WHY LABOR IMPERIALISM? AFL-CIO'S FOREIGN POLICY LEADERS AND THE DEVELOPING WORLD

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Arguing that the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and then after 1955, the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), have sought to dominate labor organizations globally, this article establishes this theoretically as "labor imperialism." The essay then asks: why do labor leaders engage in labor imperialism? This essay examines past efforts to explain labor imperialism, and finds none of them sufficient. It suggests that this labor imperialism is based on an ideological approach. To test this hypothesis, it examines Labor's foreign policy under AFL and then AFL-CIO presidents Capper, Meany, Kirkland, and Sweeney, and argues that the hypothesis that Labor's imperialism is based on an ideological construct is confirmed. Further, it identifies the ideological construct on which it is based as American Nationalism. It argues that efforts to challenge labor's imperialism must specifically challenge the American nationalism upon which it is based.

The past fifty years have seen the development of a scholarly literature concerning American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) foreign policy, empirically establishing that the AFL and then the AFL-CIO has sought to dominate labor movements and progressive allies in a number of countries around the world since the early 1900s, engaging in what is loosely referred to as "labor imperialism." Yet the term "labor imperialism" has not been theoretically developed to date, despite the extensive number of empirical studies completed so far—the term has been generally accepted by activists, but not theoretically grounded. Along with this, but more importantly, there has been no satisfactory explanation why labor leaders would engage in labor imperialism.

This article seeks to theoretically ground this literature, by formally placing U.S. Labor's efforts to dominate labor around the world (Labor's "dominative project") within the concept of "imperialism." Once this is established, then attention is paid to explaining why labor leaders might engage in such. The question that begs to be answered is why have Labor's foreign policy leaders taken this approach; why have U.S. Labor leaders engaged in labor imperialism? There have been three explanations provided to date within the literature: but which, if any, is correct?
This article proceeds as follows. First, empirical findings to date are reviewed, introducing readers to an extensive literature based on research on labor from a number of countries around the world, and published across a wide range of journals and books over the last fifty years. This literature provides unequivocal evidence of efforts by the AFL–CIO foreign policy leaders to dominate labor movements globally, and particularly in the developing countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Following, the concept of imperialism is presented, and the heretofore dominant Marxist approach is challenged by an approach developed by a Dutch scholar named Jan Nederveen Pieterse. With the more inclusive understanding that comes from Nederveen Pieterse’s approach, Labor’s dominitive project can be formally incorporated into the concept of imperialism.

Next, the essay addresses the key question: why labor imperialism? After discussing three structural-based explanations that have been previously advanced, they are each found wanting. The author seeks an alternative explanation. This author then hypothesizes that Labor’s foreign policy leaders take an ideological approach to Labor’s foreign policy rather than any rational or interest-based structural approach as posited to date.

To test this hypothesis, the AFL and AFL–CIO foreign policy under Presidents Gompers, Meany, and Kirkland, and then under John Sweeney, is examined critically, and the hypothesis is evaluated.

**Empirical Findings to Date**

Empirical research on the AFL–CIO’s foreign policy program has established five sets of interrelated findings. First, U.S. Labor has actively sought to dominate foreign labor movements since the early years of the twentieth century under Samuel Gompers and it continues today, despite changes suggested in the early years of the Sweeney Administration (see Scipes 2006). This research has unequivocally established that Labor’s foreign policy leaders have worked to help overthrow democratically elected governments, have collaborated with reactionary, pro-dictator labor movements against progressive labor movements, and have supported reactionary labor movements against progressive governments (Scipes 2000, 12; see, among others, Andrews 1991; Armstrong et al. 1988; Barry and Preusch 1986; Bronstein and Johnston 1985; Buhle 1999; Cantor and Schor 1987; Carew 1998; Filipelli 1989; Hirsch 1974, n.d. [1975]; Hirsch and Muir 1987; Morris 1967; Nack 1999; Radosh 1969; Scipes 1989, 1990, 1996, 116–125; Scott 1978; Shorrock and Selvaggio 1986; Sims 1992; Snow 1964; Spalding 1984; and Weinrib and Bollinger 1987. See also Scipes 2005b, 2005c, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2010). Second, this domination project is a product of forces within the labor movement, and not of external forces such as the U.S. Government, White House and/or the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (Scipes 1989; see also Andrews 1991; Carew 1998; Filipelli 1989; Nack 1999). Third, Labor’s foreign policy leaders have voluntarily chosen to be conscious actors in major initiatives by the U.S. State (Carew 1998; Filipelli 1989; Nack 1999).

In short, the range of operations in this effort to dominate labor globally has been extremely well established, and has been generally referred to as “labor imperialism.”

However, while the empirical research is conclusive, no one has established a theoretical understanding of “labor imperialism”: just what is meant by such a term, and how can it be understood?

**Imperialism: A Conceptualization**

The term “imperialism” generally refers to dominative relations between countries that take place at the nation-state level. These dominative relations are often hidden by euphemistic language used in academia, and certainly in public discourse—such as “mutual defense”—that hide the nature of these relationships. Nonetheless, imperialism is based on the understanding that all nations do not have equal political-economic power, that they have differing levels of power, and that the stronger dominates or will try to dominate the weaker when the weaker does not acquiesce to the stronger on its own. Traditionally, this domination takes place specifically across nation-state borders—as distinct from domination within the same nation-state—and has developed for the benefit of the specific nation-state that is dominating one or more other countries. Another way to think about this is as an oppressor–oppressed relationship between different nations.

It has been the Marxists who are generally seen as having developed the concept of imperialism to the greatest degree. Lenin, in his important theoretical understanding, claims that imperialism is “the highest stage of capitalism” (Lenin 1916/1987).

However, this approach collapses the motivation for imperialism to economic gain; that is, it approaches imperialism economically. Additionally, Lenin and subsequent Marxist writers have located imperialism at the level of the nation-state only; they have argued imperialism results when one nation-state dominates another.

The path-breaking work of Dutch scholar Jan Nederveen Pieterse challenges Marxist interpretations, arguing that imperialism is domination extended across political community borders (Nederveen Pieterse 1989). And he develops the concept of imperialism far beyond that of the Marxists.
A political community usually refers to a nation-state; however, while including nation-states in this category, Nederveen Pieterse's understanding of imperialism extends beyond the nation-state level. He recognizes that because of external domination during past history, groups who share common culture, traditions, languages, and political organization (i.e., "political communities") may have been incorporated within the boundaries of other political communities. Examples of this include Native American nations having been incorporated into the U.S., the Palestinians into Israel, the Kurds into Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq, and certainly this is also true of the indigenous peoples around the world. Thus, instead of ignoring these peoples or making them irrelevant by confining the understanding of imperialism to only nation-states, Nederveen Pieterse broadens the conception of imperialism to include the domination of one political community over another, and this can exist within the current boundaries of a nation-state: these cross-political community border relationships are based in unequal power relations, with the stronger dominating the weaker.

In addition, Nederveen Pieterse extends the concept of imperialism "vertically" to include different levels of domination. He not only focuses on dominate relations at the nation-state level, but he includes domative relations at levels higher and lower than the nation-state level. For example, at the suprastate level (at a higher level than nation-states/political communities), dominant relations can be established, such as between the United Nations (UN) and people of any particular country (such as UN "peacekeeping forces" and Haitian slum dwellers). Likewise, domative relations can be established at a substate level (at a lower level), such as between a labor organization in the U.S. and labor organizations in other countries. In other words, Nederveen Pieterse not only expands the concept of imperialism on a horizontal axis through broadening it to include domination across political community borders, but he also extends it vertically by including different levels of domination. It is in recognizing that domination can take place at a level below nation-state domination that allows Labor's across-political-community-borders domination to be included within the concept of imperialism.

Further, Nederveen Pieterse's is not an economic view of imperialism. It recognizes that the motivation for imperialism has at least two possible origins: yes, like the Marxists have argued, imperialism can be initiated for economic gain, that is, profit. Additionally, though, Nederveen Pieterse recognizes that imperial domination also can be implemented to achieve political power in the global realm, such as through geostrategic positioning, and through mobilizing and/or controlling social forces in other countries for the benefit of the imperialist force. And, while these two aspects of imperialism can be separated for analytical purposes, in reality, they are often in some combination. Thus, the issue is not a dichotomous categorization and choice between economics or politics, but rather is a search for primacy at any one time and/or situation: in some situations, economic motivations may be primary with political ones secondary, and in others, political control may be primary, and economic ones secondary.
At the same time, however, the concept of imperialism is not just limited to politics or economics. It can refer to any activities that seek to dominate other groups across political community boundaries, and this can be on the cultural level, the spiritual level, the social level, etc.

In short, Nederveen Pieterse’s conceptualization of imperialism is much more sophisticated, more accurate, and, as shown below, provides a much more robust understanding of imperialism than do Marxist explanations; it is the understanding used herein. In fact, his conceptualization allows us to speak of labor imperialism in theoretical terms for the first time.

Explanations of Labor Imperialism in the Literature

There have been three different structural approaches in the literature to try to explain U.S. Labor’s imperialism: that it was forced on Labor by external forces; that it was a “natural product” of business unionism in an imperialist country; and that it was done out of Labor’s self-interest to ensure economic growth and jobs for American workers. Do these explanations hold water under closer inspection? A quick review suggests major weaknesses in each.

Initially, the explanations for Labor’s imperialism was that it was a product of forces external to the labor movement, such as the U.S. Government, White House, or CIA (Agee 1975; Morris 1967; Radosh 1969; Sims 1992). However, more recent research has discredited this approach: the established standard today is that Labor’s foreign policy is a result of forces within the labor movement itself (Scipes 1989; see also Andrews 1991; Carew 1998; Filipelli 1989; Nack 1999).

However, when one looks within the labor movement, what explains why Labor would engage in imperialism? How can labor imperialism be understood? There have been two major explanations presented to date.

It has been suggested that labor imperialism is the “natural product” of business unionism in an imperialist country (see Ancel 2000; Buhle 1999; Scipes 1989, 2000; Scott 1978). Yet some business unionists, such as those in California, have challenged and repudiated the AFL–CIO foreign policy leaders: in 2004, the biennial convention of the California State AFL–CIO unanimously voted to repudiate the foreign policy of the national AFL–CIO (Hirsch 2004; Scipes 2004). Obviously, labor imperialism cannot be both a “natural product” of business unionism, and then be repudiated by business unionists.

The second major internal explanation is based on Labor’s perceived “self-interest.” In other words, might not Labor’s foreign policy leaders see it desirable that the U.S. seek to dominate the world, that they support the U.S. Empire, because this provides the safety and security for U.S.-based corporations to expand overseas, therefore providing jobs for American workers at home?

This certainly seems plausible. In fact, “empire creates jobs” could be argued as being an accurate representation of U.S. reality during the period 1947–1973, when expansion overseas was combined with economic advancement, widespread job creation in the U.S., and increasing social equality. This is the period
when the U.S. was generally unchallenged economically, politically, and militarily within its own sphere of “influence,” that is, the non-Soviet dominated part of the world.

However, “empire creates jobs” certainly is more questionable for the 1970s after 1973 (see Scipes 1984) until the mid-1990s, and it certainly has not been true in the early twenty-first century (Scipes 2009). That explanation, especially beyond the 1947–1973 period, simply does not provide a satisfactory explanation.

Thus, the three major structural-based explanations presented to date each seem wanting. While not suggesting these explanations offer nothing, it is clear these are, at best, small contributors to the larger explanation.

However, the ongoing support for the U.S. Empire, especially when opposed to rational self-interest (i.e., labor movement interests), suggests an ideological approach to Labor’s foreign policy, rather than any rational or interest-based approach. Thus, the essay hypothesizes that Labor’s foreign policy is driven by ideology.

To examine this possibility, a quick overview of AFL/AFL–CIO foreign policy under Presidents Gompers, Meany, and Kirkland is presented, and this is followed by an overview of AFL–CIO foreign policy under John Sweeney. Following, a synopsis of AFL/AFL–CIO foreign operations is presented. Then, based on evidence presented above, an argument is presented that the acceptance and propagation of labor imperialism is an ideological construct, a conscious choice, based on American Nationalism.

AFL and AFL–CIO Foreign Policy under Gompers, Meany, and Kirkland

Although Scipes’ 1989 account of how AFL foreign policy developed under Samuel Gompers provides perhaps a better understanding than any work previously detailing how Gompers and his allies came to oppose the Left within Labor, it is the work of David Nack (1999) that details how the political struggle between the Left and the Right within Labor developed over time, and how Gompers took an ideological approach to anything the Left supported or represented. In other words, Nack especially established that Gompers’ foreign policy was an ideological one. And, of course, being the first president of the AFL, and one who held power for so many years, and whose allies were to so ideologically dominate the labor movement, Gompers’ foreign policy set a powerful precedent for the labor movement (updated in Scipes 2010, 1–25).

Gompers’ successors also took ideological approaches toward foreign labor, with George Meany being the exemplar. Meany served as Secretary Treasurer of the AFL between 1939 and 1952, and as the President of the AFL and then as President of the AFL–CIO from 1952 until his death in 1979. Accordingly, Meany played such a large role in the development of the AFL and then the AFL–CIO, but nowhere more than in international affairs: “international affairs stands as the first AFL program that bore the exclusive brand of George Meany” (Goulden 1972, 137).
Meany’s ideological approach to foreign policy is obvious. Meany hired Jay Lovestone, former National Secretary of the Communist Party USA, and his fellow leftist Irving Brown to carry out foreign policy, suggesting that George Meany—an incredibly conservative business unionist—would associate with the Devil as long as it would advance his purposes. This ideological approach can be further seen in Meany’s getting the AFL’s Free Trade Union Committee to shift during World War II from fighting the Nazis to fighting the Communists while the U.S. Government was officially allied with the leading Communist-led state, the Soviet Union under Josef Stalin. This also can be seen in his response to the Cuban Revolution, when Meany established AIFLD (American Institute for Free Labor Development) because the established “pro-Western” labor organization in Latin America, Inter-American Regional Organization of Workers (ORIT), was not sufficiently successful. Meany’s support for the war in Vietnam is still another example.

In his biography of Meany, Joseph C. Goulden discussed Meany’s approach:

Meany detested the Communists. They were an anathema to him as a trade unionist and a Catholic. Meany said that American workers should recognize Soviet labor ‘for what it is—a government-controlled, government-fostered, and government-dominated labor front that denies the workers of Soviet Russia the basic human freedoms that Americans hold are prerequisite to a free trade union’. This tenet is crucial to understanding Meany’s unflinching anticomunism. A nation is not free unless its trade unions are free—such is Meany’s litmus test, and Communist regimes fail it. (Goulden 1972, 122)

If Meany had held that position in all cases—a nation is not free unless its trade unions are free—then his actions would certainly have been understandable, defensible, and probably supportable, at least in most cases. However, as demonstrated in numerous studies, as well as in Scipes (2010), Meany only applied that standard to those countries who opposed U.S. foreign policy; he did not follow it regarding dictators who supported U.S. foreign policy: Meany supported South Korea (after 1948), the Shah of Iran (after 1953), Guatemala (after 1954), Brazil (after 1964), Suharto of Indonesia (after 1965), Marcos in the Philippines (after 1972), and Pinochet in Chile (after 1973). Each of these regimes was unquestionably a dictatorship, and each had committed mass murder and/or gross human rights violations upon thousands and thousands of workers and other citizens during their rule; for example, between 500,000 to a million people were killed in Indonesia during the coup, which ended with Suharto in power. Meany also supported apartheid South Africa throughout his presidency.

This ideological approach can be clearly seen in Latin America. As Serafino Romualdi (1967) points out in his autobiography—Romualdi spent twenty years in Latin America as “Labor’s Ambassador”—discussing his work for the AFL and the AFL–CIO in Latin America, there were a number of dictatorships in the region that the AFL–CIO might have complained about and maybe even formally protested to international organizations such as the International Labor Organization of the UN, but who were otherwise tolerated. Among the most
egregious examples were the AFL/AFL–CIO tolerance of dictatorships in Haiti and the Dominican Republic (Romualdi 1967, 360–404). Further, as documented in Scipes (2010), the AFL, and then the AFL–CIO under Meany’s leadership, helped lay the groundwork to overthrow democratically elected progressive regimes in Guatemala (1954), Brazil (1964), and Chile (1973), each of which had passed pro-labor and pro-poor legislation prior to being overthrown.

Lane Kirkland, who was Meany’s assistant and subsequent successor, obviously followed Meany’s lead on this, although Kirkland was no patsy himself. Still, his support—politically, financially, and organizationally—for the dictatorship in South Korea (Chun 2003); the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines (Scipes 1996); the dictatorship of Suharto in Indonesia (Labotz 2001); and for the white dictatorship of apartheid in South Africa until 1986 (Baskin 1991; Duke 1991), cannot be conceived of as advancing the interests of the American labor movement. Kirkland also supported the U.S. wars in El Salvador against the indigenous insurgency, and the Contra war against the successful revolution in Nicaragua (Puddington 2005).


These setbacks for unionized workers and diminution of Labor’s organizational and political power—especially when coupled with Labor’s disastrous 1994 election campaign results (see Buhle 1999) and dissatisfaction with Labor’s reactionary foreign policy (Bacon 1995; Battista 2002; Shorrock 1999)—led to the overthrow of Kirkland, the rejection of Kirkland’s chosen successor, Tom Donahue, and the election of John Sweeney as President of the AFL–CIO in October 1995 (see Dark 1999).

AFL–CIO under John Sweeney

John Sweeney’s initial efforts regarding foreign policy looked very encouraging. He signaled a new approach to foreign policy. The AFL–CIO publicly announced that it was “forging ahead with an activist international affairs program focus on organizing, educating members, and building a strong global union movement.” Further, in reporting recommendations to the Executive Council by the International Affairs Committee, the issue of external funding was explicitly discussed: “The committee recommended that ACILS [see below] be funded without government supervision, foreign or domestic. Currently, much of the money that funds the institutes comes from the US Agency for International Development and the National Endowment for Democracy” (Parks 1996).
By 1997, Sweeney had begun implementing this program. He had disbanded Labor’s series of semiautonomous regional “institutes”—the AAFLI (Asian American Free Labor Institute), AALC (African American Labor Center), AIFLD (American Institute for Free Labor Development—in Latin America), and FTUI (Free Trade Union Institute—in Europe)—and replaced them with the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS), which is also known as the “Solidarity Center.” Further, Sweeney removed many of the long-time Cold Warriors from the International Affairs Department. And these changes (Rodberg 2001; Scipes 2000; Shorrock 1999, 6–7; see also Gottlieb 1997; Marshall 2002)—along with some positive efforts to support workers’ struggles in several developing countries (Frundt 2005)—were seen as being a qualitative improvement over the preceding regimes of George Meany and Lane Kirkland (Engler 2002; Scipes 2000).

While recognizing the improvements under Sweeney, questions were still being raised. The author listed some still-troubling issues in the field of foreign policy that needed to be addressed, especially insufficient transparency, governmental funding, and the continuing relationship with the National Endowment for Democracy (Scipes 2000, 7, footnote 1). In a response to this article (Scipes 2000), Judy Ancel pointed out that continued U.S. Government funding for ACILS was extensive, listing offices in Mexico and Honduras that have been funded by the government, while a brief search of U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) programs revealed that ACILS’ programs in “over thirty countries and regions including Cuba, Indonesia, Nigeria, Latin America and the Caribbean, Bangladesh, Egypt, South Africa, the Philippines, Burma, Croatia, Eritrea, Sri Lanka, India, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Zimbabwe, Serbia and Russia” were funded by USAID (Ancel 2000). Peter Rachleff (2000) detailed the role played by Jack Otero in undercutting a rank-and-file-led struggle in 1998 against an effort to privatize a Mexican railroad; Otero had been involved in AIFLD activities in Chile before the 1973 coup. Further, despite claims that Sweeney had removed all of the “Cold Warriors” from the AFL-CIO, Otero worked for the AFL-CIO’s Transportation Trades Department and “continues to broker relationships between US rail unions and their counterparts south of the border” (Rachleff 2000, 82).

Both Tim Shorrock and Simon Rodberg focused attention on Harry Kamberis, who Sweeney hired to head the Solidarity Center, and who had formerly worked with AAFLI, “one of the Cold War precursors to the Solidarity Center” (Rodberg 2001). Shorrock noted that Kamberis “served as staff in the Philippines and South Korea” during the 1980s—during times of great labor repression in each country (see Chun 2003; Scipes 1996)—and then as director of AAFLI. He reported that “the institute [AAFLI] refused to openly support independent unions in Korea being attacked by the military government” and that “in the Philippines, it saw its primary mission as undermining a leftist labor federation suffering intense repression” (Shorrock 1999). The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) had earlier identified Kamberis as, “From
1991 to 1995 ... [he] was the Director of AAFLI's Philippines office and prior to that of the Korea office” (NED 1997, 11). Rodberg (2001) further identified Kamberis as “a former foreign-service officer and international businessman,” and noted that he “doesn’t share the liberal-left union background of his colleagues at the AFL–CIO.” NED states, “He has also served in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Greece for the US State Department” (NED 1997, 11). Obviously, Kamberis has a questionable background for such a position. Further, the reason for his selection has never been publicly revealed to this writer’s knowledge.

So while there were positive developments initially under John Sweeney, troublesome questions remained. Meanwhile, certain events in recent years have called into question the depth of the AFL–CIO’s foreign policy reforms (Scipes 2005b, 2005c; 2006). Three sets of events stand out: (1) the AFL–CIO’s refusal to open the books and clear the air with respect to its past foreign policy operations despite efforts by affiliated labor organizations—most importantly, the California State AFL–CIO—to get them to do so; (2) ACILS’ involvement in Venezuela concerning attempts to overthrow the government of the democratically elected Hugo Chavez in April 2002; and (3) the federation’s support of and participation in a new Cold War-like labor agency of the federal government, the Advisory Committee for Labor and Diplomacy, under Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush.

Scipes (2006) examined each of these three issues in detail as part of a process to determine whether Labor’s foreign policy had made a qualitative change under AFL–CIO President John Sweeney, which was suggested by Sweeney’s actions in the late 1990s, or had the Sweeney Administration reverted back to “traditional” labor imperialism after some initially promising changes? He set stringent requirements for a finding of “reversion” but, despite these, he found that foreign policy under Sweeney had, in fact, “reverted back to ‘traditional’ labor imperialism” (Scipes 2006, 32).

This labor imperialism continues to date.

**Synopsis**

Through an examination of the history of Labor’s foreign policy, it was found that the AFL/AFL–CIO foreign policy has been and continues to be, in fact, imperialist.

Explanations provided as to why the labor movement engages in labor imperialism, however, have not been satisfactorily established. Labor’s foreign policy has been developed internally, not by forces outside of the labor movement, and the concept of business unionism cannot explain both the acceptance and rejection of labor imperialism. Additionally, “empire creates jobs,” an apparently rational argument, has been rejected. In short, existing structural explanations for Labor’s imperialism have been found wanting.
Another Explanation

But what holds all of this together, what explains Labor’s well-established history and contemporary activities described by the concept of “labor imperialism”? It is argued here that the acceptance and propagation of labor imperialism is an ideological construct. Based on Nack’s work on Gompers, and especially when combined with the material from Meany’s biography, this author argues that which has guided the labor movement’s foreign policy has been American Nationalism, the idea that the U.S. is unequivocally the best country in the world, and that it should run the world.

Accordingly, the earlier formulation put forth by a number of authors—explaining labor imperialism as flowing out of business unionism—was incorrect: business unionism in an imperialist country was seen as naturally progressing into labor imperialism, and that has been shown to be wrong. On the contrary, this article argues that labor imperialism flows from the belief in American Nationalism—which is based on race, empire, and capitalism (Nederveen Pieterse 1989), and the superiority of the “American” version of each. This is joined with Labor’s conscious unwillingness, in general, to challenge the efforts of the U.S. Government around the world. At the same time, Labor’s foreign policy leaders attempt to impose American “union beliefs” (as developed by a few key people) and business unionism on workers in other countries for the further well-being of the U.S. Empire from U.S. Labor’s perspective.

In other words, business unionism accepts capitalism, and has traditionally accepted race and empire. However, the actions of the California AFL-CIO have shown that business unionism can either accept or reject race and empire; it does not automatically include race and empire. Therefore, the decision whether to accept or to reject race and empire is a conscious choice. The argument is that AFL/AFL-CIO Presidents Gompers, Meany, Kirkland, and Sweeney, and their respective foreign policy teams, have each accepted race and empire, usually at the expense of the well-being of the U.S. labor movement.

This finding has considerable ramifications. Theoretically, it means a structural explanation as to why labor imperialism exists simply cannot be substanti- ated. Importantly, and practically, it also means that Labor activists can change this foreign policy, but it also means that to do so, they must consciously challenge the American Nationalism being propagated in our country and reinforced within many of our social institutions, specifically including the labor movement. In other words, it is not enough to challenge Labor’s imperialism, but the ideology of American Nationalism, on which it is based, must be consciously challenged as well. This also means that class-related appeals for action, while necessary, are not sufficient.

Conclusion

This article has argued that U.S. Labor’s foreign policy is a form of imperialism; in fact, this foreign policy has been established theoretically as labor
imperialism. Further, once it was theoretically established that Labor's domi-
native project was labor imperialism, a question of "why" was then asked: why have
U.S. Labor leaders engaged in labor imperialism?

To answer this question, several steps were taken. Established structural
explanations were examined and rejected overall. A suggestion was advanced that:
labor imperialism was based on an ideological approach. After examining AFL
and AFL-CIO foreign policy under Presidents Gompers, Meany, Kirkland, and
Sweeney, the ideological approach hypothesis was confirmed. Further, it was
argued that U.S. labor imperialism flows from the belief in American National-
ism. Accordingly, for Labor activists to have a chance to overturn this labor
imperialism, they must challenge the American Nationalism on which it is based.

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Notes

1. When used in this article, "US Labor," "Labor," or the term "labor movement" refers only to the
AFL/AFL-CIO, and specifically does not include the post-2005 labor center Change to Win (see Fletcher
and Gapasin 2008), or any other independent labor organizations in the U.S., such as the United Electrical
workers (UE), or the National Education Association. Their international operations must be analyzed
separately, but it must be noted that UE's labor internationalism directly repudiates that of the AFL-CIO.
Within the AFL-CIO, knowledge of its foreign operations is almost totally confined to top-level leadership
and those at higher levels of the Department of International Affairs (collectively referred to as "foreign
policy leadership"), and appears almost totally unknown to many leaders even of major affiliated unions, and
especially to rank and file members.

However, the AFL-CIO affiliated American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has an active project to
dominate educational labor globally—see Schmidt 1978 and Sukariel and Tannock 2010—whose opera-
tions seem very much in tune with that of the AFL-CIO. Nonetheless, the AFT's foreign activities seem
to be generated within by, again, a small portion of the leadership, and deserve enhanced scrutiny and
opposition, while recognizing their congruence with that of the AFL-CIO.

For a fascinating overview of education unions, and particularly those members of the World Confeder-
ation of Organizations of the Teaching Profession (WCOTP), see Smaller 2009. He specifically notes
WCOTP's involvement with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

2. Some researchers have used the term "trade union imperialism" (e.g., Scipes 1989; Smaller 2009). This
author believes "labor imperialism" is a more inclusive and accurate term, since these labor operations can
extend far beyond the trade unions of a country, to include affecting military operations against
governments—such as in Guatemala (1954), Brazil (1964), Chile (1973), and Venezuela (2002)—and often
are in conjunction with non-trade union organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy
(see Scipes 2005c; 2010).
3. This section is drawn from the preface of Scipes (2010).

4. This point could be debated, as many Marxists have a broader understanding of imperialism than mere economics. However, on a theoretical basis, this author argues that Lenin’s approach is economic, and it is a theoretical basis that is being discussed here. In other words, in practice, the conceptualization has not been so limited, but practice has extended beyond what the theory allows.

5. The best account of Meany and his impact on the U.S. labor movement is Buhle (1999, 91–203).

6. This section is drawn from Chapter 2 of Scipes (2010).

7. Fred Hirsch (1974) identified Otero as being involved in labor activities in Chile that helped lead to the 1973 military coup.

References


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