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SU LIN LEWIS

**‘We Are Not Copyists’: Socialist Networks and Non-Alignment from Below in
A. Philip Randolph's Asian Journey**

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<Abstract>Abstract

In 1952, A. Philip Randolph, the head of America's largest black union and a prominent civil rights campaigner, travelled to Japan and Burma funded by the American Committee for Cultural Freedom. In Asia, he encountered socialists and trade unionists struggling to negotiate the fractious divides between communism and capitalism within post-war states. In Burma, in particular, Western powers, the Soviet bloc, and powerful Asian neighbors used propaganda, aid missions, and subsidized travel to offer competing visions of development while accusing each other of new forms of imperialism and foreign interference. In such an environment, a battle for hearts and minds within Asian labor movements constituted the front lines of the early years of the Cold War. Randolph's journey shows us how Asian socialists and trade unionists responded to powerful foreign interests by articulating an early sense of non-alignment, forged in part through emerging Asian socialist networks, well before this was an official strategy. The Asian actors with whom Randolph interacted in Japan and Burma mirrored his own struggles as a socialist, a trade unionist, and a "railway man" while furthering his campaign for civil rights at home. This article uses Randolph's journey to examine parallels and divergences between African-American and Asian socialists and trade unionists during the early Cold War, an age characterized by deepening splits in the politics of the Left.

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In the aftermath of the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia and the exodus of colonial powers, a battle of ideas took place in newly decolonized Asian nations on the best method of building a viable and equitable state. This struggle was fed by a propaganda war between Russian, Chinese, and Western powers seeking to promote their visions for a just society. Throughout the 1950s, the journeys of trade unionists, socialists, intellectuals, and cultural figures into and out of the region carved out ideological lines and created new forms of transnational affinity amid the hardening of national borders. As cultural and labor delegations to and from China, the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia crisscrossed the Afro-Asian world, the U.S. State Department subsidized

a number of African-American jazz musicians, athletes, and labor leaders to travel to Asia and Africa as Cold War ambassadors.¹ Meanwhile prominent African-American activists such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson, who both sympathized with anti-colonial struggles and pledged their support to the Soviet Union, had their passports revoked.² Against charges from Soviet propagandists that the Americans perpetuated white imperialism, it was, in some ways, a gift to the U.S. State Department that African-American labor leaders like A. Philip Randolph seized the opportunity to travel abroad to meet Asian trade unionists. By the 1950s, Randolph had built an international reputation as the head of America's largest black union, a prominent civil rights leader, and a figure on the Left who was also an outspoken anti-communist.

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Figure 1. Randolph's passport photo and visa for Burma. As a vocal proponent of American democracy, at least after World War II, Randolph was able to travel while pro-Soviet activists like Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois had their passports revoked (A. Philip Randolph Papers Box 56, Library of Congress).

Cold War historiography has been told as a binary story of competing powers and, more recently, through the lens of "America and the World." In an Asian context, Cold War histories have typically been examined within nation-state frameworks. What has drawn less attention is the way in which the many journeys of the era, financed by competing Cold War superpowers, reveal both the possibilities and limits of transnational affinity from different angles. Randolph's journey through Asia in the early years of the Cold War illuminates the commonalities and divergences between globetrotting African-American activists and the experiences of Japanese and Burmese activists seeking to negotiate the fractious politics of the post-colonial era. It also speaks to the power of transnational socialist networks to connect these disparate groups. New

research on the history of socialist internationalism has tended to be conducted from a European or Soviet perspective.³ Much less studied has been the engagement of African-American, Asian, and African socialists in transnational socialist networks across the Global South and the ways such figures imagined pacifist alternative paths out of a violent and escalating global Cold War. Indian, Burmese, and Japanese socialists organized socialists across the Afro-Asian world around the possibilities of a “Third Camp” or “Third Force,” as I have shown elsewhere.⁴ Randolph used similar language in an article that both criticized Paul Robeson’s commitment to Communism and defended his right to be a Communist. Randolph noted that his own rejection of Communism did not imply an acceptance of “the immorality and brutalities of monopoly capitalism”; he too elected to choose the “principles of the third force or middle of the road methodology of the British Labour Party, as the way, without violence, or bloodshed, to a new social order of security and freedom, peace and justice.”⁵

While a growing body of literature has pointed to the confluence of race and empire in African-American engagements with the colonial and post-colonial world, the reception of African-Americans in Asia and Africa also continues to be an understudied field.⁶ For the past two decades, literature on black internationalism has focused predominantly on “race” as a mobilizing factor for African-Americans from the interwar era to the post-colonial era of Afro-Asian solidarity.⁷ Black internationalists engaged with East Asia from the late nineteenth century, with Japan providing a model that punctured the myth of white superiority after its victory over Russia in 1905.⁸ Here I highlight the multiple and complex forms of solidarity, besides race, that emerged between Asians and African-Americans operating within a Cold War context. As Marc Gallicchio has shown, Randolph was one of a few black internationalists who refused to romanticize Japan and resisted a purely racial analysis of world affairs.⁹ While campaigning

against racial injustice, he sought other forms of engagement through socialist politics and pragmatic working-class organization.

Randolph's engagement with Asian socialist networks and popular notions of non-alignment in 1952, explored in this article, preceded the journey of Richard Wright, whose account of the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung conference is often taken as a classic text of African-American engagement with the Afro-Asian world. A recent, illuminating sourcebook on Wright's journey to Indonesia untangles the complex responses to Wright's journey through an analysis of Indonesian-language sources.¹⁰ Wright's Indonesian hosts were shocked by his naivety in regarding the Japanese as a "colored race" in solidarity with Asians and Africans in the decolonizing world, blind to their own brutal experiences of the Japanese occupation.¹¹ In Randolph's refusal to see the world solely in racial terms, he had more in common with the Indonesian socialist intellectuals who disagreed with Wright's framing of Asian concerns through the lens of "race" alone. The Indonesian journalist Mochtar Lubis criticized Wright for seeing his entire Indonesian journey "through coloured glasses" and inaccurately portraying the Indonesians he met;¹² the Eurasian intellectual Beb Vuyk criticized Wright for viewing Ghana from a position of assumed technical and civilizational superiority, despite Wright's sentiments of racial affinity.¹³ Both Randolph and these Asian socialist intellectuals shared an astute awareness of how imperial relationships cut across racial lines; their analysis problematizes the canonical status of Wright's text.¹⁴

Randolph's post-war engagements with Asia have never been analyzed. Here I take a global, multi-sited perspective on Randolph's journey, drawing on the well-preserved archives of Randolph's correspondence, letters, and photographs, but also on the archives of the European-based ICFTU and American Committee for Cultural Freedom, U.S. and Myanmar National Archives, and Burmese newspapers to yield insights into the perspectives of non-state actors on

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the everyday politics of the Cold War. While race played a role in the decision of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom to send Randolph to Burma, as well as in Randolph's arguments about the importance of sending African-Americans abroad, it was Randolph's position as a socialist, a trade unionist, and a fellow "railwayman" that provided the modes of on-the-ground affinity between Randolph and the Japanese and Burmese actors with whom he interacted. These three components of Randolph's identity as an activist structure this article. At the same time, I also de-center Randolph from this story to focus on the significance of local political dynamics in which Asian activists were embroiled, examining the parallel engagement of these figures in socialism, trade union movements, and railway unions in the early years of the Cold War. In its sensitivity to local context, this article thus challenges the historical tendency, as Joey Long has highlighted, to paint 1950s Asian labor movements with the same ideological brush.¹⁵ Trade union organization was laden with political overtones at both the national and international level.¹⁶ Like Randolph, socialists in Japan and Burma fought battles with both conservatives and communists at home.

While scholars have debated the origins of Non-Alignment, focusing largely on major political leaders and key diplomatic events,¹⁷ it is clear from these archives that well before Bandung in 1955 or Belgrade in 1961, non-state actors were already articulating a third way, envisioning development possibilities that did not conform to the standard Cold War binaries of East/West and Communism/Capitalism. Jason Parker has shown that competing, on-the-ground attempts at public diplomacy by the U.S. and Soviet Union helped engender and nurture the concept of a Third World in the minds of its inhabitants.¹⁸ Powerful Asian neighbors, including China, Japan, and India, as well as pan-Asian socialist networks also played important roles in disseminating ideas of non-alignment in Southeast Asia, a core battleground of the global Cold War.¹⁹ In Burma, the presence of Chinese Kuomintang troops on the northern border led to fears

of occupation and further legitimized Burma's neutralist foreign policy. Japan's Socialist Party took a proactive role in promoting a neutralist foreign policy domestically and among its south Asian neighbors.²⁰ In India, Nehru as well as socialist intellectuals like Ram Manohar Lohia, gave rhetorical shape to an active, "non-aligned" foreign policy (as opposed to a more passive neutralism) in the early 1950s to promote peace in an era of growing belligerence.²¹ In the Burma case, in particular, non-alignment was not just a matter of Cold War diplomacy, but a method by which strong and growing trade unions like the Burma Railways Union attempted to guard their independence amid fractious national politics exacerbated by Cold War rivalries in the region.

Cold War competition provided the backdrop by which Asian actors carved out their own ideological positions, picking and choosing from multiple sources of patronage to define their own visions of the future. *Cultures at War*, a compilation of essays by Southeast Asian cultural historians similarly highlights the way in which artists, filmmakers in the region used the game of Cold War geopolitics to draw on a number of models of modernity from the United States, the Soviet Union, Europe, and Asia.²² Visitors like A. Philip Randolph provided Burmese politicians and activists with the experience of developing their own political ideologies in dialogue with actors of diverse backgrounds and beliefs. In turn, Randolph listened to socialists and labor leaders articulating a sense of a "third way" and alternative visions of post-colonial modernity as a response to new forms of imperialism. As a socialist and activist with anti-colonial sympathies, Randolph was an astute observer of the position of Japanese and Burmese activists. His visit to Burma sheds light, too, on the way Burmese trade unionists, whose voices are not easily found in the archive, positioned themselves within a politically divisive atmosphere and engaged critically with American efforts to spread the message of American democracy. We should see these dialogues as one form of interaction among many in an era of transnational connections moving in multiple directions. As I show here, in the early 1950s, alongside the networks of affinity that

emerged between Randolph and his Asian interlocutors, transnational socialist networks among Asian actors also expanded in an era of mounting distrust of American imperialism. But these networks were also continually undercut by other forces: in Japan, the rise of moderate conservatism aligned to the United States, in Burma, civil war and the rise of a military dictatorship seeking to isolate the country from the outside. Randolph's journey presents us with as an opportunity to examine the nuanced political perspectives that underpinned transnational socialist networks and emerging ideas of non-alignment during the early Cold War, an age characterized globally by deepening splits in the politics of the Left.

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A. Philip Randolph and the Rise of Socialist Asia

The story of Randolph's emergence as a leading figure in the American labor and civil rights movement is well chronicled.²³ Randolph began his activist career in Harlem as editor of the radical journal *The Messenger*, promoting socialism as the only political path able to address the exploitation of the African-American working class.²⁴ As leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), Randolph campaigned throughout the 1920s and 1930s for fairer working conditions for the black porters and maids who worked on the executive railway cars of the Pullman Company. Throughout this time, as Eric Arnesen has shown, Randolph remained a committed socialist, a "somewhat lonely and certainly unpopular political road," given that the Socialist Party's color-blindness divided Harlem's activist community.²⁵ Unlike the West-Indian born activist Hubert Harrison, one of the Socialist Party's most prominent early black members, who became disillusioned with the party's refusal to recognize the importance of race, Randolph remained loyal to the party, convinced by individual socialists' support for black rights and condemnation of racial discrimination.²⁶ American socialism itself was born of the railways: Eugene Debs, a mentor to Randolph who founded the Socialist Party in 1901, had also founded

the American Railway Union in 1893, which elected to exclude African-Americans in a narrow vote, despite Debs insistence that they be admitted.²⁷ The prominent Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas, Debs' successor, was a close friend of Randolph's, gave regular speeches to Harlem's socialist groups, and helped Randolph to secure financial support to start the BSCP.

While he had in the 1920s lauded the Soviet Union as model of development,²⁸ by the end of the 1930s, a time when Du Bois turned increasingly to Communism, Randolph became increasingly disenchanted and instead put his faith in the promise of democratic institutions to enact social change.²⁹ In 1941, Randolph famously launched the March on Washington Movement to appeal to Roosevelt to desegregate the military, resulting in legislation to end employment discrimination in the defense and civilian arms of the federal government. Like his contemporaries, Randolph linked the civil rights movements with anti-colonial struggles around the globe, and portrayed racial discrimination as a stain on American democracy.³⁰ The following year, in a mass demonstration at Madison Square Garden, he made a statement to the press, warning that American democracy was a failure because of its racial limitations, and that the world's wars would never end "until the white man's supremacy is put down and all races and nations and peoples are treated as equals."³¹ Deploing the call for African-Americans to enlist to fight wars against Japanese imperialism, he asked, "How can we fight for democracy in Burma, a country we have not seen, when we don't have democracy in Birmingham, a city we have seen?"³²

A decade later, Randolph had a chance to see Burma. In 1952, Thomas, then head of America's Socialist Party, invited Randolph to accompany him on a trip to Japan, which had a thriving trade union movement, and Burma, then the only nation in Asia headed by a socialist government. Randolph and Thomas embarked on the trip under the auspices of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom (ACCF), founded by an eminent ex-communist, Sydney Hook,

and closely affiliated with the Europe-based Committee for Cultural Freedom; Thomas was chair of the organization's Administrative Committee.³³ The ACCF was later discredited for receiving funds from the CIA and State Department, one of a broad spectrum of leftist anti-communist groups—including labor organizations, student groups, intellectual and cultural congresses—used to wage a cultural cold war in response to Soviet front organizations of a similar kind.³⁴ However, the trip itself was facilitated not through the US State Department, but through informal transnational socialist and labor networks. An invitation to Randolph came in a letter from the Japan Committee for Cultural Freedom, a congress of Japanese leftist intellectuals affiliated with the committees in Europe and America, while Japanese labor leaders invited Randolph to speak at the annual May Day ceremonies. Frank Trager, a member of the Socialist Party, longtime friend of Thomas and Randolph, and head of the US aid mission to Burma organized and hosted Randolph and Thomas on their Burma journey.

Randolph and Thomas arrived in Japan at the end of the American occupation period, amid mounting anti-Americanism and fractures in the Japanese Left. Initially, American occupation forces in Japan encouraged a revival of the trade union movement and sought to purge conservative politicians.³⁵ U.S. labor experts from the AFL and CIO were also brought in as advisors, as trade union membership grew tremendously but split along ideological lines.³⁶ Communists and socialists set up two separate, rival trade union federations: the Japan Federation of Labor (Sodomei), which included socialists, and the Congress of Industrial Unions (Sanbetsu), composed of communists and socialists opposed to Sodomei leaders.³⁷ By this time, under the impression that the Soviet Union was responsible for an ensuing wave of labor militancy, American occupation forces began to crack down on left-wing trade unions, while encouraging the Japanese to reconsider rearmament and support more mainstream, conservative political parties.³⁸ Amid a rising tide of anti-Americanism from Japanese communists in 1952, Randolph

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and Thomas found themselves in the middle of a backlash during the May Day celebrations at which they were invited to speak. The event was meant to be a peaceful rally of 400,000 workers belonging to Japan's labor unions. Since May Day rallies had been reinstated in 1946 in Japan, they had been an occasion for mass protest.³⁹ But the scale of violence in the 1952 May Day protests was unprecedented. Police clashed with crowds of communist unionists, Koreans, and students, using teargas and guns against unarmed demonstrators protesting the terms of the San Francisco Peace Treaty.⁴⁰ Angry demonstrators set foreign cars on fire, tussled with American servicemen, and clashed with police.⁴¹ Thomas and Randolph were dropped from the program at the last minute and were hurried away to avoid a mob on the platform.

Arriving days after the official end to the American occupation, Thomas and Randolph were privy to continual discussions about the need for Japanese neutrality in the face of competing Soviet and American influence. The 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty excluded the Soviet Union and included a defense agreement that provided for the stationing of American garrison troops in Japan—laying the groundwork for all-out alignment with the US. Sohyo, Japan's General Council of Trade Unions composed of various leftist groups, including most of the delegates of Sodomei and Japan's Social Democratic Party, publicly objected to the treaty, and in their discussions with Randolph and Thomas both groups steered the discussion towards its renegotiation. The Japanese Socialist Party (JSP), founded in 1945, had by 1948 gained enough votes to lead a coalition government with two non-socialist parties. The party split in 1951 between a Left Socialist Party and a Right Socialist Party.⁴² According to a document in Randolph's files outlining the foreign policy of Japan's Social Democratic Party (the Right wing of the JSP), the treaty undermined Japan's sovereignty, particularly in the eyes other Asian nations—namely India, China, and Burma.⁴³

In the paper, Japanese socialists also detached themselves from Japan's own recent, imperial past, seeking to “abolish the remnants of the aggressive policy pursued in Asia by Japanese militarists in the past.” They sought to re-establish “neighborly” and economic ties with Asia, promoting free trade, international socialism and alignment with the Socialist International. The Left wing of the Japanese Socialist Party, by contrast, supported efforts by Indian, Burmese, and Indonesian socialists to form a “third force” that stressed non-alignment and an Asian body separate from the Socialist International.⁴⁴ Networks with Asian socialists were solidified that March when leaders of both wings of Japan’s Socialist Party travelled to Rangoon to attend the preliminary meetings of the Asian Socialist Conference (ASC), where Indian and Burmese socialists, along with the Left wing of the Japanese Socialist Party, collectively pledged a commitment to the idea of a “third force” as the only road to peace in the midst of an escalating Cold War.⁴⁵ Randolph observed that Japan's “third-force-peace-formula” dominated the thinking of not only Japanese socialists but also trade unions and intellectuals as well.⁴⁶ He was also highly conscious of the power of racial discourse, and blamed the escalating influence of the Soviet-dominated World Federation of Trade Union (WFTU) throughout Asia on “white world chauvinism.”⁴⁷ He criticized the apathy of European socialists to liberation movements in Asia and Africa (as Asian and African socialists in the ASC would do),⁴⁸ while the Soviet-dominated WFTU continued to win converts through the rhetoric of anti-imperialism.

But while sympathizing with the Japanese over the issue of “white world chauvinism,” Randolph was also wary of their use of “race” to create an Asian bloc. Japan’s occupation of Southeast Asia in the Second World War stemmed from an interwar, imperial ambition to extract raw materials to revitalize the Japanese economy under the cover of pan-Asian solidarity. As Gallicchio has shown, Randolph had predicted these ideological flaws early on, warning of Japan's imperial ambitions soon after the First World War.⁴⁹ He had similar thoughts with regards

to post-war Japan and was wary of the tendency of Japanese socialists to see themselves as saviors of “underdeveloped” nations in Southeast Asia. This new Japanese policy constituted a decisive, post-war shift: wracked by war guilt, but also keen to promote a new sense of regionalism and economic development, Japanese socialists sought to forge a cooperative economic development plan that would strengthen Asia’s collective ability to withstand the volatile geopolitics of the Cold War.⁵⁰

Southeast Asia was a key battleground of the “global Cold War.”⁵¹ As American and Soviet aid and propaganda missions struggled to gain ground in the region, Japan, too, sought to promote good relations with the Southeast Asian countries it had formerly occupied. Having lost its colonies in Korea, China, and Taiwan, Japan required large imports of rice, for which it turned to Burma.⁵² Taking a different stance than Randolph, who questioned Japan’s intentions, Rangoon’s newspapers commented on the end of the American occupation in Japan, arguing that Japan should help in rehabilitating Asia after playing Asia’s “bully.”⁵³ Ravaged by the occupation and in need of funds for rehabilitation, the Burmese were ready to take aid from all sides. The desire for aid legitimized Burma’s neutralist foreign policy, promoted by U Nu and the Burma Socialist Party (BSP), which led Burma’s post-war coalition. The coalition, fearing both Western imperialism and Chinese aggression on the Burma border, advocated instead limited cooperation with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Western democracies.⁵⁴ Seen in this light, the acceptance of aid from Japan was another means of balancing the interests of these powers.

In post-colonial Southeast Asia, the US feared that both Burma and Vietnam, sharing a border with China, would soon succumb to communism and plugged an enormous amount of resources into both countries. In 1950, the U.S. government pledged an \$11 million aid program to Burma dedicated to agricultural projects, public health, education, industry, economic planning, and public administration.⁵⁵ According to U Kyaw Sein a Burmese political

commentator interviewed by the American Embassy, the “Economic Cooperation Administration” (ECA) aid plan succeeded in dividing Communists and Socialist factions. The pro-Communist faction, aligned to the Socialists in the era of anti-colonialism and anti-Japanese resistance, resigned to form the Burma Workers and People's Party. ECA aid isolated the Communist faction and entrenched the commitment of the Socialist Party to accepting the aid, albeit without “strings”; as Kyaw Sein argued, this enabled them to stand up to domestic opposition as well as their critics from the Soviet and Chinese Embassies, while also challenging them to match the American efforts on the same terms.⁵⁶ American aid, then, could also be used as a tool which the Socialist Party used to play different sides off each other.

Unlike the Socialist Party in America and Japan, Burma’s Socialist Party was no fringe or opposition party but, in 1952, in power and leading a coalition of leftist groups.⁵⁷ With a socialist party at the head of government, Burma was a source of fascination to both Randolph and Thomas, who arrived a few days after Randolph’s visit. “Burma,” Randolph argued, “may serve as a laboratory of political and governmental experimentation for it is probably the only country in Asia with a Socialist government or with Socialist officials. And while practically all of them are of the left-wing persuasion, they are not really pro-Soviet Russia or anti-United States, although they express themselves, paradoxically, as being Marxists, as well as committed to the democratic method.”⁵⁸ In short, these were the kinds of socialists that America could work with.

As with the Japan trip, Randolph’s journey to Burma emerged through informal connections with socialist networks in Burma. Robert Delson, a New York lawyer whose brother represented Randolph’s Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, wrote to U Kyaw Nein, a leading member of the Burma Socialist Party. Randolph, he wrote, had been “a forceful and eloquent advocate of the development of under-developed countries without exploitation” and was, of course, “extremely sympathetic to the ideals and aspirations of the Burmese working class.”⁵⁹

The American Embassy, aware of the trip, cabled Randolph and Thomas to see whether they would be prepared to give public lectures at the Burma-American Institute in Rangoon. The ACCF's Executive Secretary, Pearl Kluger, also wrote to Frank Trager, then an official at the American Embassy, to ask if it would be possible for Thomas and Randolph to meet with intellectuals, socialists, and trade unionists during their stay.⁶⁰ She asked that the meetings be organized with non-governmental individuals and organizations as both would be visiting Asia as members of the ACCF, not any government body.

Randolph's existing friendship with the Tragers again showed that personal connections among socialists, rather than the U.S. State Department, provided the key impetus for his visit and shaped his perspective on Burmese politics. Trager, who would go on to become an NYU professor of Southeast Asia politics, was director of the ECA aid program in Burma from 1951-52. Trager had joined the Socialist Party in Baltimore in 1930, and he had helped lead the city's cross-class, inter-racial anti-lynching campaigns of the 1930s.⁶¹ His connection with Norman Thomas ran deep—he worked on Thomas' presidential campaigns in the 1930s, and was president of the New York State Socialist Party in the mid-1930s.⁶² Like Thomas and Randolph, Trager was, by the 1950s, a committed anti-communist but an ardent socialist. While in Rangoon, Randolph stayed at the Tragers' home; Helen Trager was an educationist and appointed as a visiting professor at Rangoon University. Both were part of a circle of Westerners on the ground who built relationships with Burmese intellectuals, socialists, and government officials. Trager was close to the colonial scholar J.S. Furnivall, a longstanding Fabian and one of the few colonial officials invited to stay behind and work as an advisor to U Nu's government. Thomas Posey, the African-American labor advisor who guided Randolph through Rangoon, and with whom Randolph dined at the Tragers' home, was also invited by U Nu to stay behind even after the American aid agency was asked to leave Burma in 1952, serving out his term until 1954.⁶³

Thomas and Randolph ran in socialist circles that connected them to Burmese politicians and intellectuals, even as the aid mission with which Trager and Posey were associated was viewed with suspicion in the Burmese press.⁶⁴ Randolph's connections also gave him a limited, Rangoon-based perspective; his flying visit did not permit him to witness the instability occurring in the countryside, overrun by communist insurgents supplied with arms from the PRC and later, the Soviet Union, and by the Karen National Defense Organization, which had by then taken over many of Burma's towns and cities outside of the capital. Nonetheless, Randolph was given unique insights into the ideological positions of socialist leaders and burgeoning civil society in Rangoon, and gained a different perspective from that of State Department officials concerned with battling the "red peril" across the country.

Over lunches at the Trager home, Randolph met various socialist officials, including U Kyaw Nein, General Secretary of the Burma Socialist Party, and U Tun Win, Minister of Information. Randolph was impressed with their youth, passion, and intellect. That March, at the preliminary meetings of the Asian Socialist Conference, U Kyaw Nyein had publicly committed to "Democratic Socialism" as a "Third Camp... alternative to Capitalist Democracy and Totalitarian Communism," and likely discussed his politics with Randolph in their informal meetings.⁶⁵ Randolph's observations of Burmese political ideology did not conform to American stereotypes, but rather dismantled them. In a report on his trip to Rangoon, sent to the ACCF and officials in the State Department, he downplayed the communist threat in Burma while attempting to explain the nuances of Burma's brand of socialism. Burma's socialism, he argued, was forged in opposition to Soviet and Chinese communism but was also committed to both Marxism and democracy.⁶⁶ Where the CIA considered U Ba Swe, the leader of Burma's Socialist Party, "an extreme leftist," hostile to the U.S. and closer to Communist China, Randolph took a more nuanced view.⁶⁷ He studied U Ba Swe's pamphlet, *The Burmese Revolution*, a transcript of

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a speech given to the Trade Union Congress of Burma in 1951.⁶⁸ The pamphlet outlined a Burmese brand of Marxism, not as a “carbon copy of the Russian or Chinese revolutionary pattern” but as a guide, which, when put in practice, had to be adapted to suit its surroundings. The pamphlet, Randolph noted, relayed a “sea of difference” between becoming a Marxist and becoming a Communist, which meant unequivocally accepting Soviet leadership. It also, he noted, merged Marxism and Buddhist philosophy, which Randolph saw as incompatible with totalitarianism. As such, Burma, Randolph argued, was set to build a “sound Socialist democratic society, free from the Russian Communist sickness.”⁶⁹

Unlike the visits of African-American jazz musicians to Asia and Africa and other state-sponsored missions, Randolph’s visit to Asia was forged through connections with both Asian and American socialists on the ground. His interactions with Japanese socialists highlight new tensions among the Left, the significance of emerging networks among Asian socialists and evolving commitments to a “Third Force.” Randolph’s observation of Burmese socialism also reveals a deeper ideological connection. Like the Burmese socialists whom he met in Rangoon, Randolph too had been inspired by Marxism and continued to fight on behalf of the working class and for social justice, while retaining a commitment to democratic institutions and a wariness of foreign interference in domestic affairs. Moreover, like them, he saw trade unions as the first line of defense against Communism.

Trade Union Battles and Burma’s Propaganda Wars

As this special issue details, the global trade union movement was a key battleground for the winning of hearts and minds during the Cold War. Burma’s trade union movement had its roots in the 1920s and 1930s, when British trade unionists began promoting the development of Indian and Burmese trade unions, subscribing to the argument that a healthy trade union sector

was integral to the functioning of capitalism. British officials noted that compared to the Indian trade union movement, the Burmese trade union movement took some time to get off the ground, with Indian migrant workers within Burma forming much of the initial trade union agitation in the country.⁷⁰ Generally, most Burmese workers stayed away from trade union organizing during the colonial era. Burmese historian U Myo Htun Lynn noted that in colonial Burma, trade unionists were “generally treated as subversive elements or as engineers of trouble.”⁷¹ There were, nonetheless, moments of intensive agitation related to anti-colonial activism, most famously on May Day 1938, when oil workers marched alongside members of the student movement to protest against the colonial government. This protest was the first experience of Burma’s nascent communist and socialist leaders in working-class organizing, particularly for U Ba Swe, leader of Burma’s Socialist Party and President of the Trade Union Congress of Burma at the time of Randolph’s visit.

British stereotypes of the unwillingness of the Burmese to join trade unions, compared to their Indian counterparts, proved unfounded. In the wake of the colonial exodus and in the run-up to Burmese independence, as political consciousness ran high, there was a flurry of trade union organizing, similar to that experienced in post-war Japan. In 1945, labor representatives met to form an association of trade unionists in Burma, while the following year saw the unionization of clerks and office workers, post office workers, and mining laborers,⁷² as well as the formation of Burma’s largest post-war union, the Burma Railways Union, to which we will turn in the following section. Two “trade union congresses” were formed during this time along the lines of the Trade Union Congress in Britain, historically the support base of the British Labour Party. Splits in the trade union congresses mirrored political splits between Socialists and Communists in the newly formed government, led by the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL). By 1950, Burma’s trade union movement was divided between the Trade Union Congress of Burma

Commented [MK12]: Unclear – do you mean the idea that Burmese workers didn’t want to join unions?

Commented [SLL13R12]: Yes, as above with the observation that British officials believed that the trade union movement took some time to get off the ground – but rephrased as well – hope this makes more sense

(TUC-B), affiliated with the Burma Socialist Party, and the All-Burma Trade Union Congress (ABTUC), affiliated with the Burma Communist Party. In 1946, two years before Burma's official independence, A.C. Baker, a British trade unionist sent to Burma as its new Director of Labor to ensure the "growth of a healthy and responsible Trade Union movement," commented that the Communist-led trade union congress was "not composed of bona fide trade unionists" but was mainly "political in its designs and intentions." He was especially distressed that the two trade union congresses could exist alongside each other, but targeted his complaints against the All-Burma Trade Union Congress, which, amid "real causes of grievance among lower-paid workers: low wages, high prices, bad conditions at home and work," did not act as "genuine trade unionists" but "stirred up trouble" and "hampered and interfered in negotiations going on between legitimate unions and their employers."⁷³

The charge that politics had divided the trade union congresses was not unique to Burma, but applicable to trade union movements around the world (see Leslie James' essay on Trinidad and Nigeria and Mathilde von Bulow's piece on Algeria in this issue). It also mirrored divisions among labor activists in the United States. Baker's claims about the "disruptive" nature of the Communist-led trade union congress resemble the concerns of Randolph with reference to his own trade union in the 1920s and 1930s. Jennifer Luff has shown that Randolph exemplified the position of many American union leaders by attempting to oust known communists from their unions.⁷⁴ As Anthony Carew has argued, it was the zealotry with which anti-communists in the American labor movement tackled communist elements that set them apart from the British Trade Union Congress.⁷⁵ While the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and British Trade Union Congress, along with the Central Council of Trade Unions of the Soviet Union were the three main organizations that together formed the World Federation of Trade Unions in 1945, this congenial experiment did not last, in large part due to the AFL's hostility towards the WFTU as a

communist-dominated organization.⁷⁶ In 1949, the organization split, with the Soviet bloc retaining the original name and the new International Federation of Trade Unions dominated by unions in America and Europe.

Both organizations sent representatives and propaganda missions to Asia to win over its unions. In 1951, the year before Randolph's visit, two representatives of the World Federation of Trade Unions—Liu Ningyi and Thomas McWhinnie—arrived in Rangoon greeted by the Chinese ambassador, as well as 1,500 Chinese, 200 Burmese, and 200 Indian members of the Communist-affiliated Trade Union Congress of Burma. The grand event marked the formal, public affiliation of the Trade Union Congress of Burma with the WFTU. Liu, a prominent member of the Chinese labor movement, addressed the Burma Trade Union Congress and urged delegates to make a united stand against Anglo-American imperialists. McWhinnie, formerly a member of the British Labour Party, followed, arguing that the WFTU “stood for the rights of labor” and that it had “no color prejudice, like British and American labor unions.” British and American labor leaders were “the satellites of Anglo-American capitalists. Their representatives might come to Burma and might attempt to undermine you as they once attempted to undermine the WFTU.”⁷⁷

English-language newspapers in Rangoon, backing Burma's Socialist government, took a neutral stance on the visit. Edward Lawyone, the Burmese editor of *The Nation*, wrote that it was important that the Socialist government allowed the WFTU to attend and give communist trade unions a platform, but that too much importance was attached to trade unions, and that it was the peasantry that determined politics. Meanwhile, an editorial in *The New Times of Burma* observed, “it seems more than a coincidence that the arrival in Rangoon of the WFTU delegation is timed with the inauguration of the Asian Information and Advisory Centre of the ICFTU at Singapore. The merits and demerits of these rival organizations are a matter of divided opinion in Burmese

political circles, but concrete action shows that at this critical epoch in Burma's history, the labour class of the country will be subjected to high-pressure publicity from both sides."⁷⁸ The editorial indicates that Asians were all too aware of what Rachel Leow, elsewhere in this issue, calls the "Cold War Classroom," in which the ICFTU, WFTU, as well as China's ACFTU competed to win over Southeast Asia's trade unions. For the moment, the editorial went on, attention was on the WFTU, but it hinted that the policies of both bodies must be the subject of "conscientious study by the working masses."

The unwillingness of Burma's socialists to commit to either the WFTU or the ICFTU revealed growing sentiment for non-alignment, a trend that continued throughout the following year. The result of the WFTU visit was the formal split between the larger, non-aligned, socialist-backed Trade Union Congress of Burma (TUC-B) and the new Burma Trade Union Congress (BTUC—formerly the ABTUC), now formally affiliated with the WFTU. The political rifts between the trade union congresses, and with independent unions, were on display that Labor Day in 1951 as three different labor organizations held rival May Day celebrations. On the former colonial cricket grounds, U Ba Swe gave a speech at a mass rally of around 7,000 people for the TUC-B, detailing the history of the labor movement in Burma in campaigning against colonialism and for fairer working conditions. The speech ended with a call for self-determination—"Those who could determine our future were not the Japanese or the British or the Americans but ourselves"—and a caution to those accepting "foreign help" in their activities, a dig at the BTUC and its support from Moscow. At the Workers' Memorial, near the Police Courts, a total of 3000 workers gathered for a meeting of the rival BTUC. Large paintings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao were placed around the Workers' Memorial as BTUC leaders denounced American aggression in Korea and criticized the American aid mission. A third celebration, attended by a meagre 200 workers, was held at the Burma Oil Company's

compound, and according to a US consular report, was the “only gathering which emphasized Burmese workers’ real problems and grievances,” the other two rallies being “used to explain their political position.”⁷⁹ Again, from the perspective of Western observers, the mix of trade unionism with politics had created a toxic environment, in which the concerns of “genuine” trade unionists had been buried.

It was this fractious atmosphere of trade union organization in Burma that Randolph entered the following year, as competition between the two trade union congresses escalated. On May Day 1952, just days before Randolph’s visit to Rangoon, a half-page, front-page article in *The Burman* featured a message from the WFTU arguing for the “immediate end to the war of bacteriological weapons by American armies in Korea and China” while condemning colonialism and “all the deeds of oppression upon which the colonial system is based.”⁸⁰ American activities in Korea were continually referenced by the WFTU to point to the dangers of American imperialism in Asia. Rather than endorsing the views of any one side, an editorial in the same paper pledged its commitment to workers around the world: “it matters not where May Day is celebrated. In Peking, Moscow, London, Washington or in Rangoon, the workers participating in the May Day celebrations will be united in the thought that in unity they can contribute to the cause of world peace and human progress.”⁸¹ It was not just Western observers who were concerned about the increasingly divisive atmosphere of the trade union movement; Rangoon’s editors were also calling for workers’ solidarity across ideological lines.

Randolph’s visit thus came at an opportune moment. As an African-American labor leader, Randolph could evade the charges of “color prejudice” trumpeted by WFTU delegates. But compared to the high-profile visit of the WFTU delegates a year earlier, Randolph’s visit received little attention. There was no mention of the visit in the Burmese-language press. Nevertheless, an English-language paper, *The Burman*, did run a front-page piece about his

arrival: “an ardent Socialist most of his life, Randolph has long been an effective crusader for social, political and economic equality for Negroes in the United States. He is credited with having done much to break down racial barriers and in helping to establish fair employment practices... [and is] known as one of the top Negro leaders of the United States.”⁸² It reported that Randolph would address members of the Burma Railways Union at its headquarters after an informal talk with its officers in the morning.

At the press conference that followed, Randolph shared information about the structure and practices of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, relating that it was open to all types of railway workers and was composed of 10,000 dues-paying members. *The Nation* reported these numbers, noting that a Pullman porter receives a minimum salary of \$200 a month and a fireman \$780. Randolph stressed that it was due to the efforts of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters that senior occupations like that of “fireman” now included “colored Americans,” occupations that only recently had been reserved for whites. The papers also reported on Randolph’s lecture at the Burma Council of World Affairs on the topic of “Labour in the Free World,” in which he traced the conflict between the struggle for individual rights and the state from the days of the French Revolution to the present day. *The Nation* summed up the speech: “All wealth, he said, is created by labour. Labour is primarily concerned about freedom which can only be exercised in a democratic state. But political democracy is useless unless it is supplemented by industrial democracy, economic democracy, and ethnic democracy.”⁸³ Randolph stressed the importance of equality in industrial and economic development (including the full participation of workers) and equality between races. A decade earlier, he had made these same points in his speech at Madison Square Garden about the limitations of democracy in America.

At Randolph’s press conference, Burmese journalists were most concerned with the riots Randolph witnessed in Japan on May Day—news had travelled fast. Randolph recounted the

slogans, inflammatory statements, and speeches made against the Yoshida Government, indicating that they were “Communist-inspired.” According to the *Burman*, Randolph expressed his pessimism about the power of Japan’s Social Democrats and predicted either a Fascist or Communist coup on the timetable at a distant date. The *Nation* reported that Randolph was “very much impressed with the magnitude of the demonstration and the organization of the Communists, and believed that it was meant to be a show of Communist strength for the benefit of left wing and right-wing Socialists, the members of trade unions and the broad masses of the Japanese people.”⁸⁴ Randolph also spoke of the influence of the Communists in the Japanese trade union movement, but believed that there was still a chance that the movement could be “saved,” particularly given that it was led by many “intelligent leaders.”

Randolph added that he had met leaders of prominent trade unions in Burma —namely the Burma Railways Union—who believed in the importance of safeguarding the union from political control, a principle which American trade unions considered vital.⁸⁵ By stressing this point, Randolph communicated not only the driving ideology behind organizations like the AFL and ICFTU, but the ways in which the Burmese railway union leaders he had met sought to navigate the fractious political atmosphere of post-war Burma.

“Once a Railway Man, Always a Railway Man”

In the years immediately following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, Burma’s colonial government invested in building the country’s railways to funnel the lucrative commodities of the hinterland to the world. As in America’s Pullman Company, which Randolph battled for much of his adult life, divisions between senior and subordinate railway staff emerged along racial lines. The Burma Railways senior staff was composed mainly of whites, Anglo-Indians, and Anglo-Burmese, with Burmese playing a minor role.⁸⁶ By 1938, subordinate railway

staff numbered almost 22,000, but the numbers of those enrolled in the railway unions were low.⁸⁷ The Burma Railway Employees' Union had only 1,648 members in 1935, the bulk of them Indian workers.⁸⁸ The organization of the Burmese workforce began in earnest with the founding of the Burma Railways Union in 1946. By 1952, the year of Randolph's visit, the ICFTU reported that 14,000 railway workers had registered in the union (a Burmese account puts this number at 20,000 in 1946).⁸⁹ The Burma Railway Union Workers' Constitution focused on worker organization, solidarity and co-operation among employees, the improvement of economic conditions, fair wages, addressing the grievances of its members, and the promotion of the civic and political interests of the working class.⁹⁰

After Burma's independence, the Burma Railways Union sought to protect its autonomy from rival communist and socialist trade union congresses. In 1946, the Burmese president of the union complained to A.C. Baker, the British Director of Labour, of interference by both trade union congresses, and asked whether the union was bound, by English trade union practice, to affiliate to a trade union congress.⁹¹ After the formal split between the two trade union congresses, Burma's largest unions sought to retain their independence from politics: the Burma Railways Union (with 14,000 members), the Inland Water Transport Employees Union (6000 members), the Port Workers Union (1600 members), and the Burma Oil Company Staff Employees Union (2,500 members) refused to affiliate or pay dues to either side. ICFTU representative J. Krane, Chief of Service in the ICFTU Organization Department, visited in 1950, overlapping with the WFTU visit, and met with these four independent unions, observing:

... they are trying to remain completely outside Burmese politics and concentrate on the building of sound industrial organizations. There is little doubt that the Burma Railway Workers' Union and the Port Workers' Union, in organization and activity, would rank with some of the best unions to be found even in the West...the democratic elements in the Burmese union movement have expressed considerable interest in the work of the ICFTU and are extremely anxious to

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maintain international contacts and to obtain as much basic trade union material as possible from the outside world.⁹²

None, he argued, sought direct affiliation for reasons linked to the “neutrality” foreign policy of Burma’s Socialist-led government. Krane recommended that the ICFTU continue to advise in the problems of the Burmese unions, and he expressed confidence that international assistance in reconstruction would bring results.

Like Krane, Randolph was impressed with the union, and sympathized with its desire for political independence. In 1952, when leaders of the Railway Workers Union met Randolph, they also expressed their opposition to government control of the union despite the existence of a Socialist government, a stance which, to Randolph, showed “profound trade union wisdom and courage when it is considered that the railways are government owned.”⁹³ Randolph found the presidents and officials of both the Railway workers union and the Port Workers union to be “hard-headed, practical trade unionists, with their feet on the ground, despite their claim to be Marxists. Like American trade unionists, they have developed their vocation loyalties. Thus, one finds great pride manifested in the achievements of each trade union craft and calling.”⁹⁴ Randolph’s commitment to craft unionism—with all workers in the same profession belonging to the same union—was one of the key reasons why he controversially led the BSCP to join a then conservative AFL in 1936.⁹⁵ Randolph’s positive assessment of the Burma Railways Union extended to its “splendid brick building,” a testament to his recognition of the material conditions that signaled an efficient, sound trade union.⁹⁶ He noted that the union even had its own choral group, as well as a “Ladies Auxiliary” with a number of female members present at the meeting. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, similarly, had a Ladies’ Auxiliary established in 1925 which raised funds, encouraged male porters and family members to support the union, sponsored social events, and were key elements in grassroots organizing for the

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BCSP's cause.⁹⁷ Given the number of parallels between this union and his own, Randolph was at home.

<Insert Figure 2 here>

Figure 2. Photograph of Randolph's visit to the Burma Railways Union from the Library of Congress. Caption reads "Left to Right: U Taung Saing (organizer); U Maung Ko, (president); Dr. Thomas Posey (ECA Labour Advisor); U Khin Maung (General Secretary); U Hlaing (Executive Committee Headquarters); A. Philip Randolph (President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters); U San Thein (Treasurer, Rangoon Branch); U Sein (Secretary) (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-104694).

In a photograph of Randolph meeting with Burmese trade unionists, Randolph is pictured leaning back in a Burmese teak chair across from Thomas Posey, an African-American economist with the ECA mission, listening to U Maung Ko, President of the Burma Railways Union, speak about the challenges faced by his union. U Maung Ko leans in, in animated conversation, in direct eye contact with Randolph, who seems to be asking questions. Randolph's notes from the visit contain scribbles about what Burmese workers received in salaries, vacation rights and social security. Given the pose of the figures, the photograph seems to show the Burmese and the two African-American participants engaged in relaxed conversation. Randolph had a long history of working closely with railway workers to campaign for better working conditions and knew how to listen to their concerns. Where the archives of development often rely on institutional documents and voices of white advisors, the photograph speaks to the ways in which African-American advisors and labor leaders, working outside institutional structures, were able to capture the attention and engage in active discussion with Burmese trade unionists.

In Randolph's archive of the trip is a transcript of a short speech by U Maung Ko, addressed to Randolph, his fellow workers, and Thomas Posey, who is thanked for arranging the meeting. In it, U Maung Ko speaks of the need to study the railway systems and labor movements of other countries. He mentions one labor leader who had recently gone to the United Kingdom to study labor problems and another who was due to go to the United States to study social security. When they came back, he said, they would tour the railways to let railway workers know what they had seen and learned. U Maung Ko continues:

This is long drawn out policy and we realize it will take time. We will need all the education we can get. We need books to read, listen to other labour leaders. Sometimes we will even need to hear others criticize us./ Having sent men across to other countries to learn, heard others talk, and listen to criticism, we will then choose what we will adopt to ourselves and our country./ We do not believe in stereotyped methods, we are not copyists, we are not staunch followers of isms, although some of the isms have been our guide in many instances. True we started our Union by revolutionary methods, and such element is still with us, but the time has now changed. The country is free, we believe in creative initiation and on that line the Burma Railway Workers' Union will move on towards a goal which has been our aim. That is the freedom of the working class as a whole and the Railway men in particular.⁹⁸

The term, "copyists," seems to be a direct reference to U Ba Swe's speech given to the Trade Union Congress of Burma months earlier in December 1951, in which he argued that revolutionary action did not constitute "the carbon copy of the Russian or the Chinese revolutionary pattern."⁹⁹ U Maung Ko also stressed the freedom of trade unions to choose their own path, without being bound by "isms", including communism and socialism. This was a call for both more interaction and access to information and opportunities to travel and learn from others. But also, mirroring the concerns of Western labor advisors, it laid out a claim to independence from any particular political system, or indeed, the dictate to follow the path of any one political party.

Commented [MK20]: Huh? "a speech given at"?

The speech ended with a congenial acknowledgement towards Randolph, drawing on a “familiar saying,” “once a Railwayman always a Railwayman,” and noting that union members felt more at ease in the company of Randolph, who as a fellow “railwayman” understood their vocation like no other. The meeting indicates the power of professional affinities, particularly along craft lines, among union leaders. Yet it also points to a justifiable desire to protect unions from politics, particularly within a volatile political environment. This was a clear articulation of non-alignment from below, one that emerged independently of Western propaganda and interference. Indeed, when the ICFTU finally opened an office in Rangoon in 1961, the ICFTU’s Burmese representative wrote to the ICFTU’s regional secretary to argue that workers in Burma felt that the ICFTU Center should be distributing books, booklets, pamphlets, and leaflets, especially in Burmese.¹⁰⁰ In the midst of an international propaganda war and a divisive national political situation, trade union leaders sought to remain resolutely independent, but were nevertheless hungry for information and ideas.

Epilogue: After the Journey

While many studies of the 1950s have dwelled on the shaping of post-colonial national identities, political factionalism, or the ideological battles and propaganda wars fought by Americans and Soviets during the Cold War, non-state networks have been largely neglected.¹⁰¹ The provision of high degrees of patronage by the American, Soviet, and Asian governments to win over “hearts and minds” during the Cold War also created an effervescence of transnational civil society networks, which trade unionists, women, youth groups, and intellectuals used to meet others and campaign for grassroots political change. They were not merely “puppets on strings” of Cold War intelligence services, but actively used such opportunities to discuss ideas, learn from others’ expertise, and articulate their own political and ideological positions in

dialogue with each other. Besides racial solidarity and shared experiences of “white world chauvinism,” socialism, professional affiliation and practical techniques of mobilization formed networks of affinity between Randolph and the trade unionists with whom he interacted. Whereas the U.S. State Department and CIA were content to view anyone on the left through a Cold War lens—as “Communists” aligned with China or the Soviet Union—Randolph, as a Socialist, took a more nuanced view, and saw shades of difference between leftist activists in Japan and Burma.

Back home, Randolph used his Asian trip to spread his own ideas about American democracy. He drew on his new position as an international advocate to argue for changes in segregated labor politics at home. Addressing the Third Constitutional Convention of the AFL-CIO, which merged in 1955, he argued, “how can you go to the workers of Africa and Asia and talk about trade union democracy with unions affiliated with the AFL-CIO with a color bar in their constitutions? ... it just can't be done.”¹⁰² He also continued to keep abreast of labor issues in Asia. He sent reports on his trip to the Office of Labor Advisors in the Mutual Security Agency, who, in return and at the suggestion of Thomas Posey, sent Randolph a number of booklets dealing with Burmese social and economic problems. He kept up a correspondence with trade union leaders, including Yoichi Yamamoto, head of the Japan Railway Union. At Yamamoto’s request, he cabled the Japanese Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru to protest the government’s dismissal of three top trade union leaders from the National Railworkers’ Union for protecting workers’ rights to campaign for a wage increase; this was publicly reported in a BSCP press release.¹⁰³ The following year, the U.S. Department of Labor provided Randolph with a grant to attend the Asian Railways Conference in Cairo, while plans were underway to attend labor conferences in Burma, India, and Tokyo.

One of Randolph’s key recommendations after his Asia trip was that “non-officials” be sent to Asia to “protect and safeguard the interests of the United States.”¹⁰⁴ These groups would

have “no recognized, expressed, or implied obligations or responsibilities to serve as a special pleader for the foreign domestic policies of the government.”¹⁰⁵ As such they would be in a better position to meet and confer with government, trade unions, students and farmers in various countries in Asia, hold press conferences, participate in seminars and conferences, address public meetings, and write and contribute articles to the local press. By the late 1950s, the American labor movement was sending envoys to Africa. Along with other African-American union leaders, Randolph, as he did in Asia, showed great sympathy for the aspirations of African trade unionists to neutrality, even as he maintained an anti-communist stance.¹⁰⁶ Writing to Charles Millard, the Director of the ICFTU in 1958, Randolph, then the Vice-President of the AFL-CIO, argued that the United States should continue to provide liberal and generous economic aid to accelerate economic development and strive to understand the particular dynamics of Asian and African history and culture. But while he defended the right of Asians and Africans to employ neutralism as an intellectual formulation, he was careful not to equate neutralism with democracy and sought to recognize the political realities of the Cold War world. It was, he argued, of utmost urgency that American and international trade union bodies did not remain neutral, but provide scholarships, leadership training, and support to independent unions within Asia and Africa to counter propaganda efforts by the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁷ Despite his socialism, and his ability to see more nuanced differences among Asian and African activists on the left, Randolph was, at heart, a Cold Warrior committed to the promotion of American democracy abroad.

Meanwhile, non-aligned networks among Asian socialists continued to grow, and Rangoon became a central point for their mobilization. In 1953, the year after Randolph’s visit, Rangoon hosted the first Asian Socialist Conference, including the Socialist Party of Burma, the Praja Socialist Party of India, the Socialist Party of Indonesia, the Labour Party of Israel, the Japan Socialist Party, the Pakistan Socialist Party, and the Progressive Party of Lebanon. Norman

Thomas was among a number of international socialist leaders to send greetings. At the conference, delegates planned an Asian Trade Union conference, to be held in Rangoon, to ensure that trade unionists did “not become tools of [the] two conflicting and hysterically antagonistic camps” of the United States and Soviet Russia and seek instead “the goal of peaceful democratic socialist construction.”¹⁰⁸ This conference, the result of consultations between trade union congresses in Burma, India, Indonesia, and Japan, was held in May 1955, and, according to ICFTU files, constituted an attempt to show the strength of non-communist trade unions in Asia, particularly to the Chinese.

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While Bandung has been seen as the diplomatic starting point for the Non-Aligned Movement, connections between Asian socialists – and their close links with trade union movements - need to be recovered as an early indication of ‘non-alignment from below’. The Asian Socialist Conference of 1953 has been seen as a forgotten “precursor” to the more high-profile Bandung conference, where issues of human rights and anti-colonial solidarity emerged alongside a shared commitment to the principles of the welfare state and the idea of a “third force” as a way of ensuring peace amidst an escalating Cold War.¹⁰⁹ Despite setting out some of the policy positions that emerged at Bandung, socialists from Burma, Japan, as well as the host country of Indonesia, were conspicuously absent at the conference, with nationalist leaders taking center stage. As Kweku Ampiah has shown, the early advocacy on the part of Japanese socialists for a neutralist foreign policy had influenced public opinion and the policies of Japan’s new Liberal government, then in power, who arrived in Bandung keen to promote neutrality as well as economic cooperation with Southeast Asian countries, as advocated by the socialists years earlier.¹¹⁰

Commented [MK22]: This needs to be rewritten. First, in the previous paragraph you say the conference took place in May 1955 – that’s after Bandung, I think. Maybe that should be 1954? This still doesn’t seem “well before Bandung” since it’s less than a year. Second, these sentences move confusingly from discussing the Asian Socialist Conference to Bandung and then back. I frankly don’t understand the point of the Bandung sentence. Finally, the last sentence (“Despite setting . . .”) starts with a dangling modifier. I also don’t really understand why the paragraph ends with a point about Japan. What is the claim that this paragraph is making?

Commented [SLL23R22]: The Asian Socialist Conference of 1953 is the forgotten precursor to Bandung – it fits with the point about ‘non-alignment from below’ – emerging before non-alignment was a diplomatic strategy. Have rephrased and hope this makes more sense.

Despite visions of an alternative path, neither American nor Southeast Asian socialists were able to win over electorates in the first decades of the Cold War; but they were nonetheless

often integral in the shaping of political discourse. In October 1955, Norman Thomas published an article in the *New York Times*, conceding that unlike in Europe, Socialism, as an organized movement, would never succeed in coming to power in America's two-party system but that its strength came from the adoption of its ideas—namely the welfare state, cooperatives, and a commitment to free labor unions—by other parties.¹¹¹ By the late 1950s, the dream of a socialist revolution in Asia was also coming to an end. Burma was the last holdout of socialism in Asia. Both Indian and Indonesian socialist parties suffered defeats in democratic elections to nationalist and communist parties better able to cater to popular nationalism, religious sentiment, and the economic concerns of rural voters. Even in Burma, by 1957, numerous splits emerged in Burma's various parties and factions, including the AFPFL. Burma's ruling coalition split, with both nationalists and socialists accused of taking sides, respectively, with the Communists and the Army. The widespread perception that the CIA was supplying military aid to Kuomintang forces on Burma's northeastern border with China did not help.¹¹² Within a volatile political atmosphere and insurgents throughout the country, U Nu transferred power to General Ne Win in 1958 to run a military caretaker government. In 1962, Ne Win instituted his own "Burmese Way to Socialism," which, in principle, capitalized on many of the earlier attempts by Burmese socialists to meld Marxism with Buddhism and institute a welfare state.¹¹³ In reality, it meant an end to Burma's experiment with parliamentary democracy and the beginning of a military dictatorship that would last close to fifty years, infiltrating every aspect of life in Burma, including the banning of independent trade unions. Ne Win continued to look to the Soviet Union, China, and Japan for aid and support, but America had lost the Cold War in Burma.

As one of his biographers notes, Randolph also faced difficulties during the early Cold War period. Although the battle to integrate the American military was successful, others were less so.¹¹⁴ Soon after Randolph's moment of triumph in organizing the 1963 March on

Washington, which heralded a new era for civil rights, American soldiers, largely from the African-American working class, were funneled into Vietnam to fight an unwinnable war. It was Vietnam that most intimately connected Southeast Asia and the United States during the Cold War; as Simon Hall notes, it was a war which Randolph opposed and must have looked to with “private horror.”¹¹⁵ This article has traced more hopeful connections before this point, offering a perspective on socialist networks and trade unionism from two sides of the globe. It reminds us that the 1950s were a period of remarkable openness and transnational connection, but also one in which escalating military and ideological warfare continually undercut the attempts of activists to forge a more peaceful and equitable future.

Endnotes

¹ See Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA, 2004); Hugh Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (Cambridge, MA, 2008).

² A number of scholars have focused on W.E.B. Du Bois and Robeson’s anti-colonialism, rooting this in their commitment to communism. See especially Gerald Horne, *Black and red: WEB Du Bois and the Afro-American response to the cold war, 1944-1963* (Albany, 1986). Others have sought to “decenter” the focus on these figures and examine other ways in which African-American leaders connected with anti-colonial causes through pragmatic politics and democratic means. See especially Carol Anderson, *Bourgeois Radicals: the NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941-1960* (Cambridge, 2015).

³ See Peter Van Kemseke, *Towards an era of development: the globalization of socialism and Christian democracy, 1945-1965*. (Leuven, 2006); James Mark and Peter Apor, “Socialism Goes Global: Decolonization and the Making of a New Culture of Internationalism in Socialist Hungary, 1956–1989,” *The Journal of Modern History* 87:4 (2015): 852-891; Talbot C. Imlay, *The Practice of Socialist Internationalism: European Socialists and International Politics, 1914-1960* (Oxford, 2018).

⁴ See Su Lin Lewis, “Asian Socialism and the Forgotten Architects of Post-Colonial Freedom,” *Journal of World History* 30:2 [Special Issue: Afro-Asian Internationalisms in the Early Cold War] (2019).

⁵ Randolph, “The Tragedy of the Peekskill Robeson Concert” (1950), Speeches and Writings, A. Philip Randolph Papers, Library of Congress (henceforth APRP). On the movement within the British Labour party for a “third force” see Jonathan Schneer, “Hopes Deferred or Shattered: The British Labour Left and the Third Force Movement, 1945-49,” *The Journal of Modern History* 56: 2 (1984): 198-226.

⁶ Important exceptions include Kevin K. Gates, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill, 2006) and Robeson Taj Frazier, *The East is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Imagination* (Durham, 2015)

⁷ See Penny von Eschen, *Race against empire: black Americans and anticolonialism 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge, 2008); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and US foreign affairs, 1935-1960*; Anderson, *Eyes off the prize: The United Nations and the African-American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955* (Cambridge, 2003); Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting ‘til the midnight hour: a narrative history of black power in America* (New York, 2006); On Asia see Bill V. Mullen, and

Cathryn Watson, "Introduction: Crossing the World Color Line," in *W.E.B. Du Bois on Asia: Crossing the World Color Line* (Jackson, 2005).

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⁹ Gallicchio, 42. See also Yuichiro Onishi, "The new Negro of the Pacific: How African Americans forged cross-racial solidarity with Japan, 1917-22," *The Journal of African American History* 92:2 (2007), pp. 201-202.

¹⁰ Brian Russell Roberts and Keith Foulcher, "Introduction: Richard Wright on the Bandung Conference, Modern Indonesia on Richard Wright," *Indonesian Notebook: A Sourcebook on Richard Wright and the Bandung Conference* (Durham, 2016).

¹¹ Ibid, 202.

¹² Ibid, 9-12.

¹³ Beb Vuyk, "Black Power" (1955) in Roberts and Foulcher, 145-151.

¹⁴ On the problematic with Wright's text, see also Mark Philip Bradley, 'Richard Wright, Bandung, and the Poetics of the Third World' *Modern American History* 1 (2018), 147-150.

¹⁵ S.R. Joey Long, "Mixed up Power Politics and the Cold War: The Americans, the ICFTU and Singapore's Labour Movement, 1955-1960," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40:2 (2009).

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¹⁷ G.H. Jansen, *Afro-Asia and Non-Alignment* (London, 1966); Roy Allison, *The Soviet Union and Non-Alignment*. (Cambridge, 1988); Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York, 2007); Rinna Kullaa, *Non-Alignment and Its Origins in Cold War Europe: Yugoslavia, Finland, and the Soviet Challenge* (New York, 2012); Natasa Miskovic, "Introduction," Natasa Miskovic, Harald Fischer-Tiné and Nada Boskovska, *The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War* (London, 2014); Lorenz M. Luthi, "Non-Alignment, 1946-1965: Its Establishment and Struggle Against Afro-Asianism," *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 7:2 (2016).

¹⁸ Jason Parker, *Hearts, Minds, Voices: U.S. Public Diplomacy and the Formation of the Third World* (Oxford, 2016), 9.

¹⁹ Odd Arne Westad, *The global Cold War: third world interventions and the making of our times* (Cambridge, 2005).

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²² See Tony Day, "Cultures at war in cold war Southeast Asia: an introduction," in *Cultures at war: the cold war and cultural expression in Southeast Asia*, ed. Tony Day and Maya Ht Liem (Ithaca, 2010); On "alternative modernities" see Westad, 25.

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²⁴ Kersten, 17-20; Rosenberg, 85.

²⁵ Eric Arnesen, "A. Philip Randolph: Emerging Socialist Radical" in Kersten and Lang, *Reframing Randolph*.

²⁶ Ibid, 55-56.

²⁷ Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana, 1982).

²⁸ Rosenberg, 85.

²⁹ Nicholas Grant, *Winning Our Freedoms Together: African Americans and Apartheid, 1945-1960* (Durham, 2017), 12.

³⁰ See especially John J. Munro, *The anticolonial front: Cold War imperialism and the struggle against global white supremacy, 1945-1960*. University of California, Santa Barbara, 2009.

³¹ Address by A. Philip Randolph in Madison Square Garden, June 16 1942, APRC.

³² Roi Ottley, *New World A-Coming: Inside Black America* (New York, 1943), 252. The written press statement in Randolph's files words this differently, but the sentiment about sending black Americans to Burma is the same. See Randolph, "Address at Madison Square Gardens" (1941), Speeches and Writings, APRC.

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³⁶ Christopher Gerteis, "Subjectivity Lost: Labour and the Cold War in Occupied Japan," *Labour's Cold War: Local Politics in a Global Context* (Urbana, 2008); David Baker, "The Trade union movement in Japan" in *International Socialism*, 23 (1965)

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³⁸ Gerteis, 268; Stockwin, 15; Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (London, 1999), 254-273.

³⁹ See Dower, 254-273.

⁴⁰ William Andreas, *Dissenting Japan: A History of Japanese Radicalism and Counterculture from 1945 to Fukushima* (Oxford, 2016).

⁴¹ Richard Finn, *Winners in Peace: MacArthur, Yoshida, and Postwar Japan* (Berkeley, 1992), 311.

⁴² J.A.A. Stockwin, "The Japanese Socialist Party," *Asian Survey* 6:4, 187-188.

⁴³ "The Foreign Policy of the Social Democratic Party of Japan," Japan, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Files (henceforth BSCP), Container 100, Library of Congress.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ See Saul Rose, *Socialism in Southern Asia* (Oxford, 1959), Stockwin, Lewis.

⁴⁶ A. Philip Randolph, "My Trip to Asia," Box 37, 0337. Undated Speeches, microfilm reel 30 APRC

⁴⁷ A. Philip Randolph, "Sea-Asians," Box 38, 0840. Undated Speeches, microfilm reel 30 APRC

⁴⁸ See Lewis, 69; Gerard McCann, 'Where was the Afro in Afro-Asian Solidarity: Africa's Bandung moment in 1950s Asia', *Journal of World History* 30:2 (2019), 107

⁴⁹ Gallicchio, 42.

⁵⁰ This was also Japan's stance at the Bandung Conference. See Ampiah, 192.

⁵¹ Westad, 128.

⁵² Kei Nemoto, "Between Democracy and Economic Development: Japan's Policy Towards Burma/Myanmar Then and Now" in N. Ganesan and Kyaw Yin Hlaing, *Myanmar: State, Society, and Ethnicity* (Singapore, 2007), 96-108.

⁵³ "Pulse of the Burmese Press," *The Nation*, April 30, 1952.

⁵⁴ Confidential report by L.M. Purnell, the American Embassy in Rangoon, "Political Parties and Elections in Burma," June 8, 1951.

⁵⁵ Clymer, 58-9.

⁵⁶ 'Views of Thakin Kyaw Sein on Burmese Political Situation' 30 August 1951, RG84 US Embassy Burma 1950-52 Box 9, NARA.

⁵⁷ See Min Ye Paing Hein, "Fighting in the Dark: Ideology and State Formation in Post-Colonial Burma," *Journal of Historical Sociology* (2016).

⁵⁸ A. Philip Randolph, "Rangoon," Box 38, 0751. Undated Speeches. Microfilm reel 30, APRC.

⁵⁹ Letter from Robert Delson to U Kyaw Nyein, 22 April, 1952, BSCP Container 100.

⁶⁰ Letter from Kluger to Trager, 23 April 1952. ACCF Archives.

⁶¹ Andor Skotnes, *A New Deal for All? : Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore* (Durham, 2012).

⁶² Oral History Interview with Frank Trager (11 November 1972), Taniment Library, New York; "Obituary: Frank N. Trager, 78, An Expert on Asia, Dies" *New York Times*, 31 August 1984.

⁶³ Archive guide to the Thomas E. Posey Collection, <https://reuther.wayne.edu/files/LP001155.pdf>.

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⁶⁶ A. Philip Randolph, "Rangoon." Box 38, 0751. Undated Speeches. Microfilm reel 30. APRC.

⁶⁷ CIA Information Report, 10 December 1951, as quoted in Kenton Clymer, *A Delicate Relationship*, 111 fn22.

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⁶⁹ Ba Swe, *Burmese Revolution*, as qu. in Randolph, "Rangoon", APRC.

⁷⁰ 'Report of A Dalgleish on Trade Union situation in Burma', IOR/M/4/1213, India Office Records, British Library.

⁷¹ U Myo Htun Lynn, *Labour and the Labour Movement in Burma* (Asia Foundation, 1961), 27.

⁷² Ibid, 28.

⁷³ Confidential letter from A. C. Baker to Hughes, May 2 1946, Myanmar National Archives (Yangon) AG. 10-1 Acc. 365.

⁷⁴ See Jennifer Luff, *Commonsense Anticommunism: Labour and Civil Liberties between the World Wars* (Chapel Hill, 2012).

⁷⁵ Anthony Carew, "Conflict within the ICFTU: Anti-Communism and Anti-Colonialism in the 1950s," *International Review of Social History* 41 (1996), 150.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 148.

⁷⁷ "WFTU Representatives Address Mass Meeting," *The Burman*, 12 February 1951.

⁷⁸ "The Parting of Ways," *The New Times of Burma*, 13 February 1951.

⁷⁹ "May Day Celebrations in Rangoon, May 17, 1951," US Embassy Burma Classified General Records 1950-52 Box 9 NARA.

⁸⁰ "WFTU's Appeal to Workers," *The Burman*, May 3, 1952.

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⁸² "Noted American Socialist Labour Leader Arriving in Rangoon This Evening," *The Burman*, 6 May 1952.

⁸³ "US Labour Leader tells of Tokyo riots," *The Nation*, 11 May 1952.

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⁸⁵ Ibid.

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⁹⁰ "Constitution of the Burma Railway Workers' Union." File no. AG-10-2 Acc 477. Myanmar National Archives.

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⁹³ Randolph, "Rangoon."

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Eric Arnesen, "A. Philip Randolph," *The Human Tradition in Labour History* (Lanham, 2003), 181.

⁹⁶ On the material elements of sound trade unionism, see James elsewhere in this volume.

⁹⁷ Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*, 104.; Melinda Chateauvert, "Organizing Gender: A. Philip Randolph and Women Activists" in *Reframing Randolph: Labour, Black Freedom, and the Legacies of A. Philip Randolph* (New York, 2015).

⁹⁸ "Speech given by U Mg Ko, President of the Burma Railways Union, Rangoon, 9th May 1952" in Container 100, BSCP.

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¹⁰⁰ Letter from San Tun Hla to Brother Mapapra, 22 March 1962.

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¹⁰³ "Press release: Randolph protests oppression of Japanese Workers," 20 February 1953, Container 100, BSCP.

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¹¹³ Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps: Histories of Burma* (New York, 2006), 261.

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¹¹⁵ See Simon Hall, "The Response of the Moderate Wing of the Civil Rights Movement to the War in Vietnam." *The Historical Journal* 46:3 (2003): 681.