REVIEW ESSAY

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When I published my book on the AFL-CIO’s foreign policy program—AFL-CIO’s Secret War against Developing Country Workers: Solidarity or Sabotage? (Lexington Books, 2010)—I had tried to sketch out an overview of this program based on research done to date, and hoped that subsequent researchers would “fill in the blanks” that had not been addressed in previous research; I even pointed out places that I knew the existing analysis was weak or non-existent. Thus, I was excited to learn of the publication of this new collection.

This new volume of writings on the foreign policy of the AFL-CIO is both interesting and frustrating. interesting because they bring some new research results to light, and frustrating because this is a obviously a political project against more critical analyses of the AFL-CIO’s foreign policy, of which this reviewer’s is one, as it “ignores” most of the significant work of those it opposes. Even more interesting, however, is that findings in a number of the included chapters support the claims of the more radical critics. The chapters were originally presented at a conference in Ghent, Belgium that took place October 7-8, 2011, and this collection includes 14 chapters written by labor scholars from Europe, Latin America and the United States, with an introduction by Marcel van der Linden, and a conclusion.

The “political project” becomes obvious in the first paragraph of the Introduction. Claiming that “The AFL-CIO’s foreign policy is one of the last overlooked subjects in the field of Cold War history,” the editors give a quick overview of the literature, but then ignore three major monographs on this very subject: Beth Sims’ Workers of the World Undermined: American Labor’s Role in US Foreign Policy (South End Press, 1992); Paul Buhle’s Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland, and the Tragedy of American Unionism (Monthly Review Press, 1999); and my own book, with Sims’ and my books solely focused on the AFL/AFL-CIO foreign policy program, each including but not limited to the Cold War period. To suggest this collection edited by
Waters and Van Goethem adequately covers the literature without addressing these three works—beyond the surface “mentioning” of Scipes and Sims, and without even mentioning Buhle—is ludicrous.

However, rather than focus on the political project, attention should be first given to the findings of the research.

To his credit, Geert van Goethem recognizes that American Federation of Labor (AFL) foreign policy began under Samuel Gompers, the first president of the AFL (1886–1894; 1895–1924, when he died in office), and not later during the 1940s, as has been often claimed. Yet Van Goethem’s focus in “From Dollars to Deeds: Exploring the Sources of Active Interventionism, 1934–1945” is on the AFL’s fight against fascism between 1934 and 1945 and it’s turn (actually, re-turn) to anti-communism. He points out the “missionary” nature of both Gompers and George Meany: “It [their anti-communism-KS] was a matter of life and death; a fight between good and evil. It was not about the short-term interests of the union member, but about the United States itself: what it stood for and its place in the world. As to that, the AFL international action was much more political than that of its European counterparts” (19).

One thing that is particularly interesting is how these researchers—in a number of chapters—demonstrate that the AFL/AFL-CIO (i.e., both before and after the 1955 merger of the AFL and the Congress of Industrial Organizations) foreign activities were established independently of the U.S. Government, a point this writer has been making since 1989: the AFL/AFL-CIO have not been puppets of the U.S. Government, nor of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Quenby Olimsted Hughes in her chapter, “The American Federation of Labor’s Cold War Campaign against ‘Slave Labor’ at the United Nations,” pays considerable attention to this and, in fact, Hughes notes that because this campaign raised the potential of garnering a lot of attention on conditions in the U.S. (such as racist treatment of “Negros”) and causing the British considerable concern about forced labor in their colonies, it was not strongly supported by the U.S. State Department. This independence is noted again in Alessandro Brogi’s “The AFL and CIO Between ‘Crusade’ and Pluralism in Italy, 1944–1963”; in Barrett Dower’s “The Influence of the AFL on the Force Ouvriere, 1944–1954”; Eric Chenoweth’s “AFL–CIO Support for Solidarity: Moral, Political, Financial”; Dustin Walcher’s “Reforming Latin American Labor: The AFL-CIO and Latin America’s Cold War”; Mathilde von Bulow’s “Irving Brown and ICFTU Labor Diplomacy During Algeria’s Struggle for Independence, 1954–1962”; and John C. Stoner’s “We Will Follow a Nationalist Policy; but We Will Never be Neutral: American Labor and Neutralism in Cold War Africa, 1957–1962.”

However, that the AFL/AFL-CIO activities were established independently from the U.S. Government does not mean that they did not work with the U.S. Government or some of its particular agencies. The case that the AFL/AFL-CIO collaborated with the CIA—already incredibly strong—has only gotten stronger: in the Introduction, after noting Gompers’ understanding that “freedom for the working class required that their trade unions have complete independence (emphasis added) from government control,” and noting the Soviet
unions were not "free" of government control, the editors then turned around and accepted that "Battling communism often meant working in conjunction with the US government, including the State Department, the Agency for International Development (AID), and the CIA as well as its predecessor, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS)" (p. 2). [In my book—Scipes, 2010: 203, endnote #9—I argue this connection with the CIA has been well documented, but overemphasized.]

Several of the articles in the collection support claims about this governmental—and especially CIA—collaboration: Van Goethem on AFL activities between 1934 and 1945; Hughes on "slave labor"; Brogi on Italy; Dower on France; Chenoweth on Solidarity; Larissa Rosa Correa's "Democracy and Freedom in Brazilian Trade Unionism During the Civil-Military Dictatorship: The Activities of the American Institute of Free Labor Development"; Angela Vergara's "Chilean Workers and the US Labor Movement: From Solidarity to Intervention, 1950s—1970s"; and Edmund F. Wehrle, Jr.'s "Free Labor versus Slave Labor: Free Trade Unionism and the Challenge of War-torn Asia."

Notably, there is nothing in this collection that indicates that AFL/AFL-CIO leaders ever honestly reported or listened to rank and file members about their international activities. As I claimed in my 2010 book, "Thus, the AFL-CIO foreign policy leadership has operated in the name of American workers, but without our informed or even uninformed consent..." (Scipes, 2010: xxx).

One new contribution of this collection is that several authors show that workers in other countries have not passively just followed the AFL/AFL-CIO's "commands": it didn't happen in France, once Force Ouvrières was created; nor did it in Latin America: see Walcher on Latin America; Magaly Rodríguez García on "The AFL-CIO and ORIT in Latin America's Andean Region, from the 1950s to the 1960s"; Robert Anthony Waters, Jr., on "More Subtle Than We Knew: The AFL in the British Caribbean"; Correa on Brazil under the dictatorship; Vergara on Chile; nor did it in Africa: see Van Bullow on Algeria; and Stoner on Africa. However, while nice to have the "documentation" on this, it seems a bit of a "straw person" argument: I don't know of any critic of AFL-CIO foreign policy who has ever claimed that it has been so successful that workers anywhere automatically succumbed to its desires.

Another contribution of this collection is Yvette Richards' "Marred by Dissimulation: The AFL-CIO, the Women's Committee, and Transnational Labor Relations." Richards shows that the AFL-CIO foreign policy leadership was very uninterested in women trade unionists and their issues, and they sabotaged efforts to advance these interests in international meetings of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).

Several of these articles certainly add to the discussion of AFL/AFL-CIO foreign policy, although some are of greater value than others: Brogi is interesting in Italy, although it would have been stronger had it engaged with Ronald L. Filipelli's American Labor and Postwar Italy, 1943—1953 (Stanford University Press, 1989); also interesting is Richards on women, Correa on Brazil, Van Bullow on Algeria, and Stoner on Africa. Correa's is especially interesting
since she glosses over the Brazilian military coup in 1964—not even a full sentence!—in which AIFLD (the AFL-CIO’s American Institute for Free Labor Development) played a direct role, to discuss AIFLD’s role during the dictatorship and its efforts to help “guarantee the functioning of democratic institutions . . .” (178–179).

However, some of these articles are very propagandistic: Chenoweth’s on Solidarity is an homage to Lane Kirkland’s “international labor solidarity,” while ignoring AFL-CIO’s activities in and support for dictatorships in places like Brazil, El Salvador, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Africa, and South Korea, all about the same time, or Kirkland’s support for anti-governmental activities in revolutionary Nicaragua. Wehrle’s on Asia, primarily on Vietnam, also is even worse, glorifying “free” trade unionism, inaccurately asserting the support of labor members for foreign operations they did not know about, and suggesting U.S. activities in Vietnam as being honorable.

Perhaps more egregious, however, is Vergara, when she claims, “Historians have intensely debated the degree of US influence in Chile during President Salvador Allende’s years and although CIA support for the many military and extreme right coup plots is evident, the relevance of US-attempted influences on the labor movement is less clear” (emphasis added: 210). Unfortunately, that is not true at all: as I show in my 2010 book in a section devoted to Chile, based on an increasing number of studies and books since 1974 including declassified U.S. Government documents, the AFL-CIO, through its American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), was directly involved in the overthrow of the Allende government (Scipes, 2010: 40–48).

Especially following these chapters, the conclusion to the study, “Transnational Labor Politics in the Global Cold War” by Federico Romero, is confusing. His second paragraph is quite laudatory:

... we are now witnessing the emergence of a new scholarship. It does not entirely skip away from some of the older questions, but it approaches them with a fresh view, as it operates within a completely changed intellectual context and historical frame of reference. As the essays collected in this book make clear, these new historians of the AFL-CIO’s global projection are not only free from the ideological shibboleths of the Cold War era, which have obviously faded away. In tune with current historiographical trends, they are exploring the vast and uneven terrain of the global Cold War... They incorporate the postcolonial emphasis on the independent agency and culture of actors in Asia, Africa and especially Latin America. They investigate the dynamics of transnational labor relations within the cultural and political boundaries of modernization projects... They are also beneficially free from any cloak-and-dagger fascination with the conspiratorial reading of history that often tarnishes the literature on the CIA’s cultural and psychological Cold War, and its cooperation with American trade union officials (269).

What puzzles me is that Romero writes as if there has been no solid scholarship on workers around the world or even on AFL/AFL-CIO foreign policy over the past fifty years, or that if he knows there is, he dismisses it. In fact,
there’s a growing literature that has been exploding since the 1960s on labor around the world, and not just in the “Global North,” with much of it being of high quality.

This ties into my major concern of this collection—and I cannot ascertain whether each author consciously participated on this basis, or if just a few key actors, including the editors—but this is an extremely political project while hiding behind the “objectivity” of scholarship. First, they treat the very concept of “free trade unionism” uncritically, accepting it at face value, with no recognition that, in fact, it is a very political concept in and of itself. Second, many of the authors do not question AFL/AFL-CIO intervention, and this is especially true of their activities in Europe during the 1940s and 1950s. The fact is that the Communists in France and Italy had won the public support they enjoyed because of their leading roles in resisting fascism in those countries; while they did get advice and resources from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, they were not creations nor slaves of the Soviets. And third, along with the second, is that the AFL/AFL-CIO always saw the “Communists” as being outside forces, being directed by Moscow, and never being the product of local forces and conditions that were almost always more important; again, however, this collection never questions this basic assumption.

All of this leads to my final complaint: the authors do not engage with the established literature in the field of AFL/AFL-CIO foreign policy studies; as stated above, they specifically do not engage with the work of Sims, Buhle, or myself. Sims published a very influential book on this subject in 1992, as did Buhle in 1999, although Buhle’s focus was on the “business unionism” of the AFL/AFL-CIO over time, and only focused on foreign policy slightly (albeit powerfully).

Nonetheless, this collection as a whole is terribly flawed—and fails as a political project—because it refuses to engage with the concept of “labor imperialism,” and claims that the AFL/AFL-CIO has engaged in these practices. This analysis has been developed the furthest by myself: in addition to my 2010 book (published, I might note, over a year before the conference that led to this collection), I also have published twenty-six articles on the AFL-CIO foreign policy program since 1989, in the U.S. and a number of other countries, in peer-reviewed journals, specialty journals, popular magazines, and trade union newspapers—see in particular, my article in the December 2010 issue of Working USA: “Why Labor Imperialism? AFL-CIO’s Foreign Policy Leaders and the Developing World.” Further, I have formally reviewed books by Hughes and Rodriguez Garcia elsewhere, as well as discussed Wehrle’s work in my book. It is difficult to believe that my work is unknown to most of these scholars. And yet, there are only two mentions of my book in this entire collection, and neither one dealt with any issues raised therein, only mentioning its existence.

Whether my analysis is superior or inferior to the analysis/analyses in this collection must be left for others to determine: in fact, I’d welcome such efforts as long as my work gets treated respectfully. But refusing to engage analyses that question one’s own is intellectual cowardice.
In short, as seen by the chosen title of the collection—*American Labor’s Global Ambassadors: The Intellectual History of the AFL-CIO during the Cold War*—this collection is put forth as a challenge to the claim of “labor imperialism.” It suggests, ignoring much of the scholarship over the past fifty years, that the U.S. labor movement as a whole has endorsed these labor imperialist efforts—when, in reality, most American trade unionists still do not know about them—and that these “labor ambassadors” have respectfully represented American labor to workers and unions around the world. I argue that working with the CIA, overthrowing democratically elected governments, supporting dictators, and hiding these efforts from their own members challenges such claims.

Nor, very pointedly, is this “the” international history of the AFL-CIO during the Cold War. This collection presents some new research that is definitely valuable and, for specialists who have some background in the field and can critically evaluate claims, it will make contributions to the field. Yet by its unwillingness to engage with those of us who hold different viewpoints, suggestions that it is an “objective” study that is “state of the art” are shown to be facetious.