce and a permanent system of employment.⁹¹

Contacts made by the General Secretary during his overseas study trips facilitated subsequent information exchange between WWF officials and their foreign counterparts. Collecting up-to-date evidence on employment conditions and collective bargaining contracts related to waterside labour of western European countries was important in the context of the rapidly changing environment of the domestic stevedoring industry which quickly made regulations and agreements outdated. As a result, throughout the 1960s the union was engaged in lengthy and complicated negotiations and enquiries with government and management to frame new policies and rules of industrial relations.⁹² In the eyes of the WWF leadership this ultimately made it 'imperative ... [to] obtain as much information as possible and as up-to-date information as possible about other waterfronts of the world' to aid the negotiation process.⁹³ Subsequently, senior union officials, but especially Fitzgibbon, regularly asked their fellow overseas unionists to provide specific pieces of evidence on changes in wages, sick leave entitlements, and pensions schemes, work intensity, working conditions, permanency arrangements and many other interrelated questions.⁹⁴

The development of container shipping further encouraged the federation to seek closer and more frequent international contacts. As a commercial undertaking, containerisation was characterised by very high capital intensity so it was large transnational consortiums that

⁹¹ Fitzgibbon autobiography, NBAC, P102/91,87-91, 110, 162; Industry Training Overseas Papers, NBAC Z432/39; WWF correspondence with overseas unions for 1968, NBAC N114/111

⁹² Hull, Technological change, Chapter 4

⁹³ WWF correspondence with overseas unions for 1965, the quote taken from Fitzgibbon's letter to T. O'Leary, then secretary of deckers section of British Transport and General Workers' Union, NBAC, N114/101; 'Overseas study to aid negotiations,' *Maritime Worker*, (May 27 1971), 1

⁹⁴ WWF correspondence with overseas unions for 1961-1962, NBAC N 114/91; WWF correspondence with overseas unions for 1965, NBAC, N114/101; WWF correspondence with overseas unions for 1965, N114/112; WWF correspondence with ILWU for 1969-1980, NBAC Z432/40

were now entering into the container shipping trade in Australia.⁹⁵ With enormous financial and technological power these new entrants clearly enjoyed a much stronger position against the WWF – a typical national-based organisation. This imbalance of industrial strength on the national level motivated the WWF and some other Pacific unions to seek approaches to ‘the same type of international cooperation around this field of containerisation as the big shipowners [were] doing.’⁹⁶ In this context, the WWF, the ILWU and the All Japan dockworkers unions organised a new Pacific Transport Workers International Conference in 1971 to consider collectively the development and impact of containerisation and to define strategies to minimise the threats posed to their memberships by technological changes.⁹⁷

Apart from intensifying collaboration with individual unions the WWF also accepted the need in the later 1960s to look to ‘wider forms of organisations [and] amalgamation of forces to allow consultation’ between organised labour bodies.⁹⁸ Fitzgibbon claimed later in an interview that at that particular time he ‘became quite impressed as an individual with the performance of the ITF on the international scene’. In an oblique reference to the changed ideological position of the ITF under General Secretary, Charlie Blyth who had worked as a seafarer on the Australian coast in the 1930s, Fitzgibbon also added ‘its objectivity, its support [...] for working class causes’. This impression, he said, led him to advocate for the idea of affiliation to the ITF to the members of the union federal council.⁹⁹ He omitted to add that an additional incentive came when the All Asia and Pacific conference meeting scheduled for

⁹⁵ Fitzgibbon, Report on containerisation, NBAC, P 102/92

⁹⁶ WWF correspondence with overseas unions for 1969, the quote taken from Fitzgibbon’s letter to T. O’Leary, then secretary of deckers section of British Transport and General Workers’ Union, NBAC, N114/112.

⁹⁷ ‘Pacific unions talks on container age mooted,’ *Maritime Worker*, (August 18 1969),7; ‘Fitzgibbon on overseas tour,’ *Maritime Worker*, (June 17 1971),1.

⁹⁸ Fitzgibbon, ‘The March of Mechanisation,’ *Maritime Worker*, (March 29 1967), 8.

⁹⁹ typescript of Fitzgibbon’s 1986 interview with Richard Raxworthy in the Labor Council of New South Wales oral history project, 1986, [ORAL TRC 1948/19](#); National Library of Australia Oral History Collection; also NBAC, P 102/21

1971 was abruptly cancelled by the ILWU at very short notice, leaving the WWF without its regional support base at a vital time. The ITF meanwhile had turned itself into a powerful and influential transport labour international covering millions of workers.¹⁰⁰ Joining this large international community of organised labour and actively contributing to it promised the WWF additional support in cases of local industrial disputes.¹⁰¹

At that time the ideological differences between the WWF and ITF leaderships had all but disappeared. The height of the Cold War had passed but so too had the ideological position of the ITF and WWF leadership changed. With Fitzgibbon's ascendancy and changes at the ITF there were no more disagreements over the supremacy of the market versus a state-controlled economy as the two organisations faced the common enemy of globalised technological innovation. Furthermore, Fitzgibbon could see a tactical advantage and wanted to use alliance with the ITF for a local political purpose. He was reluctant in the late 1960s to acknowledge this intention openly, but three decades later he was more forthcoming. Then he did stress the importance of affiliation to the ITF as 'play[ing] a part in publicity and more importantly, politically divorcing' the WWF from its well-known previous Soviet connection. It was, he said, 'A connection that was overplayed in Australia and was unfair to the great majority of wharfies and Branches anyway. I had been gradually moving that image away in Australia and the I.T.F. affiliation would play its part in assisting that process'.¹⁰²

Fitzgibbon's actions were not arbitrary. Despite amendments in the political character of the WWF leadership in the 1960s, there was still a deep-rooted public perception of the union as a communist-dominated organisation that was actively fostered by the union's opponents.

¹⁰⁰ Lewis, ITF, 365 (Table 6)

¹⁰¹ Fitzgibbon autobiography, NBAC, P102/91, 175.

¹⁰² Fitzgibbon, autobiography, NBAC, P 102/91, 163.

This created additional problems for the federation's struggles for its members. The 1965 changes to the Stevedoring Industry Act, so unfavourable to organised labour, were made by the Liberal-Country Party government under the pretence that 'Communist leadership of the W.W.F. dishonoured industrial agreements, defied the arbitration system and broke the rules of the trade union movement'.¹⁰³ What is more, even though on the whole the Labor party resisted the new legislation, some ALP parliamentary members were 'somewhat half-hearted in [their] opposition to the Bill, perhaps being fearful of directly supporting Communists.'¹⁰⁴ In Fitzgibbon's eyes, therefore, making a formal alliance with the ITF, a global labour organisation hostile to the Soviet system, would allow the WWF to reinforce the public message that it had moved away from its communist legacy.

Despite all the influence of the General Secretary, the union's policy was the prerogative of the members who always had the final word in making important decisions through elected representatives. The membership endorsed proposals of union officials by vote at regular triennial conferences. The suggestion to join the ITF was accordingly put forward at the 1970 conference. The process started with the joint report to the audience by top union officials, including Fitzgibbon, on international trade union affairs. The document stressed that under the growing global consolidation of shipping companies trade unions in the industry equally needed to combine their efforts internationally to protect labour standards. On that account it was suggested the WWF affiliate with the ITF as the organisation which performed 'some valuable work throughout the world' by waging solidary labour actions on a global level. It was especially emphasised that the ITF had a capacity to provide assistance to 'workers in developed countries such as Australia to meet the challenge of the changing technologies of

¹⁰³ Cooksey, *Political review*, 100-101

¹⁰⁴ Cooksey, *Political review*, 101

the transport industry’¹⁰⁵ It the concluding remark which preceded the successful voting by union members it was also stressed that the affiliation ‘would give the Federation a voice in world affairs and it is desirable to widen our international contacts and this will allow us to do that’¹⁰⁶

With a strong WWF interest conveyed to the ITF, the technicalities of affiliation went smoothly. At the beginning of 1971 the union federal council voted to join the ITF and allocated necessary funds to pay a membership fee. In June the same year, Fitzgibbon departed for London to have a preliminary informal discussion about the WWF intention with ITF officials. Even though they had some concerns with ‘the communist image’ of the union, the ITF response was a very positive one for two reasons. First, it was because of ‘the Federation connections in the A.C.T.U. and its standings in the Australian Trade Union Movement’ and second, because of ITF hopes that the new affiliate would contribute much to the global-scale campaign against ships registered in flags of convenience’ countries, such as Liberia or Panama’.¹⁰⁷ In view of these considerations the members of the ITF executive board promptly agreed to accept the WWF application for membership so that Fitzgibbon was already able to attend the ITF Congress held in Vienna in July 1971 as an official delegate.

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The Vienna event finalised the process of formal engagement of the Australian union into the international organised labour movement. This had started in the late 1950s in the last years of Healy’s leadership when the internationalisation of the stevedoring industry environment

¹⁰⁵ WWW Federal Officers’ Report to 21st All Ports conference commencing 21st September, 1970, NBAC Z432 Box 19

¹⁰⁶ Minutes of 21st All Ports conference, 2nd October, 1970, NBAC Z432 Box 19.

¹⁰⁷ Fitzgibbon autobiography, NBAC, P102/91, 163, 174.

¹⁰⁸ Fitzgibbon autobiography, NBAC, P102/91, 163, 166.

prompted the WWF to develop closer contacts and greater information exchange with overseas dockers' unions. The application of internationalised technologies increased dramatically on the Australian waterfront in the following decade and so did the need of domestic waterside unionists for cooperation with their counterparts outside the country.

The election of Fitzgibbon to the position of General Secretary was, however, the important factor in the WWF's drive to internationalisation. It removed the crucial ideological barrier to WWF affiliation with the ITF which concomitantly made it easier to establish contacts with unions from other developed, western bloc, countries. More importantly, it brought Fitzgibbon's vision of a successful trade union leader to the problem of managing change for waterside workers.

Conclusion

In a quarter century period following World War II the relationship between the WWF and the organised international trade union movement went through two stages. Until the end of the 1950s the federation had little incentive to develop permanent bonds with international organised labour. Its strong industrial power due to a highly organised and homogeneous waterfront workforce meant the Union was largely a self-reliant organisation with no need for support from an international organisation. The WWF's short term engagement in the pro-Soviet WFTU was not dictated by economic necessity but rather the ideological preferences of then General Secretary Healy's communist leadership. The same ideological reason also conditioned the negative attitude of the WWF to the anti-Communist ITF, thereby continuing a much longer tradition of abstention

In the late 1950s-early 1960s the union encountered a greater need for close cooperation and regular contacts with overseas organised labour which marked the beginning of the second

stage. This drive for internationalisation stemmed from a rapidly globalising stevedoring industry environment which presented Australian waterside unionists and their counterparts from developed countries with the same type of problems. Learning how dockers' unions outside Australia responded to these common challenges gave a greater chance to the WWF leadership to identify correctly the new trends in the industry, make correct judgements about the future, and lead on that basis. It is hard to underestimate the significance of Charlie Fitzgibbon's role in recognising and guiding that change.

As the functions of the ITF involved provision of information to member trade unions and the facilitation of cooperation between them on the global level, the WWF had developed a powerful incentive to join this transport workers' international by the late 1960s. This was combined with a strong desire of the new WWF leadership to reorient the pro-communist stance of the wharfies union and align it to the ITF which clearly promised to achieve this objective. These two economic and political reasons ultimately led the Australian union to affiliation with the ITF, and thus integration into the international organised labour movement. It was the leadership of Charlie Fitzgibbon to foresee the need and enable the manoeuvre.