

# Making a Mess Abroad:

## The Foreign Aid Policy of the 'Decidedly Internationalist' AFL-CIO

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### The Email dialogs

Kim Scipes, a former trade unionist now living in Chicago, has been campaigning over the last years for an opening of the books on the international policy of the 'old' AFL-CIO, with respect to the Pinochet coup in Chile, 1973. Now he is questioning the policy of the 'new' AFL-CIO with respect to the attempted coup in Venezuela and, most-recently, to Cuba. (Scipes 2000, 2002a, b).

In response to such challenges, Stan Gacek, a leading International Department officer, issued a public response which later appeared on the AFL-CIO website (AFL-CIO 2002). The speed of this response, and its reproduction on the website is, in my experience, an innovation. But, apparently, an innovation of restricted application.<sup>1</sup> In a further reply to Scipes on the Cuba funding, which has not been publicly circulated, Gacek declared that

'In response to...your emails, you should know that the Solidarity Center is NOT receiving any funding under the USAID/Cuba Program of May, 2002.' (Forwarded email, June 26, 2002)

Puzzled by this odd formulation, and wondering whether Kim might have maybe made a loose accusation, I re-read his email but then realized that the problem was not a loose accusation but, rather, a tight answer – a legalistic formulation which did not address the substance of Kim Scipes' question - or even the detailed US state funding data Kim had provided!

My own experience, after annotating and forwarding a story I had received, on funding for the 'reformed' unions in Venezuela (Waterman 2002), was of receiving, privately, from friends close to the AFL-CIO, emails to the effect that I was not only undermining committed reformists doing good solidarity work within that organization but possibly endangering lives by raising the matter!

In one case I was pointed to a union leader in a third country, who might tell me what good work the AFL-CIO was doing under extreme conditions there. I did not follow this up, since I would not expect a hard-pressed union leader, receiving funding or other support from a foreign source, to publicly express anything but gratitude, almost regardless of the original source of such funding – which the AFL-CIO is anyway unlikely to draw prominently to his or her attention.

## New lamps for old

These exchanges raise questions about how, precisely, the 'new' AFL-CIO aid policy differs from the 'old' - apart, of course, from the rhetoric.<sup>2</sup> (Remember, we are concentrating on 'aid' here, not on other problematic areas of recent activity, having to do with a renewed wave of protectionism that allies US unions with US corporations, nor with AFL-CIO identification with the US's 'savage wars of peace' – for which see Box 2).

The source of funding for AFL-CIO aid activities remains 1) the US state and/or state-dependent foundations, and 2) US embassies in specific countries – the latter reportedly being by far the most important source (and one even harder to obtain information on). The 'new' AFL-CIO, moreover, remains intimately involved in the State Department's international labor operations – though for this information one has to go to the latter rather than the former (US State Department 2000).

The International Department's mode of operation remains that of doing good by stealth and wealth. The American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS or the Solidarity Center) has no website and apparently does not issue any public account of its activities, nor any accounts of its incomes and outgoings. Perhaps it delivers such information to *its* funders, or the US tax authorities, but not *in* public, not *to* the public. It here appears to have less obligations to its 'stakeholders' than any publicly-floated corporation to its shareholders. There can be no doubt that, as in the past, the State Department, CIA and FBI, are better informed about the Solidarity Center than any labor union member or officer in the USA **[Box 1]**.

### BOX 1

#### Jay Lovestone, AFL-CIO leader, CIA Collaborator

*Not so much by their anti-Sovietism as their secretiveness...Lovestone and his allies overstepped their mandates and thereby made it more difficult for American labor to build or rebuild, an international program [...] Lovestone's legacy is clear: Not only was he operating without the informed consent of American labor union members, he was acting against their interests.*

(Dashiell Shenk 1999).

And if the International Department of the AFL-CIO is itself fully informed, rather than turning a blind eye, it is not telling us either.

For information, critics are dependent on the *providers* of such funding (who are

either under legal obligation, or are only too proud to boast of, or boost, their furtherance of US state interests), on US critics of the AFL-CIO (who may or may not have done their homework). But we have no access to the horse's mouth, nor even to some radical-democratic deep throat within the AFL-CIO (though here, of course, one lives in hope).

In the absence of information, we have to assume that 'reform' of the International Department means reform *within* the 'AFL-CIO-CIA' of the Cold War years. Reformists seem to consider that by re-directing some – even, who knows, all? - of the funding effort to 'good' unions in Latin America or Indonesia, to the Ukraine or Zimbabwe, they are forwarding solidarity between US unions and workers, Poor World unions and workers.

### **The meaning of international labor solidarity**

In so far as unions and workers at either end may not even *know* of this funding, such a purpose can hardly be achieved.

In so far as the funding relationship is in practice one between a handful of officers at both ends, then maybe it furthers relations of trust between them. Thus, the radical Brazilian, Kjeld Jakobsen, International Secretary of the equally radical Central Única de Trabalhadores appears alongside Harry Kamberis (Cold War AFL-CIO apparatchik, secretive head of its Solidarity Center), when the latter promotes neo-liberal democracy, under the aegis of another US state-dependent operation, the Worldwide Movement for Democracy (2000). But this then has surely to be called not *worker* or *union* solidarity but something like *the international solidarity of a handful of union officers*.

The relationship can hardly be even considered solidarity if it implies a one-way flow of funding, staffing and support from one party to another. This is, at best, a 'substitution solidarity' - one in which the 'rich, powerful, informed, generous' party supports the 'poor, weak, ignorant, needy party'. About which see either version of the 'White Man's Burden' **[Box 2, 3]**

In pre-modern times this was called 'charity'. Or a patron-client relation.

In modern times it was called a 'civilizing mission'. Or a patron-client relation.

In high modern times it is called 'trade union development aid'. Or a patron-client relation

## BOX 2

### **The White Man's Burden (Imperialist version)**

*Take up the White Man's burden--  
Send forth the best ye breed--  
Go, bind your sons to exile  
To serve your captives' need;  
To wait, in heavy harness,  
On fluttered folk and wild--  
Your new-caught sullen peoples,  
Half devil and half child [...]*

*Take up the White Man's burden--  
The savage wars of peace--  
Fill full the mouth of Famine,  
And bid the sickness cease...*

(Rudyard Kipling 1899)

## BOX 3

### **The White Man's Burden (Anti-Imperialist Version)**

*Take up the White Man's burden,  
And teach the Philippines  
What interest and taxes are  
And what a mortgage means.  
Give them electrocution chairs,  
And prisons, too, galore,  
And if they seem inclined to kick,  
Then spill their heathen gore.  
They need our labor question, too,  
And politics and fraud,  
We've made a pretty mess at home;  
Let's make a mess abroad.*

(Ernest Crosby 1899)

This, for example, is how the patrons help the clients in Thailand, as expressed by a Solidarity Center representative at a meeting of the World Bank:

In Thailand, the Solidarity Center strengthens unions through a program of grass-roots training and technical assistance. A gamut of training ranges from union administration, collective bargaining, legal education, and effective leadership skills. Why is this important? Because when a downturn occurs, aggrieved workers need leaders who can sit down at the table to negotiate with employers about how to solve the situation as fairly and equitably as possible. It comes down to treating workers with respect when issues like lay-offs, cut back in working hours or other eventualities come up. A sustainable solution requires the participation and assent of all partners. This is basic "lesson learned" of international development that the World Bank has already recognized. (Robertson 1999).

Helping workers peacefully negotiate the conditions of their own funerals is, apparently, something that the AFL-CIO really knows about. *And* something that justifies the work of the Solidarity Center to the World Bank?

### **Why does AFL-CIO internationalism remain state-dependent?**

A question must also arise about the continued dependence of the AFL-CIO on funding from the 'rich, powerful, informed, generous' source of its 'solidarity activities'. Is this not *another* patron-client relationship? Originally, the reformed leadership of the AFL-CIO was going to put an end to state-dependency in its solidarity work and become 'decidedly internationalist' [Box 4].

#### **BOX 4**

##### **The AFL-CIO Turns 'Decidedly Internationalist'**

*In the past, the dominant labor policy was alternately driven by cold war anti-communist ideology, a belief that prosperity was dependent on foreign markets for US products, and a protectionism that sought to prevent the importation of foreign products. Each of these approaches, in their own way, supported US corporate interests. But now that workers and unions are combating employers that are multinational, organized labor is forced to organize against capital on a global scale. Consequently, the current AFL-CIO has turned decidedly internationalist in perspective.*

(Gregory Mantsios 1998)

What is the problem here?

1) The US unions are not *short of money*. Consider the immense funds they invest, at each election, in the Democratic Party, or local politicians, who then, if successful, deliver either favors or a slap in the kisser. Consider the money tied up in real estate,

so as to be within walking distance of the White House and Congress (despite all the harm these have done them over the past several decades).<sup>3</sup>

2) Is the AFL-CIO (including its reform element) *afraid to ask* member unions, unionists or the general public for funds to support unions and workers abroad? Is it afraid to either reveal the lack of such solidarity feelings, or worker mistrust of the requesting leadership, or that contributors might want information about and control over such funding? ('No taxation without representation' was, I believe, a motivating battle-cry of the American Republic).

The second case was certainly true of the leadership of the state-controlled Czechoslovak unions, in the mid-60s, when a reformist (yes!) international officer proposed collecting solidarity funds for Vietnam from the workers themselves. The leadership ridiculed him. Why bother, irritate or provoke the members? The union leadership had its own sources of funding to demonstrate 'Czechoslovak working-class solidarity with the heroic people of Vietnam struggling against US imperialism'. I heard this story from the officer concerned, who had experienced different British union solidarity practices during the war years, whilst I – a reformist (I do confess!) within the World Federation of Trade Unions – was providing Communist finance and support to an affiliated union center in Nigeria, early 1968.

3) Is the AFL-CIO not only dependent on funding from outside and above, but also adjusting its 'own' international and aid policies to accord with the 'political opportunities' this provides or allows? Might it, therefore, be more active in relation to 'free trade unionism' in Venezuela and Cuba than, say, China (where worker and union rights are *worse* than the former, but where the US has major business and strategic aspirations)? One would like to know.<sup>4</sup>

## **The need for radical democratization**

The last question that arises here is whether 'reform' is an appropriate stance or discourse in relation to the problems of the AFL-CIO – not only in respect of its international policy but of its policy, period. There are, it appears, certain taboos on speaking about – not to mention action on – quite fundamental problems of US unionism. These include widespread corruption and even mafia connections within major US unions,<sup>5</sup> the corporate salaries and perquisites of office that union leaderships enjoy, the general phenomenon of deference toward the US state, the major corporations, the Democratic Party, despite the diminishing returns these have been delivering US unions and workers over the last decades.

What US unionism and its international relations would seem minimally to require is not 'reform' but 'radical democratization'. The latter implies a continuing process of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (transparency). Just like the AFL-CIO was presumably claiming to promote amongst Russian unions after 1989. About this operation, Renfrey Clarke (1994) commented:

While the AFL-CIO has an obligation to give practical help, it is sadly unqualified to issue recommendations on how to build labor unions. Accepting the AFL-CIO's advice on strategy and tactics is like taking boxing lessons from a fighter who has suffered 50 knock-outs in 50 bouts...Despite its failures at home, the AFL-CIO has an astonishing ability to fund assistance to foreign unions.

Not quite so astonishing when one considers that hyperactivity and 'success' abroad provides at least some solace for inactivity and failure at home.

As for the need to go beyond 'reform', nationally and internationally, this is made clear by Robert Fitch (1999):

In the book she edited, *Not Your Father's Union Movement*, Mort<sup>6</sup>...writes about the need for "core positioning and message discipline." But this is not a strategy for journalists trying to find the truth; or reformers trying to right what's wrong; it's the method of public relations consultants trying to create an image. "Message discipline" underpins UNITE's own strategy for presenting itself as a fighter against sweatshops with its highly successful campus campaigns against overseas garment makers. But the best move UNITE could make in the battle against sweatshops—if it wanted to protect its members, instead of just its image—would be simply to enforce its own contracts here in New York. The truth is that UNITE has presided over the greatest collapse of labor standards in this century, while piling up more financial assets per member than any union in the country.

With respect to its international relations, radical democratization would imply, at very least, opening the books on the past. And if - as an AFL-CIO staffer told me some years ago - these documents were destroyed by the old International Department or Institute staff before the reform staffers came in - then we need to know 1) what exactly was destroyed, what archives remain, and where they are,<sup>7</sup> 2) who exactly destroyed what, 3) why no public denunciation or legal action was taken against these predecessors of the Arthur Andersen Corp., 4) whether the reform leadership was complicit with this destruction (maybe as a condition for the voluntary retirement - on full benefits - of the Cold Warriors?). If this passage appears to be idle speculation, then the AFL-CIO needs to be reminded that, as with Soviet Russia and Communist/Capitalist China, the CIA and Enron Corporation, speculation thrives on the denial or manipulation of information.

*I mean*, if the US corporate, state and judicial authorities, are capable of cleaning up *their* act, in relation to Enron and Arthur Andersen, should not the AFL-CIO demonstrate, in regard to itself, the principles and practices it claims to be supporting and promoting in Venezuela and Cuba?

*I mean*, if the AFL-CIO is energetically - if secretly - promoting abroad standards it practices neither within the union movement, nor in relation to employers, in the USA, will not the question increasingly arise of whether what it is preaching to Cubans or Indonesians is not a cheap (at least for the unions) substitute for what it is failing to practice in the USA?

*I mean*, finally, if the AFL-CIO is seriously interested in moving from either charity or enlightened-self interest, toward a rounded and principled solidarity relationship, should it not - for example - be bringing an equal number of qualified graduates and experienced activists from the Third World to help US unions solve the crippling problems with which the latter are struggling?

### **Postscript: union birds and imperial feathers**

I have already suggested that the international practices of the AFL-CIO - and the shortcomings of 'reform from within' - were paralleled by the Czechoslovak Communist unions, and the Communist WFTU during the Cold War. This may not

make AFL-CIO reformists feel any better, since they can hardly appeal to these cases as justifications for their own practices or aspirations.

Perhaps they will be more cheered by the knowledge that the British Trades Union Congress is similarly dependent on a cozy relationship with the British state, and appears, indeed, to see this as something to be boasted of.<sup>8</sup>

In a Press Release of June 18, 2002, the TUC declared that it would be working with the Foreign and Commonwealth (previously Colonial) Office in 'promoting workers' rights around the world' (TUC 2002). This implies not only mutual consultation on such matters but secondments (staff exchanges), and collaboration with British Embassy staff around the world.

The TUC General Secretary, John Monks declared, in announcing this, that

British unions are well-regarded throughout the international trade union movement and have a wealth of practical experience they are more than willing to share, both here and in activities abroad.

Why, where and how British unions are 'well-regarded' abroad is a matter for investigation rather than assertion. Which 'practical experiences' in Britain and abroad might be worth sharing is also a matter of conjecture, given the neo-liberal policies of the current British Labor Government, which is proudly continuing the anti-labor policies of its Conservative predecessor. Most problematic of all is why the TUC considers that it is by *close collaboration* with this British government that it can best recommend itself to the international union movement and further labor rights internationally.<sup>9</sup>

The answer here must lie, as with the US, in a state-defined nationalism and imperialism that goes back at least 100 years. Or, at very least, to rest with some implicit notion of a 'civilizing mission' to be jointly furthered by the unions and the state, amongst 'the lesser breeds without the law' – or at least without the labor law. (Here it should be remembered that Kipling's appeal to 'take up the white man's burden' was written by a British imperialist but addressed to and published in the US).

### **Deference to those above/superiority to those below?**

The general syndrome revealed here (also found within the recently re-branded Global Unions) is one of 'Deference to the Rich and Powerful/Superiority to the Poor and Weak' - even when the latter reveal themselves, like the Brazilian CUT, as *more independent* of their own nation-state than those who are patronizing them.

This continued state-dependency, however, calls to mind the words of Napoleon after a disastrous battle, when he said 'this is worse than a crime, it's a blunder'.

The moral turpitude of such a foreign policy alliance is thus overshadowed by its archaic frame of reference, and its consequent ineffectivity under contemporary conditions **[Box 5]**.

## BOX 5

### Union Internationalism: the End or the Beginning?

*[A]ll too often, official trade union practice seems implicitly to accept that internationalism is an elite concern, that it is safer if the membership does not learn too much of policies which they might perhaps oppose. In some unions...international issues are given reasonable prominence in international communications and education; I fear that this is far from typical [...] In the third century of trade union internationalism, the challenges which are faced are perhaps greater than ever, but there is growing awareness that old recipes for action are inadequate and that new possibilities can be grasped. Thoughtful trade unionists have come to recognize that playing safe is the most risky strategy. The present is either the end of the beginning or the beginning of the end.*

Richard Hyman (2002)

It belongs to a period in which power in the land and in the world rested primarily in the hands of national capitalisms, nation states and blocs. And in which, therefore, nationally-defined and identified unions could gain real (evidently not permanent) advantages for the unionized from identification with the nation state. Given globalization, *that* power is increasingly shifting to corporations whose allegiance to any national polity or liberal-democratic standard is decreasing. Think Enron, think WorldCom, think 'if you USAmericans/Mexicans/Chinese workers won't accept Mexican/Chinese/Tibetan conditions, we will have to move to Mexico/China/Tibet/Togo...!'.

Those concerned with even effective labor *defense* against a globalized capitalism need, surely, to create, first and foremost, a partnership at the level of working people, and allied democratic forces – even if these are in Arequipa (Peru), Novosibirsk (Russia) or Ouagadougou (it's the capital of Burkina Faso, just above Lomé, Togo, on the map of Africa).

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<sup>1</sup> *Gacek thus fails to explain what he means in this statement when he talks of 'mutual solidarity' between the US and Venezuelan unions. What funding, policy, personnel, expertise, declarations or information could the latter have been possibly providing the former over the decades?*

<sup>2</sup> *Like all effective rhetoric, of course, that concerning the new internationalism of the AFL-CIO rests upon a certain reality. But rhetoric functions in two ways: by exaggeration and concealment. Thus, the presentation of AFL-CIO international policy by Stan Gacek, on another occasion (Worthman 2001), is marked both by dramatization and silences. For the Cold War origins of this mode of operation, see the extensive special section in *CovertAction Quarterly* (1999)*

<sup>3</sup> *For this problem, see Tasini (1995), which does not, however, deal with the international operations of the US unions.*

<sup>4</sup> *For the ambiguities of the China Syndrome within the AFL-CIO, see Sze Pang Cheung (2000). 'We Have Met the Enemy: Fighting China or the WTO?', *Against the Current*, No. 87, June-July, 2000).*

<sup>5</sup> *For the corruption problem, and mafia connections, see Robert Fitch (1999).*

<sup>6</sup> *Reference is to Jo-Ann Mort (1998). This attractive and optimistic collection celebrated the new AFL-CIO leadership. The contribution on labor internationalism, by new department head, Barbara Shailor, provoked me to send her an open letter (Waterman 1999), striking similar notes to this present piece. Although I have had a couple of pleasant and productive encounters with her since writing that letter, she has not yet seen fit to explain the lack of a reply.*

<sup>7</sup> *Whilst documents of the International Department, or the various AFL-CIO regional aid institutes, may have been folded, spindled, mutilated or shredded, archives covering the Cold War period – including the CIA Connection - not only clearly remain but are accessible to diligent researchers. Check here the work of Tony Carew (1996, 1999) and his contributions to v.d. Linden (2001: 187-339, 605).*

<sup>8</sup> *The global problem, indeed crisis, of trade union internationalism at the turn of this century is revealed in a well-documented and somewhat understated paper that traces this back to the turn of the previous century. Richard Hyman (2002) concludes, finally, that we are now confronted either with beginning of the end of labour internationalism or the end of the beginning. And that a new beginning would necessarily imply the active involvement of rank and file unionists in such international policy.*

<sup>9</sup> *The active collaboration of the TUC with British colonial policy goes back, however, to 1937, following major labor uprisings in the West Indies. The spirit in which this was done was not dissimilar to that expressed by the TUC above – although without the contemporary reference to human rights (Roberts 1964: Ch. 5).*