6 Employers of the world, unite!

The transnational mobilisation of industrialists around World War I

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“The social explosiveness of capitalism increased”, writes Jürgen Kocka, when “It began to expand from the sphere of circulation to the sphere of production and to reshape the world of work directly”.¹ The Industrial Revolution, the rise of the factory and the dynamics of capitalist investment were global phenomena. They changed the world of work as men and women left their rural and semi-rural lives to become like cogs, semi-automatons in the production of vast amounts of manufactured goods, which in turn generated streams of cash for the factory owners. Workers, however, soon embraced internationalist agendas to advance their political rights in society and prevent wages and working conditions racing to the bottom; “Workers of the world, unite!” famously urged Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848.² The successive international gatherings of political parties of the left are important benchmarks in working class cooperation, from the Communist League (established in 1847), to the First (1864), Second (1889), Third (1919) and Fourth (1938) *Internationales*. Trade unions also enthusiastically welcomed internationalist agendas. Bricklayers, miners, stonemasons, transport workers and woodworkers established international federations before the end of the nineteenth century. An International Secretariat of National Trade Union Centres was created in 1901 and was transformed into the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) in 1913.³

As a consequence, workers’ uprisings and the desire to protest and strike spread across the world. Eric Hobsbawm described the “Springtime of the Peoples”, in 1848, as “the first potentially global revolution”; while the 1871 Paris Commune and its bloody repression sent out a global shockwave. Even before the rulers of Austria, Germany and Russia created the Three Emperors’ League in 1873 to combat the threat from workers collaborating internationally – a “capitalists’ counter-International”⁴ – French lawyer Léon Chotteau (1838–95) criticised the “apathy and inertia of capital” and suggested that employers’ best option to prevent such social uprisings was to create an “Association Internationale des Patrons”, composed of an international council made up of national and local divisions, which would spearhead ambitious plans of social reform. “So, industrialists and traders, rise!” he wrote in his brochure.⁵ Chotteau’s initiative failed to take wing and fly, though; only two industrialists showed up at the general gathering he organised in Paris to lay the foundations of his *Internationale*. Similarly

unsuccessful was the initiative of the Paris British Chamber of Commerce in 1874–75 to create a “Chambre de Commerce Internationale” in order to provide a private international forum to debate commercial issues.⁶ The idea of an *Internationale* in the employers’ camp was floated again during the wave of strikes around 1900, but only in 1920 would the International Organisation of Industrial Employers (IOIE) be finally founded, with a light secretariat in Brussels, as a rallying point for employers’ representation in the new (tripartite) International Labour Organisation (ILO). During one of the first meetings of the new organisation, Allan Smith (1871–1941), chairman of the British National Confederation of Employers’ Organisations, told his fellow employers’ delegates, who were from Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Italy, Sweden and Switzerland, why the foundation of the IOIE was necessary. The minutes quote:

He laid stress on the importance of employers realising the great responsibility which rested on them in these days, when from so many quarters, even from certain Government officials, strong attacks were being made on capital and private ownership, and how they must recognise the significance of these attacks and get together and discuss all aspects of industry. He thought this could not be done satisfactorily in these days of the International Labour Organisation without the employers of labour meeting internationally and discussing their difficulties and striving to bring about uniformity of action as far as such was practicable, and thus vindicate beliefs in the duties and necessities, in the interests of the world’s trade, of private employers of labour.⁷

From Paris to Brussels, via Zurich, Turin, Stockholm and Washington, this chapter tells the story of employers’ transnational collaborations to unite and mobilise against labour’s political, economic and social challenges. At the centre of this story are employers’ associations, which specialised in addressing issues related to labour, most importantly about strikes. Created around 1900, these associations were vastly different from the older trade associations and chambers of commerce. The literature is rich with many case studies of capitalists’ individual and collective actions, and investigations have been made of both trade associations and chambers of commerce (in which capitalists act as businessmen) and employers’ associations (in which capitalists are represented as employers of labour). While these different bodies – and their actions – should not be regarded as separate entities, as they constitute “an integrated area of research in which market trends, technological innovations, entrepreneurial strategies, industrial relations and political concerns are all interrelated”, the history of trade and employers’ associations is one of separate dynamics in response to specific challenges. Numerous studies have shown that while most national trade associations were created in the last third of the nineteenth century in response to the increasing intervention of the state in the economy and the imposition of tariffs – “organized capitalism” – most employers’ associations were created after 1900 specifically to combat increasing labour militancy, in workplaces and in societies, at both local and international levels. Some associations specifically formed to

fight trade unionism were, however, created as early as 1890, like Britain's Shipping Federation, founded in reaction to the London dock strike of 1889, and the Arbeitgeberverband Hamburg-Altona, which mobilised employers in this stronghold of German trade unionism.⁸

Strikes "had launched a cycle of worker-employer strife whose ultimate destination no one could predict", Daniel Rodgers writes, and industrialists had the most to lose from workers' mobilisation and the new world order that internationally minded socialists wanted to create. Nations on both sides of the Atlantic around 1900 were hence haunted by the "social question", which opened up a battlefield between "a world of competing solutions". The mobilisation of employers in professional, well-founded and disciplined associations, I seek to demonstrate in this chapter, was part of this battle. The foundation of employers' associations took a good share of wind from unions' sails, reinforced the most reactionary elements among employers and conservative governments, and gave the upper hand to the employers that chose not to compromise with workers, but to confront them. In most countries, employers' self-organised defence pre-dated the first significant interventions by the state in the labour market and in social policies, which massively pre-empted the range of possibilities that could be implemented afterwards because it solidified a "constituted field of interests" that would prove difficult to overcome.⁹ In other words, the employers got the first shots in, in many countries. This chapter argues that employers' associations were pivotal in the conservative response of industrialists to progressive ideas promoted by the labour movement; "Reactionary Avant-Gardes", wrote Hans Ulrich Jost. They were against (industrial) democracy, welfare policies and economic redistribution, and they fashioned conservatism during the Belle Époque in ways that are only now beginning to be fully understood.¹⁰

While most studies of employers' mobilisation have concentrated on regional or national analyses, this chapter will consider the foundation of employers' associations as a distinct transnational event, because the reasons why they were created, their respective constitutions and their actions all followed clear transnational patterns. The men – and very few women – and organisations involved in that process that would meet in the IOIE in 1920 had established powerful local, sectoral and national employers' associations around 1900 that convened internationally, learnt from one another, and built social, political and economic influence, from their local town hall to Geneva's Palais des Nations, in complex *jeux d'échelles*.¹¹ Because global history is "both an object of study and a particular way of looking at history", this chapter seeks to demonstrate that "what we call the 'local' is replete with elements of 'global' origins and vice versa", hence illustrating that internationalism was as important a factor in employers' collective action as it was for the representatives of labour.¹² As regards employers, however, as Philippa Hetherington and Glenda Sluga show, there was an illiberal internationalism that was locked into a continuous interaction with liberal internationalism.¹³ The chapter begins by discussing the transnational contacts that framed the creation of European employers' associations before World War I, then progresses to the genesis of the IOIE, in which all of these contacts crystallised after the war ended.

The “social question” and the creation of employers’ associations

In 1909, Swiss socialist leader and trade unionist Robert Grimm (1881–1958) advanced his view that the creation of employers’ associations had dramatically changed the labour movement. He wrote:

The times when trade unions could mow down one firm after the other are gone forever. Every raid on a firm is henceforth considered as a declaration of war on all employers. Immediately, the employers’ federation enters the game and puts all its force to crack down on any strike and to make it ineffective.

Worried by what he called “employers’ terrorism”, but ready to take on this new challenge he rhetorically asked whether coalesced employers, “would succeed in preventing strikes forever and in demolishing trade unions?”¹⁴ Just a year later, Eduard Sulzer-Ziegler (1854–1913), a major Swiss industrialist from the Sulzer company in Winterthur, warned his fellow employers about the dangers of the labour movement, as it “had declared a war on the entire social order, capitalism in general and the firm in particular”. “*Si vis pacem, para bellum*” explained Sulzer-Ziegler: “If the employers want peace, they must unite; otherwise, if they fail to unite, if they do not get prepared for the war, then they will have the war as a matter of certainty”.¹⁵

In Switzerland, strikes had reached their peak in around 1905–06, but this pattern of behaviour was replicated all over the industrialised world. At the turn of the century, trade unions and employers’ associations both grew increasingly well organised, with each side claiming that they needed to be ready and able to face a better coordinated opposite side. “In every instance, the organization of labor is more extensive than that of the capital employing the labor”, wrote the Illinois Coal Operators Association in 1901.¹⁶ In addition, in some places, the state, although not remotely as interventionist as it would become directly after the war, and then to a greater extent in the 1930s, did not stay totally inactive. In 1902, a massive coal strike in Pennsylvania caused a coal shortage in the US that led to Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919) intervening and imposing a mediated agreement. Laws on arbitration and extension of collective labour agreements were still in their early stages, but it was becoming clear that the fight to alter public intervention would become a much higher priority for employers. Another source of concern for employers was the fact that from 1899 – when for the first time, a socialist became part of the French government – employers started to doubt the state’s resolve to take their side in the face of threats from the labour movement, a threat they perceived as existential. In fact, social policy and/or labour market regulations gained global traction around 1900, as Daniel Rodgers highlighted,¹⁷ and all employers had to face them in one way or another.

Industrialists all over the world watched strikes erupting and the labour movement becoming better organised. Industrialists viewed this as socially, economically and politically threatening. Strikes were increasing everywhere, and

qualitative changes also took place: for instance the general strike became another weapon in the unions' armoury. Swedish trade unions organised a two-day general strike to gain political rights, just like Austrian and Belgian unions did. The German Social Democrats of the SPD passed a resolution in 1905 in support of the use of general strikes to advance political rights.¹⁸ In response, numerous publications urged industrialists to meet this challenge by the foundation of associations of defence: "*Gründet Arbeitgeberverbände!*" ("Create Employers' Associations!") wrote Wilhelm Georg Heinrich von Reisswitz (1859–1926), the secretary of the Arbeitgeberverband Hamburg-Altona in 1904.¹⁹ Such calls to action put forward the argument that:

The individual employer confronted with organised workers is at a disadvantage. Often, he must choose between binding to the demands that workers and their leaders dictate, or to stop his business altogether. This evil can be solved thanks to the organization of employers, so that unjustified workers' claims can be denied. But, for business activities to be safeguarded from economic damages, one should not wait that workers' said unjustified claims be formulated; the collective action must have been prepared for a long time already, and an organization must be created which is not only valid for one single case, but for all cases.²⁰

Those publications reviewed foreign experiences in Britain and in Germany, in Sweden or in the USA, and adapted such models to their local context.

Large extended strikes motivated business owners to create employers' associations in a region, sector or nation. Transnational waves of activity sprang up, from Pittsburgh to the Ruhr region, from Petersburg to Turin. All over Europe, employers were confronted with similar events. Their response often varied, though, between the stick and the carrot, and syncretic plans combining strikes insurances, lockouts and the provision of strikebreakers were regularly promoted alongside plans of social reform and negotiations with trade unions.²¹ Large industrial companies were the spearhead of this movement. Copenhagen's heavy industry firms had already created the *Foreningen af Fabrikanter i Jernindustrien i København* in 1885, followed by the national *Arbejdsgivere inden for Jernindustrien i Danmark* in 1902. British employers founded the Engineering Employers' Federation in 1896, French employers created the *Union des Industries Métallurgiques et Minières* in 1901, and Swedish industrial companies founded the *Svenska Arbetsgifvareföreningen SAF* in 1902 in response to the general strike. In response to the 1903–04 Crimmitschauer strike in Germany (in the textile industry), employers established the *Hauptstelle der Deutschen Arbeitgeberverbände* in 1904;²² the National Association of Manufacturers, which had been founded in 1895 in Cincinnati, refocused its action against trade unions in 1903; and the Swiss machine industrialists created the *Arbeitgeberverband der Maschinenindustrieller* in 1905, which in turn joined with similar associations from the textile and construction industries to create a centralised association, the *Zentralverband Schweizerischer Arbeitgeber Organisationen*, in 1908.

As Grimm noted in 1909, the literature has highlighted the way that the creation of employers' associations turned the tide in industrial conflicts during the first decade of the twentieth century. Nicolas Delalande underlines the importance of the new strikes' insurances created by employers' associations,²³ and Leopold Haimson writes that these new associations offered an "increasingly ferocious resistance" to threats to managerial power, strikes in particular. With Germany in mind, Haimson highlights

the ability and will that employers, especially those of large metal and mechanical firms, displayed individually and in concert in resorting to the use of blacklists, lockouts, as well as "yellow" unions, to stifle labor protest and to destroy the effectiveness of existing trade unions organizations.²⁴

The deployment of strikebreakers became a very useful weapon of the employers with which to confront strikes, while lockouts became an effective tool for well-funded employers' associations, as they would dry up trade unions' strike insurance funds.²⁵ Violence was not rare, in particular in the USA, where the Pinkerton detective agency became an option for employers, but also in Britain, where the Shipping Federation used private guards to protect strikebreakers and oppose industrial democracy in ways that "explicitly called into question the state's monopoly of violence".²⁶ There were often "bloodless victories" won by the employers, though, whereby management exercised its power by alternative means.²⁷ On both sides of the Atlantic, employers' associations initiated anti-union policies, political measures aimed at the authorities and political parties and measures aimed at the discipline of their own members. Their attitude to blacklists or lockouts was that they must be rigorously implemented, with no room for ill-discipline. To achieve this those associations gathered more expensive contributions from their members to finance the strike insurances and propaganda and imposed strong discipline on their members.²⁸

These associations' creation marked the changing balance of power between labour and capital. In 1905, Swedish employers started using lockouts on a large scale, with Siemens managing to destroy labour unions in its plants and usurping them with a scientific mixture of repression and targeted social policies.²⁹ Employers would often resort to appealing to nationalist sentiments, using unions' internationalist agenda strategically against them. Strikes, indeed, instigated diverse sorts of migrations, with international solidarity fundraising for strikers and the international exchange of strikebreakers between employers. Christian Koller argues that "strikes and strike-related transnational migration [of locked-out workers and strikebreakers] were the main causes of international cooperation between national trade unions and employer organizations".³⁰ In addition, strikes tended to evolve in waves that would swipe entire regions and reverberate from places to places, hence becoming increasingly European in scope and sometimes even transatlantic; this made strikes and strikers particularly vulnerable to xenophobic bashing.³¹

Men who would prove instrumental in the creation of employers' associations, like Winterthur industrialist Sulzer-Ziegler, also gathered internationally in trade

associations, chambers of commerce and international conferences on social policy. From 1905 onwards, thousands of business delegates from all over the world discussed issues related to ever-increasing economic global exchanges in the International Congresses of Chambers of Commerce and Commercial and Industrial Associations, which took place every second year in a European or American town. In the preparation for the Milan gathering of 1906, a brochure described the organisation of chambers of commerce in 31 separate countries, the explicit aim being to promote the exchange of practices and mutual understanding among businesspeople from whatever part of the world they came from.³²

For the unions and social reformists, after the first international conference for the protection of labour took place in Berlin in 1890, social policy debates gained an increasingly explicit international dimension too. Up to World War I, many international conferences – initiated by social reformists and trade unionists – promoted the idea of developing an international set of labour standards and social protection measures. A significant result of this was the creation of the International Association for Labor Legislation (IALL), which was founded in 1900 with headquarters in Basel and was considered as a frontrunner for the ILO in 1919. Not all employers frontally opposed international labour regulations, as leveling the playing field might appeal to some of them. Sulzer-Ziegler, for instance, was a delegate in the IALL. In this domain, he followed a tradition pioneered by Welsh progressive industrialist Robert Owen (1771–1858) and Frenchman Daniel Legrand (1783–1859).³³

Strikes and the international organisation of the labour movement provided another reason for employers to build international collaborations. Following strikes running across borders (like in 1904–05 throughout Germany and Switzerland), employers took international trips to see how their foreign counterparts dealt with such actions, and how they fought back. Key actors of employers' movements in different countries thus had sustained exchanges; Sulzer-Ziegler and Alexander Tille (1866–1912), an important organiser of German employers, deputy secretary of the *Centralverband Deutscher Industrieller* and social Darwinist philosopher, knew each other well.³⁴ Another Swiss machine industrialist, Gustave Naville (1848–1929), who was a key figure in the 1905 foundation of the *Arbeitgeberverband schweiz. Maschinenindustrieller*, went to Munich, Berlin and Nuremberg to study how his German colleagues operated before laying down the plans of the future Swiss organisation. In this last city, Naville met with the director of the *Maschinenfabriken Augsburg-Nürnberg AG (MAN)*, Anton Johann von Rieppel (1852–1926). In 1905, Rieppel was president of the *Verband Bayer Metallindustrieller* and had just dealt with an important strike, which concerned the labour unions' demand to sign a collective agreement, a demand that German and Swiss employers rejected. In those days, German employers were among the most advanced in their ability to counter labour unions, and Naville came back with a clear idea of what needed to be done in Switzerland. Back from his trip, he remarked that "Everywhere, the necessity to create stronger organizations, with a permanent secretariat and sufficient means at their disposable, is shared".³⁵ It is an interesting point that at that time, MAN was one of the main competitors of

some of the key Swiss machinery industry firms, like *Escher Wyss*, the firm in which Naville had made his career. Normal business competition between firms was therefore no barrier to preventing key industrialists from helping one another to deal with major waves of strike action. In the same way, the 1908 establishment of the Swiss *Zentralverband Schweizerischer Arbeitgeber Organisationen* was majorly influenced by Germany.³⁶

Indices of employers' new organisational efficiency can be found in the full-blown victory for Swedish employers in the 1909 general strike; this incited major interest in Europe, and not only because European trade unions massively helped with funds to strike in solidarity with their Swedish comrades.³⁷ The *Svenska Arbetsgivarföreningen* actually initiated the hostilities through lockouts. Its director, Hjalmar von Sydow (1862–1932), who was in charge on the employers' side, received visits of Europeans eager to learn from his experiences – for instance the secretary of the German employers' federation, Fritz Tänzler (1869–1944), and von Sydow toured Europe to explain his techniques afterwards. Interestingly he himself had visited Germany in 1904 to learn how German employers had taken control over labour exchanges (*Arbeitsnachweis*).³⁸ After his success in Sweden, he went to at least Austria, Germany and Switzerland – but most certainly to other countries as well – and paid a visit to the Krupp plant in Essen. Tänzler, as well as his Swiss colleague Otto Steinmann (1876–1961), the secretary of the *Zentralverband*, held conferences and wrote brochures describing the events and victories in Sweden; they expounded at length on the lessons that German and Swiss employers could draw from these events. There was a great deal of interest in Steinmann's analyses and his publications shaped employers' responses to the 1918 general strike in Switzerland.³⁹ Further information was circulated to employers in 1910, with the publication of a brochure by Steinmann; the prime conclusions were republished when the threat of a general strike loomed in the fall of 1918. Steinmann wrote that a general strike "did not represent such a great risk for society and for employers as one might think". Based on the Swedish experience, he argued that "If harsh measures are taken to maintain public order and security, if citizens, courageous and fearless, fulfil essential tasks, and, finally, if employers hold together and maintain solidarity among themselves, the failure of the general strike is unavoidable".⁴⁰ When military provocations forced trade unions to declare a general strike in November 1918 (a few weeks after Steinmann published his article), employers were ready, remained in close contact with the army and had already advanced plans to create private militias: all lessons learnt from Sweden. In three days, trade unions had to surrender.

Such informal encounters among employers reinforced already existing contacts in sectoral international associations. The International Federation of Master Cotton Spinners' and Manufacturers' Associations, founded in 1904, had goals such as the regulation of prices or the provision of commercial arbitration services.⁴¹ Others were created to battle trade unions, like the International Shipping Federation, founded in 1909. Under British leadership and despite fierce competition, shipowners and port employers cooperated internationally, including

through transnational exchanges of strikebreakers.⁴² Through these international bonds, employers sought to echo the workers' international collaborations with organisations of their own that were of equal strength. Some trade unions signed agreements facilitating the mobility of their respective members: for instance, enabling migrant workers not to have to pay union fees in every country, but just in one. The mutual support that those agreements provided varied significantly. Most mentioned, for instance, that members would refuse to work as strikebreakers. Others used international congresses and conferences to meet with each other, enabling practices and information to be shared across countries. The most advanced form of international cooperation between trade unions was the foundation of international secretariats or international trade unions. As a case in point, an International Metallurgists' Bureau of Information was established as early as 1893 by trade unions of six European countries, which paved the way for the foundation of the International Metalworkers' Federation in 1904. By 1900, there were as many as 17 of these international trade union secretariats; by 1914, the number had risen to 28.⁴³ An International Secretariat of National Trade Union Centres was created in 1901 and was transformed into the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) in 1913. However, only four international unions (in the textile, lithography, fur and bricklaying sectors) had an international strike fund at the time of World War I. Others gave their financial support to unions in other countries when they could, on a case-by-case basis. Overall German unions played a leading role, if not the prime role, in most of these international unions, until World War I at least.⁴⁴ National employers' associations in different countries combatted this by also signing agreements. The Swiss *Zentralverband*, for instance had such an agreement with Austrian and German employers, the main objectives of which consisted of preventing the migration of striking and locked-out workers. As early as 1907, employers' associations from Denmark, Finland and Sweden met regularly and introduced some level of coordination, even on the rates of wages.⁴⁵ Those formal and informal transnational contacts would become the roots of the IOIE, the employers' *Internationale*.

The genesis of the International Organisation of Industrial Employers

In 1911, the Italian lawyer Gino Olivetti (1880–1942), the founder of the *Lega Torinese degli Industriali* in 1906 and of the *Federazione Industriale Piemontese* in 1908, and by then the secretary of the 1910-founded *Confederazione Generale dell'Industria Italiana*, the central Italian employers' association, invited European employers in Turin to the first “*Congrès International des Organisations Patronales de l'Industrie et de l'Agriculture*” (28–30 September and 1 October). Olivetti contended in his invitation letter that

In all countries, the employers' class finds itself confronted by the same problems, born from the same causes: the universal effects of economic laws, the rise of social reform policies in all countries, the existence in all industrial

centres of a labour movement which offers everywhere the same fundamental characteristics and uses of the same methods.

“As a consequence”, Olivetti continued, an obligation has risen “for employers to organize the defence of their interests against the charges of new regulations by the state on the one hand, and against the actions of the labour movement on the other hand”. Olivetti suggested three themes for the conferences: comparing the organisation and strategies of employers in different countries, their stance on the labour movement and also over social policies, while he also suggested that “a great good” might come from employers debating “the results of their experiences and the teachings of their actions”.⁴⁶

In addition to numerous Italian employers, the congress’s honorary committee comprised presidents of sectoral and national employers’ associations and chambers of commerce: one British, one Austrian, one Swedish (von Sydow), one Belgian and 12 Frenchmen. Although little is known about the Congress itself its final resolution is well documented. It called for the strengthening of employers’ associations in every way, testifying of the common will that employers expressed in Turin. The congress gave a special mission to two Belgian congressmen – Jules Lecocq (1878–1961), a lawyer, and Jules Carlier (1851–1930), a former Belgian MP, commissioner of the Belgian delegation to the Universal Exhibitions of 1889 and 1903. Lecocq and Carlier were respectively secretary and president of the *Comité central industriel de Belgique*. The congress commissioned them to plan an organisation that would become a permanent international employers’ association; hence this represents a decisive moment in the history of employers’ international cooperation. Lecocq and Carlier became “pilgrims”, touring Europe to spread this idea to employers’ associations on the continent.⁴⁷ In 1912, they went to Paris to meet with the *Comité des Forges*. They went to London and Manchester the same year and to Berlin and Vienna in 1913, with Lecocq then drafting statutes for an international organisation of employers. A meeting was organised in May 1914 in Paris between Austrian, Belgian, British, French, German and Italian employers. If one is to trust the account Lecocq gave of the event, the birth of the International Association of Employers was greeted by a toast from each delegation. Had World War I not brought these internationalist projects to a brutal stop, an employers’ *Internationale* would have been founded during that summer of 1914. The idea of such an *Internationale* in the employers’ camp, which had failed after the Paris Commune in 1871, was now ready to be implemented. While chambers of commerce had only started to meet internationally in 1905, several years after their establishment, employers’ associations convened very soon after they were founded. Launched in Turin in 1911, celebrated in Paris in 1914, the employers’ *Internationale* came back in force after World War I.⁴⁸

The aftermath of World War I was marked by the creation of the League of Nations and the ILO, two paramount examples of the new politics of the time; these types of initiatives were now happening on a global scale.⁴⁹ Employers found themselves on the defensive while massive strike waves ran all over the Atlantic world and beyond at the end of the war; centuries-old Central European empires

crumbled and social revolution proliferated all over Europe. From employers' points of view, "recasting bourgeois Europe" turned out to be a tricky task after the earthquake of the *Grande Guerre*.⁵⁰ International trade unions had long been advocating for an international regulation of labour and had a clear upper hand when work to establish the ILO started. Among other things, the tripartite structure of the ILO – where states, trade unions and employers met at all levels of the organisation – was a victory for labour.⁵¹ The IFTU resumed its activities in the summer of 1919⁵² and it was Emile Vandervelde (1866–1938), the leader of the Second *Internationale* since 1900, who gave the main speech at the Versailles Conference in April 1919 about the creation of the future ILO. As a member of the Commission on International Labor Legislation, whose task was to prepare the foundation of the future international organisation, he was a key figure in the shaping of its structure. In Versailles, he spoke of the ILO as "a work of transition between the absolutism of the employers that was the regime of yesterday, and the sovereignty of labor, that . . . would be the regime of tomorrow".⁵³ Such ideas directly challenged employers' power and were interpreted as such, as the ILO offered international unions the opportunity to implement their long proposed agenda for an international regulation of labour. Employers had been less influential in the preparation of the First International Labor Conference in Washington, D.C., held in October and November 1919, and their delegates had no clear strategy during the conference. Labour representatives, in contrast, had organised an office in Washington before the conference and were very well prepared. As a result, they managed to get most of their delegates elected.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the Labor Conference adopted the first internal labour convention that limited working time to eight hours a day, the single most important international claim made by the labour movement since the middle of the nineteenth century. Even if some employers supported it, that decision substantiated for most of them the danger of the ILO's new global labour politics.⁵⁵

This was all it took for employers' representatives in Washington to create the IOIE. After several preparatory meetings on 22 March 1920, in London, and on 7 June 1920, in Genoa, statutes were adopted on 1 and 2 October 1920, in Brussels. The IOIE's Brussels office opened in 1920 with a staff of only three people: Jules Lecocq, who had toured Europe between 1911 and 1914, was chosen as the secretary for the IOIE, and he could count a few years later on the help of an assistant and a stenographer. The first president of the IOIE was Jules Carlier, the other "pilgrim" of the pre-World War I times. Other members of the first elected executive committee were either major industrialists, typically the president of the central national employers' federations or the professional director of these federations. Some of them, like Frenchman Robert Pinot (1862–1926), the secretary of *Comité des Forges*, a key figure of the Musée social and close to Frédéric Le Play (1806–82),⁵⁶ the Briton Allan Smith mentioned earlier or the Swedish mechanical engineering industrialist Sigfrid Edström (1870–1964), were major figures of industrial circles in their country and internationally.

IOIE's statutes made it clear that the association's aim revolved around the ILO, but they also underlined that the association would collect members' opinions on

all subjects relevant to employers, plus they would collect data and distribute information.⁵⁷ The ILO, however, would remain at the very centre of IOIE's preoccupations, and the histories of both organisations are inseparable, for instance in their joint rejection of communism, as Marieke Louis shows. From the start, the IOIE had a fairly broad membership. By June 1920, the association already counted 15 countries, mainly in Europe but also Japan and the Transvaal. A dozen others joined during the 1920s, so that almost all European countries were members of the IOIE, making the IOIE a crucial node of private internationalism in the interwar period, not least because it included delegates from countries that were not (yet) members of the League of Nations, like Germany and Austria at the beginning of the 1920s. In addition the IOIE had regular contacts with employers' associations not (yet) formally affiliated in Argentina, Australia, Canada and India. Despite the long absence of the USA from the ILO, the IOIE also kept in touch with the National Association of Manufacturers all through the interwar period.⁵⁸

The IOIE was not the only international business organisation created in the aftermath of World War I. In 1920, delegates from the victorious countries in the war (Belgium, Britain, France, Italy and the USA) created the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC). A clear division of labour was established: while the IOIE dealt with ILO-related matters, strikes, labour relations and social policy, the ICC functioned as a trade association, representing business interests in matters of international trade, transportation and finance. The same individuals were often active in both the IOIE and the ICC, simultaneously or at different times. This was the case for the organiser of the 1911 employers' conference, Gino Olivetti, but also for many others, like the Italian rubber industrialist Alberto Pirelli (1882–1971) and Sigfrid Edström, both among the founders of the IOIE and later ICC presidents.⁵⁹

Conclusion: employers and illiberal internationalism

"There can be no revolution without counter-revolution", wrote Arno Mayer.⁶⁰ This chapter has described the action of employers in the face of labour's mobilisation. While scholars have focused on the trade unions, a careful examination of employers' social and political mobilisation is indispensable to fully grasp the conflicts created by industrial capitalism, which involved "organised armies of Capital and Labor", as *The Economist* called them in 1928.⁶¹

This chapter has shown that the creation of employers' associations was a transnational phenomenon, and that once they were created, they reached out to one another. The events narrated in this chapter also suggest that transnational encounters shaped employers' strategies, stances on industrial policies and on social policy, at the very least from the first decades of the twentieth century onwards. Hence, this research provides a double contribution to the existing literature: first in studying the lesser known dimension of collective action from employers (battling trade unions and not as businessmen), and, while most studies are regional or national in scope, in revealing the transnational context in which those local

events took place. Despite its importance in shaping the attitudes and action of employers' delegates in the ILO – the IOIE was “the backbone”⁶² of the employers' group – the literature on the history of the ILO has until now failed to fully identify the role of the IOIE.⁶³ The relative neglect of the IOIE in the literature on the ILO is just one example of the general lack of attention to the historical role of employers. While new research has shown that employers' influence on social policy was highly debated and conflictual among employers,⁶⁴ there is much to discover on the transnational dynamics surrounding employers' associations: for instance the way they shaped social, political and economic conservatism. Further studies might investigate the extent to which such employers' transnational encounters contributed to a specific form of illiberal business internationalism, nurtured in opposition to workers' internationalism.⁶⁵

Inspiration might be taken from German experts writing during World War I, who mentioned five possible motivations for employers to meet internationally: to regulate competition for workers in order to avoid wage increases; to produce in collaboration in case of strikes; to prevent locked-out workers finding employment in neighbouring countries; to prevent workers' shortages; and to organise financial support among employers facing strikes. Those forces were, however, compromised by competition between firms, while foreign competitors posed the threat of taking advantage of a strike to capture new customers instead of helping their foreign competitors to oppose strikers.⁶⁶ There were indeed clear caveats to the international collaboration of employers, which provide promising research avenues. In 1926, in the context of the British General Strike, the IOIE explicitly rejected the idea of international financial support to employers affected by big strikes. The risk, the IOIE decided, was that such a solidarity action would backfire against employers if it were to become public and would lead to more international collaboration between labour unions.⁶⁷ Hence, there was a tactical limit to international collaboration among employers.

Scholars have underestimated the transnational contacts among employers, assuming that classes were “not well organized internationally” and that “one can hardly speak of any institutionalized and permanent transnational characteristic of any class in modern society”.⁶⁸ The IOIE and the ICC, among other structures, display durable international class-based collective action by enterprises' owners and managers, which are still active today, all of it awaiting proper historical investigation. Researchers might take many paths from there. What was at stake during the barely known World Congresses of Employers, held in different European capitals during the 1920s? What was the shape and reach of private diplomatic networks created by the IOIE or the ICC? How did nationally organised business communities negotiate the balance of competition and cooperation within international associations such as the IOIE?

Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin recently invited historians “to begin the process of recovering and re-imagining the plurality of internationalisms that fed political faith and disillusionment and the processes of historical change shaping the modern world”.⁶⁹ The transnational mobilisation of employers constitutes one form of internationalism; this is a form that has barely been studied, though. This

chapter has shown that the importance of transnational encounters should not be minimised in the explanation of the mobilisation of industrialists against strikes at the turn of the century, but the extent of business internationalism remains to be fully investigated in diverse contexts and periods, as employers have not finished reacting to Chotteau's urge: "So, industrialists and traders, rise!"

Notes

- 1 Jürgen Kocka, *Capitalism. A Short History* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 45. This research benefited from the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation, grant number 158916, "An International for the employers? The International Organization of Industrial Employers from the 1920s to the 1950s". For their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper, I am grateful to Thomas David, Matthieu Leimgruber, Janick Marina Schaufelbuehl and Maiju Wuokko. I am also indebted to the conveners of the Zurich Geschichtskontor in December 2016 and to the participants to the 2018 European Business History Conference.
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- 3 Nicolas Delalande, *La Lutte et l'Entraide. L'âge des solidarités ouvrières* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2019); Geert van Goethem, *The Amsterdam International. The World of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), 1913–1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).
- 4 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital*, ed. Abacus (London: Abacus, 2012 [1975]), 22 for the first quotation. On the Paris Commune, see pages 200–202. The second quotation is on page 201.
- 5 Léon Chotteau, *L'Internationale des Patrons* (Paris: Armand Le Chevalier, 1871). "So, industrialists . . ." on page 20 and "apathy and inertia . . ." on page 5.
- 6 See the letter from the Paris British Chamber of Commerce, signed by K. B. Murray, Director of the Paris British Chamber of Commerce, to the president of the *Association Industrielle et Commerciale Suisse*, November 16, 1874, 480.2.1.1, IB Vorort-Archiv, Archiv für Zeitgeschichte (AfZ), Zurich.
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- 9 Daniel Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings. Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 259–60. See page 10 for "had launched . . .", and page 20 for "a world . . ." and "State paternalism . . .".
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- 11 Jacques Revel, "Micro-analyse et construction du social," in *Jeux d'échelles. La micro-analyse de l'expérience*, ed. Jacques Revel (Paris: Gallimard/Le Seuil, 1996).
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- 13 Philippa Hetherington and Glenda Sluga, "Liberal and Illiberal Internationalisms," *Journal of World History* 31, no. 1 (2020).
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- 16 Herman Justi, *Organization of the Employer Class* (Chicago: Illinois Coal Operators Association, 1901), 7.
- 17 Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings. Social Politics in a Progressive Age*, 52–75.
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- 20 Emil Richard, *Organisation der schweizerischen Arbeitgeber* (Zürich: Zürcher Handelskammer, 1905), 10.
- 21 Pierre Tronel, *Essai sur l'organisation de la défense patronale* (Lyon: P. Grange & Refoubelet, 1911). Sulzer-Ziegler, "Ueber Arbeitgeber-Verbände." On strikebreaking see Matteo Millan, "Introduction: Strikebreaking During Europe's Belle Epoque," *European History Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (2019).
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- 23 Delalande, *La Lutte et l'Entraide. L'âge des solidarités ouvrières*, 236–40.
- 24 Leopold H. Haimson, "Conclusion," in *Strikes, Wars, and Revolutions in an International Perspective: Strike Waves in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Leopold H. Haimson and Charles Tilly (Cambridge and Paris: Cambridge University Press and Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1989), 527.
- 25 Peter Swenson, *Capitalists against Markets. The Making of Labor Markets and Welfare States in the United States and Sweden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 26 Saluppo, "Strikebreaking and Anti-Unionism on the Waterfront: The Shipping Federation, 1890–1914," 590; Patricia Cayo Sexton, *The War on Labor and the Left. Understanding America's Unique Conservatism* (Boulder: Westview, 1991). Allan Pinkerton described communists as "a class of human hyenas worth all notice and attention". For that citation (p. 57).
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- 33 Jasmien van Daele, "Engineering Social Peace: Networks, Ideas, and the Founding of the International Labour Organization," *International Review of Social History*, no. 3 (2005). Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings. Social Politics in a Progressive Age*, 52–74; Delalande, *La Lutte et l'Entraide. L'âge des solidarités ouvrières*. On Sulzer-Ziegler see Arthur Straessle, *Eduard Sulzer-Ziegler 1954–1913. Von der politischen und sozialpolitischen Tätigkeit eines Winterthurer Industriellen* (Zurich: Abhandlung zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde der Philosophischen Fakultät I der Universität Zürich, 1968), 85–86.
- 34 Erich Gruner, "Die Arbeitgeberorganisationen – Spiegelbild oder Überbietung der Gewerkschaften?" in *Arbeiterschaft und Wirtschaft in der Schweiz 1880–1914, Band II: Gewerkschaften und Arbeitgeber auf dem Arbeitsmarkt; Streiks, Kampf ums Recht und Verhältnis zu anderen Interessengruppen*, ed. Gruner Erich (Zürich: Chronos, 1988), 817.
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- 39 Otto Steinmann, Betrachtungen über den Schwedischen Generalstreik des Jahres 1909, *Schriften des Zentralverbandes Schweizer Arbeitgeber-Organisationen*, N°2, 1910. See Pierre Eichenberger, "Les organisations patronales et la Grève générale de 1918," *Traverse – Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 25, no. 2 (2018).
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- 43 van Goethem, *The Amsterdam International. The World of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), 1913–1945*, 15.
- 44 Delalande, *La Lutte et l'Entraide. L'âge des solidarités ouvrières*. Paul Hermberg, "Die internationalen Beziehungen der deutschen Arbeitgeber-, Angestellten- und Arbeiterverbände," *Weltwirtschaftliches Archiv* 5 (1915). He indicates that on the eve of the war, out of 46 members of the *Zentralverbänden gewerblicher Arbeiter*, 41 were engaged in international agreements or organisations.
- 45 Swenson, *Capitalists against Markets. The Making of Labor Markets and Welfare States in the United States and Sweden*, 104.

- 46 Annexe 1 of the “Note de Mr. Jules Lecocq,” [1950], IOIE Archives, 10.01, Origines et évolution de l’OIE, 1919–1969. On Gino Olivetti see Andrea M. Locatelli and Paolo Tedeschi, “Notes on the Genesis and Development of Business Interest Associations in Milan (19th–20th Centuries),” in *Historical and International Comparison of Business Interest Associations: 19th–20th Centuries*, ed. Danièle Fraboulet, Andrea M. Locatelli, and Paolo Tedeschi (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2013), 87.
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