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## The Epic Failure of Labor Leadership in the United States, 1980-2017 and Continuing

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# The Epic Failure of Labor Leadership in the United States, 1980-2017 and Continuing

## **Abstract**

The organizational failure of labor leadership in the US is more than individual failures, which could perhaps be overcome by the election of new leaders. The author argues that the model of trade unionism that has dominated US unionism—business unionism—offers no viable way forward and must be replaced by another model—social justice unionism.

## **Keywords**

social Justice, Social Justice Unionism, AFL-CIO, Business Unionism

## Introduction

The US labor movement is in terrible shape; in 2016, union membership was only 6.4 percent of workers in the private sector, and 34.4 percent of the public sector, giving an overall percentage of 10.7 percent.<sup>1</sup> (It had been 33.4 percent in 1954.) But, worse than the actual numbers and percentages is the all-but-total lack of vision as to what to do about this. The labor movement has been under direct attack since at least the PATCO strike in 1981, and the leaders of the labor movement—and focus here is on the AFL-CIO, although there are others labor organizations outside of its ambit—have had no vision and, arguably, no clue about what to do about this. And other than perhaps a nine-year window under John Sweeney (1996-2005)—I’m being generous—it has been blind and vision-less. And this continues today under Richard Trumka.<sup>2</sup>

This problem is a major reason for the election of Donald Trump to the presidency, aided strongly by working class voters, and I’m speaking of those who are *not* generally racist, sexist, homophobic and/or xenophobic.

The fact is that, no matter how good any one of our national/international union leaders might be as an individual trade union leader, that does not necessarily make them a good labor leader. By “labor leader,” I’m referring to those who look out for the well-being of working people in general in this country; i.e., those who go beyond members of their own union to think about working people overall. I would give the AFL-CIO leaders, individually and collectively, an “F” for their efforts since the early 1980s—with Sweeney possibly getting a D for the nine years referred to above.

This failure is even worse in light of myriad efforts by rank-and-file activists, lower level leaders and staffers, and labor researchers/academics who have spent years of their lives struggling to get the labor movement to address its’ weaknesses and change its ways. Whether through organizing new members, educating and mobilizing current members, analyzing what we can learn from workers’ struggles in the past as well as from studying contemporary efforts at home and overseas, and thinking about how we can revitalize the labor movement so as to seriously address the problems facing working people in this country, there has been extensive efforts by those “below” to overcome the lack of vision and ineptitude of national labor leaders; but the institutional power granted these “leaders” has overcome all efforts to date to initiate progressive, life-enhancing change.<sup>3</sup>

I’m going to argue that this organizational failure is more than individual failures, which could perhaps be overcome by the election of new leaders, although obviously individual leaders can have a significant impact once put into office. However, I’m going to argue that the primary problem is in our very model of trade unionism in this country: I argue that the model of trade unionism that has dominated US unionism—business unionism—offers no viable way forward and must be replaced by another model, that of social justice unionism. I’m going to argue that unless this change from business unionism to social justice unionism is made, and made soon, the US labor movement is going to fade into irrelevancy, with its power and importance diminishing even further as years go by.

Several steps must be made to develop this argument. First, the theoretical delineations of business and trade unionism are presented, which are crucial to understand the argument being made. Then, a historical overview is presented, with a primary focus on the CIO years, 1933-1955, and special attention is paid to the removal of “the left” from the CIO in the late 1940s.

This is followed by a discussion of “global competition, the US economy and the attacks on working people,” and then a question: “where is the AFL-CIO leadership?”

Following, there is an effort to make sense of why the AFL-CIO leadership has been “missing in action.” Key to understanding this, it is argued, is to connect the lack of AFL-CIO initiative in domestic situations to the initiative it shows in international affairs—and that requires discussion of the US Empire, and the AFL-CIO leadership’s support of it. And why they support the US Empire.

And then, there is the beginning of a discussion of how progressive workers can reclaim *our* labor movement.

## **Theoretical Understandings: Types and Forms of Trade Unionism**

In an ongoing project that has developed over the last 25 years, trying to understand various types and forms (subsets of types) of trade unionism around the world, three types of trade unionism have been established: economic, political and social movement unionism. The type of unionism present in the United States, since at least the 1930s, has been economic unionism which has been defined as

*... unionism that accommodates itself to, and is absorbed by, the industrial relations system of its particular country; that engages in political activities within the dominant political system for the well-being of its members and its institutional self, but generally limits itself to immediate interests... (Scipes, 1992a: 126; 1992b: 86; quoted in Scipes, 2003: 16).*

Later, the concept of trade union *forms*—or subsets of the different types of trade unionism—was developed to differentiate different conceptualizations of trade unionism *within* the economic type of unionism: business unionism and social justice unionism (Scipes, 2003).<sup>4</sup> These different conceptualizations were last defined in an article published in 2014. Based on an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation from 2003,<sup>5</sup> business unionism has been defined as:

*... one form of the economic type of trade unionism. While its internal decision-making processes can range from a top-down, results-oriented model to a bottom-up, process-oriented model, **its scope is narrow**, limiting its interests to those of the dominant members of the organization, and not necessarily to all members of the organization. These self-defined interests can be seen as separate from those of working people as a whole, and sometimes even opposed to this larger group interest. Because of this limited vision of trade unionism, business unionism depends on the ability of unions to win demands by themselves, or if they get the support of other organizations which adopt the business union’s interests and goals as corresponding to their own, it is without the union making any commitment of reciprocation to its allies. It is a form of trade unionism ultimately based on individualism, albeit expressed in a collective manner (emphasis added) (Scipes, 2003: 373-374; quoted in Scipes, 2014).*

And social justice unionism was defined as another

*... form of the economic type of trade unionism. While its internal decision-making processes can range from a top-down, results-oriented model to a bottom-up, process-oriented and democratic model, its scope is broad, seeing the necessity of addressing the needs and concerns of all its members, in the union, in the workplace and in the community. In short, these self-defined interests are integrated with those of working people as a whole. It builds support through solidarity with other people-focused organizations and projects, working in mutual efforts to improve the well-being of all concerned. It is a form of trade unionism ultimately based on collectivity and mutual respect (emphasis added) (Scipes, 2003: 375; quoted in Scipes, 2014).*

It is the narrow form of economic trade unionism—business unionism—that has dominated US trade unionism since at least the 1930s.

The importance of recognizing these two different forms of economic trade unionism is this: as I showed in my Ph.D. dissertation, *it is the conceptualization of unionism that determines the activities of unions* (Scipes, 2003). Accordingly, adoption of business unionism—which limits its concerns to wages, working conditions and benefits—means that the interests of those unions will be confined to the workplace, and generally ignore the fact that workers live outside of their workplaces, in specific communities (among numerous others, see March, 2017; see also Emanuele, 2017; Smiley, 2017—each included in this issue). Thus, instead of conceptualizing unionism as a holistic approach to workers’ lives, business unions confine themselves of only one aspect of workers’ lives, albeit a very important aspect: the workplace.<sup>6</sup>

However, this means that people outside of the workplace (and outside of union members’ families) will have little concern for those who take such a limited approach to life, especially as business unions’ power to effect the rest of society attenuates and dissipates.

### **Where Did Business Unionism Come From?**

The origins of business unionism come from Samuel Gompers and the men who both taught and then followed him:

*[Business unionism] was a direct result of the form of trade unionism created by Samuel Gompers and his associates in the last third of the nineteenth century, which was adopted by the unions across the American Federation of Labor.... Business unionism accepted the established social order based on Empire, race and capitalism (Nederveen Pieterse, 1989; Buhle, 1999); fought to keep immigrants out of the country—starting with the Chinese (Lyman, 2000) and other peoples of color, but also working later to exclude those coming from Southern and Eastern Europe (Roediger, 2005); and has tried subsequently to maximize gains within this social order for union members (Scipes, 2010a: 1).<sup>7</sup>*

Where this becomes even more important is with the development of the industrial unions that emerged in the 1930s, most of which affiliated with the CIO (ultimately, the Congress of Industrial Organizations). Rick Halpern explains,

*The 'CIO' signifies many things. Institutionally, it refers to both the Committee of Industrial Organizations formed within the AFL in 1935 and the independent Congress of Industrial Organizations, established in 1938.... In a broader sense, the CIO was a social movement, rooted in the working class and primarily concerned with economic issues that strained and overstepped institutional boundaries (Halpern, 1997: 97).<sup>8</sup>*

However, what must be understood is that the CIO—founded by John L. Lewis and a few associates—included a wide range of politics. Lewis' view of trade unionism, as well argued by Staughton Lynd in this issue (Lynd, 2017), was based on the unionism he created in the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA): a top-down, authoritarian form of business unionism.<sup>9</sup> However, this was challenged by leaders that emerged from all kinds of “dissidents,” including communists, socialists, anarchists, black nationalists and militant trade unionists of all colors, ethnicities and backgrounds (i.e., “the left”). These people were located within the UMWA as well as in the newly created unions. Ultimately, Judith Stepan-Norris and Maurice Zeitlin (2003) established that leadership in the CIO determined the different manifestations of unions: conservative, “middle-of-the-road,” or radical.

The “Big 3” of the CIO were the steelworkers (USWA), the autoworkers (UAW), and the electrical workers (UE), and initially, their politics respectively represented the three manifestations noted above. However, when Walter Reuther and his faction gained control of the UAW in 1946, Reuther moved the UAW closer to the USWA and, together, they in turn attacked the left forces led by the UE, expelling the UE and 10 other “left-led” unions from the CIO in 1949 (Rosswurm, ed., 1992). These expelled unions included somewhere between 750,000 and a million members.

Supposedly, this expulsion was of “Communists,” but in reality, it was an expulsion of all who had a broader, social justice-view of trade unionism—the FBI later claimed only 16,520 Communist Party members were in all unions, less than 1 percent of the total CIO membership (Rosswurm, 1992: 6). With these expulsions, most of the people in the labor movement with a broader conceptualization of trade unionism were removed, “disemboweling” the labor movement, a problem still reverberating within the labor movement today. Once these “troublemakers” were removed, the stage was set for the reunification of the “House of Labor” in 1955, when the CIO joined the AFL, creating the AFL-CIO.

### **Global Competition: The US Economy and the Attacks on Working People**

While the US capitalist economy grew across the 1950s and '60s and into the early 1970s, things looked good. The AFL-CIO was a power within the Democratic Party, the economy was growing, and because of the unions, a “working middle class” (Metzgar, 2000) was created—and the economic gains across the various quintiles of the population were shared fairly evenly (see Scipes, 2009: 21).

However, as the 1970s proceeded, the US economic advantage receded, and the labor movement began a period of serious decline. In face of growing economic competition from industrialized countries that had recovered from the destruction of World War II, manufacturing began moving out of the generally-unionized North to the generally-non-organized South, destroying lives and unions (Bluestone and Harrison, 1982).

With the election of Ronald Reagan and his administration in 1980, things went from bad to worse. First, Reagan attacked the air traffic controllers' union (PATCO)—which had supported his election—and union leaders stood by in this heavily unionized “industry” and let PATCO get broken, showing their lack of resolve and determination even in a situation where they were institutionally powerful.

Second, global economic competition intensified, with the further recovery in Western Europe and Japan, and the emergence of globally competitive corporations from developing countries such as Brazil, South Korea and Taiwan (Scipes, 1984; 2009).

Then, with the adoption of a neo-liberal economic program in desperate response to this intensifying global competition (see Harvey, 2005; Scipes, 2016b: 3-10), Reagan et. al. accelerated their attacks on the unions and working people in general. Corporations that employed many workers (i.e., were “labor intensive”) closed their operations at home and moved overseas, especially to places such as Mexico and China, where workers were controlled and wages were limited. Corporations that relied on high-cost machinery (“capital intensive”) stayed in the US, but subsequent developments of their required machinery required fewer and fewer workers.<sup>10</sup> On top of that, taxes were cut for the wealthy and corporations, allowing cases to be made to cut social services, despite many people increasingly needing them.

Steve Fraser discusses the impact:

*During the 1970s alone, between 32 and 38 million jobs were lost due to ... disinvestment, which was common practice in old (New England textile factories) and new industries alike (New England aircraft manufacturers). Manufacturing, which after the Second World War accounted for nearly 30 percent of the economy, by 2011 had dropped to a bit more than 10 percent. Since the turn of the millennium alone, 3.5 million manufacturing jobs have vanished and 42,000 manufacturing plants closed. On average between the years 2000 and 2011, seventeen American manufacturers closed each day (Fraser, 2015: 235).<sup>11</sup>*

Although things were bad before the 2008-09 Great Recession (see Greenhouse, 2008; Scipes, 2009), the Recession ripped the scab off Americans' unwillingness understand the impact of these economic changes on their neighbors and co-workers. Sarah Jaffe (2016: 20) reports that approximately 8.7 million jobs were lost between December 2007 and early 2010.<sup>12</sup>

Economic and social conditions for many workers across the country plummeted, as Steve Fraser (2015: 223-263) brilliantly, but tragically, illuminates.

The fact is that capitalism can no longer provide jobs and economic opportunity for near as many people as it provided for in the past. And this will become limited to fewer and fewer people as time passes (Scipes, 2017a).

This job loss is going to continue if not actually escalate. Although much rhetoric has been expended on blaming foreigners and “unfair trade competition” for US job losses, research by Michael Hicks and Srikant Devaraj (2015) of Ball State University in Indiana has shown that between 2000-2010, automation was responsible for 88 percent of all job losses in this period, while trade was responsible for 13 percent of the job losses. Already, according to McKinsey and Company, 45 percent of all jobs being done in early 2016 could be automated (Miller, 2016). But what about those declining unemployment figures? According to Lawrence B. Katz of Harvard and Alan B. Krueger of Princeton, both members of the National Bureau of Economic Research, all of the jobs created from 2005 to 2015 were of sub-standard conditions, meaning

they were temporary help agency workers, on-call workers, contract company workers, and independent contractors or freelancers (Katz and Krueger, 2016), and which generally resulted in lower pay, fewer benefits, and less economic security overall.

In short, things are bad and all indications are that they will only get worse for increasing numbers of working people. Between 1999 and 2014, people making less than \$42,000 for a family of three lost ten percent of their income; for those between \$42,000 and \$125,000, their incomes declined by six percent; and for those making more than \$125,000, their income fell by seven percent over this period. Overall, “Nationwide, the median income for US households in 2014 stood at 8 percent less than in 1999” with “median incomes falling in 190 of 229 metropolitan areas examined” (Pew, 2016: 10).

And, at the same time, capitalism literally threatens the existence of all humans, animals and most plants on the planet if greenhouse gas emissions are not severely curtailed by the year 2030 (see Scipes, 2017a).

### **Where is the AFL-CIO Leadership?**

The leaders of the AFL-CIO have been practically nowhere to be found. Oh, yes, they called for the election of Bill Clinton, Barack Obama and, most recently, Hillary Clinton to the presidency ... but none of these plans went well for working people. And a considerable number of union members supported Donald Trump.

AFL-CIO leaders said they opposed President Obama’s trade bill, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), but there were no mobilizations, no marches, nothing that observers could see, other than perhaps a few petitions to sign, pleas for members to contact their Federal legislators, and maybe an article here and there by progressive writers. There was no educational campaign within the unions to my knowledge, no mobilizations and, obviously, no efforts to move away from the Democrats, despite their moving further and further away from Labor and its concerns since 1980. One notes the irony that Republican (of sorts) Donald Trump killed the TPP, not Obama or the Democrats.

And despite the successful passage by the 2005 AFL-CIO National Convention of a resolution from USLAW (US Labor against War) demanding that US troops be brought home from the Middle East at first opportunity, there has been no effort to follow-up or to force George W. Bush’s, Barack Obama’s or Donald Trump’s administrations to bring the troops home.

In fact, to my knowledge, there has been no challenge by the AFL-CIO to the insane amounts of money being spent on military goods and the war industry, much less to the bombings, troop deployments and drone strikes. Or to multiple wars, on-going since November 2001.

### **Making Sense of All This**

What is going on—or, more correctly—what is not going on? Why has the AFL-CIO leadership been “missing in action,” to say the least? And for the past 37 years, if not longer?

A lot of what I have to say is supposition: I’ve never met a national leader of any AFL-CIO union, nor have I met the President of the AFL-CIO. They are obviously busy men (and women), but I cannot remember ever meeting any of these people at any of the many labor-focused or –related conferences I have attended over the years.<sup>13</sup> Plus, they each make a lot more



money than I do, and live in neighborhoods that don't include the likes of a low-paid professor like me, who still drives a 2007 Toyota Corolla (although assembled in the USA by United Auto Workers members). But this suggests that they are removed from their members on a day-to-day basis, being with them only in situations that the respective leader controls.

This seems related to another factor: leaders at a national leadership level appear to initiate and carry-out only policy and programs that they agree with or initiate. Yes, they may get this directive or that at a national union convention, but whether they carry these directives out or not depends on how they feel about the issue at hand or how they feel about the directive: and if they don't like them, they ignore them once the convention is adjourned. Combined with this is a top-down communications media that "communicates" to members, not interacts with the members, and which doesn't listen to members.

Where this lack of concern for members most clearly shows itself is in AFL-CIO foreign policy and operations, its' foreign policy program. As I claimed in my 2010 book, this began over 100 years ago:

*Yet in all that time, Labor's foreign policy leaders—including the top elected officials in the labor movement—have never given an honest report to their members of what they have been doing around the world and why they've been doing it. In fact, they not only have failed to report these projects, but they have actively resisted efforts to understand them when members have gotten curious—and they have resisted 'opening the books' even when formally requested by their largest State affiliate, the California State AFL-CIO (Scipes, 2010a: xi).*

Why has the AFL-CIO top leadership so resisted letting its members know what they are doing around the world? Are they doing things they don't want their members to know about?

Ultimately, yes. AFL-CIO foreign policy leaders have in the past and they continue today to do things around the world they don't want members—or anyone else beyond those they purposely inform—to know about. Most of the things we know about—their helping to overthrow democratically-elected governments (such as in Guatemala in 1954, when the AFL acted alone before the merger; Brazil in 1964; Chile in 1973); supporting labor movements that supported dictatorships (as in El Salvador, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Africa and South Korea); or attacking labor that supported progressive governments (as in Guyana, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and Venezuela)—actually harmed workers and their allies in those countries, and has been labeled as "labor imperialism" (Scipes, 2010a, 2010b, 2012a, 2016a).

Yet, as more recently recognized, there are a few cases where the AFL-CIO has played a helpful role or at least has not been oppressive (see Ryan, 2016; Scipes, 2014a; 2016c: 239, FN #34). However, the AFL-CIO organizationally has not even trumpeted their "helpful" work in any real way.<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, the AFL-CIO foreign policy leadership, and particularly the Solidarity Center, continues to serve as one of four core "institutes" of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).<sup>15</sup> Although ostensibly "independent," the NED really is a project of the US Government, as was detailed in my 2010 book (Scipes, 2010a: 96-105). Its role is clear:

*In fact, NED is a product of a shift of US foreign policy from "earlier strategies to contain social and political mobilization through a focus on control of the state and governmental apparatus" to a process of "democracy promotion," whereby*

*“the United States and local elites thoroughly penetrate civil society, and from within, assure control over popular mobilization and mass movements... (Robinson, 1996: 69; see also Golinger, 2010). What this means is that instead of waiting for a client government to be threatened by its people and then responding, US foreign policy shifted to intervening in the civil society of a country “of interest” (as defined by US foreign policy goals) before popular mobilization could become significant, and by supporting certain groups and certain politicians, then channel any potential mobilization in the direction desired by the US Government (Scipes, 2010a: 96).*

What this 30-plus year involvement with the NED shows—along with participating in John F. Kennedy’s Agency for International Development and George W. Bush’s Advisory Committee on Labor and Diplomacy—is that the top leadership of the AFL-CIO foreign policy program *supports* the US Empire, believing the United States *should* dominate the world. As was concluded in my book:

*After having examined Lodge’s Spearheads of Democracy: Labor in the Developing Countries to understand the argument for US Government support of Labor’s activities in the “developing world,” and then examining three major operations of the US Government—US Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and the Advisory Committee on Labor and Diplomacy (ACLAD)—two things are clear. One, the US Government has seen Labor’s foreign policy program as an important tool to keep workers around the world generally immobilized, a key project in trying to maintain stability within countries of the US Empire. And two, the foreign policy leaders of the AFL-CIO recognize their importance to maintaining the US Empire, both acquiescing in the foreign policy program’s use and, whenever possible, actively participating in the process of maintaining the US Empire.*

*Further, it is argued that US elites, top leaders of the US Government, their foreign policy “leaders” in both formal and informal organizations, and top leaders of the AFL-CIO, do not want “ordinary” Americans to know and especially do not want us to understand how these efforts all tie together in their on-going efforts to dominate the peoples of the world (Scipes, 2010a: 101-102).<sup>16</sup>*

Why all of this attention being paid to the AFL-CIO’s foreign policy program here? Does it have anything to do with what is happening domestically?

Unlike many commentators who do not see the connection, I do.

I argue that we must see *both* aspects of the United States: we must not only focus on the domestic arena—upon which most people agree—but we also have to focus on the foreign relations arena; unlike many, I argue they are interconnected and combined. Accordingly, we cannot understand the domestic arena without understanding how it is affected by US foreign policy.

## The US Empire

The US has tried to dominate the world since at least the end of World War II in 1945, although a strong argument can be made since 1898 (see, among others, Blum, 2000, 2014, 2015; Chomsky, 2003; Grandin, 2007; Johnson, 2000, 2010; Klein, 2007; McCoy, 2009; Nederveen Pieterse, 1989, 2004, 2008; Robinson, 1996; Scipes, 1984, 2009, 2010a; Stone and Kuznick, 2012). After World War II, its efforts were opposed by the Soviet Union, which had its own interests—mainly defense from Western aggression—and its own empire. However, the collapse of its empire in Eastern Europe in 1989 and its own collapse in 1991, left the world to the tender mercies of US elites and their foreign policy operatives, as well as their junior imperialist partners such as the UK and France.

Since 1991, the US Empire has engaged in numerous wars—all undeclared—mostly, but not completely, in the Middle East. The US government launched “Operation Desert Storm,” which forced Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, an invasion by the Iraqis tacitly accepted by the US Government before Hussein invaded.<sup>17</sup> Then, the US imposed sanctions on Iraq, which led to the deaths of over 500,000 Iraqis under the age of five—US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright (under Democratic president Bill Clinton) said during a national television interview with Leslie Stahl of CBS News that these deaths were “worth it.”<sup>18</sup> In the former Yugoslavia, the US launched a war against Slobodan Milosevic, supposedly in defense of Kosovo, even though Milosevic had accepted US demands before the assault began. Then, of course, the attack on Afghanistan, and then the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the latter of which killed over 600,000 Iraqis,<sup>19</sup> while causing another two million to become internal refugees in their own country, while another two million were forced to leave their country. President Obama continued the war in Iraq as long as he could, continued the war in Afghanistan, and then later additionally bombed Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen.<sup>20</sup>

Besides the moral issues connected to attacking countries that were not threatening this country, the fact is that it is very expensive. Maintaining, if not expanding, a global military force is very expensive.

Without getting into the minutiae of arms spending, let me discuss one thing, the National Debt. Every year, the US Government develops a budget, saying what it will spend its money on, and the taxes needed to cover these costs; if it takes in more than it spends, the budget is said to be in “surplus”; if it spends more than it takes in, it is said to be in “deficit.” Then, the government combines each year’s surplus/deficit to previous surpluses and deficits, in a cumulative account known as the National Debt. Thus, this allows people to see how the US Government is doing economically since the founding of the country in 1789.

Between 1789 and 1980—from Presidents George Washington through the end of Jimmy Carter’s presidency—the accumulated US National Debt was \$909 billion or, to put it another way, \$ .909 trillion. Now this includes all the debt from the War of 1812, the Civil War, the “Indian Wars,” the Spanish-American and Philippine-American wars, World War I, World War II, Korea and Vietnam. It also includes government projects such as the electrification of the Tennessee Valley, the War on Poverty, the Space Program, the Interstate Highway Program, etc., up to that time: \$ .909 trillion.

Ronald Reagan entered the presidency in 1981. During the eight years that he was president (1981-89), Reagan doubled the National Debt: from \$ .909 trillion to \$2.868 trillion (when dealing with specific numbers, you have to deduct the original amount).

Since then, the National Debt has exploded. According to the Economic Report of the President of the United States (2017), the estimated National Debt at the end of 2016 was \$19.537 trillion. The National Debt has grown by over \$19 trillion since 1981—36 years.<sup>21</sup> (It is expected to cross over \$20 trillion later in 2017.)

What this means is that the US Government has spent over \$19 trillion more than it took in from taxes and other fees during these past 36 years. Much of that money has been spent on the US Empire, and specifically its' war machine. What's clear is that this is money spent that did not go generally into health care (beyond important, but limited, Medicare and Medicaid), education, infrastructure, dealing with climate change, etc., or anything else that might improve the lives of Americans.

So, the United States is by all means bankrupt, being \$19 trillion in debt; the American people really haven't gotten anything from this except for 16 years (and counting) of war; and the AFL-CIO leadership thinks it's more important to support the US Empire than to take care of our people.

What's wrong with this picture?

### **Why Have AFL-CIO Leaders Made This Choice?**

I think the root of this problem is the uncritical acceptance by most Americans of the myth of American "exceptionalism," and the accompanying US nationalism that we've been propagandized with from birth. The story we've basically been told in school and by the mass media throughout our lives is that the United States is so wonderful, so exceptional, that it generally is "beyond reproach": our leaders so wise, our actions so benign if not positive, our motives so pure.<sup>22</sup> And this, somehow, has emerged from this place we call "America."<sup>23</sup>

The interesting thing is that is a projection of a national myth about the United States—an "imagined community" as Benedict Anderson (2016) explicated—that consciously has been propagated by our political and economic leaders as a way of unifying the hundreds of millions of people who populate this country.

Yet, while it clearly *is* a myth, it is said to be a powerful "reflection" of who we are as a people, and we have been taught that is an accurate representation of the country. And people have fought and died to maintain the myth.

The problem is, however, that it is a myth, as increasing amounts of research has shown.<sup>24</sup> What we know now is that this country was based on theft of land from Native Americans, with resulting genocide, and the widespread enslavement of Africans, with extreme violence at the center of cotton production, which in turn, was the basis for industrialization of the "West" (for one effort to pull this understanding together, and to move it from historical "margins" to the center of US historiography, see Scipes, 2017b). We know that millions of Europeans, especially those from Eastern and Southern Europe—along with African Americans, and later, Chinese and Mexicans—worked under horrible conditions to build canals, railroads, mines, fields and factories to serve as the basis of industry. Later, millions worked within the mines, fields and factories themselves—with children and many young women—to produce goods and services that created many millionaires, great wealth and, eventually, because working people organized and fought for them (see Murolo and Chitty, 2001), better living standards for most of our peoples, while also providing the tools of wars, death and destruction, to kill around the world.<sup>25</sup>

Leaders of the United States—elected and appointed, but serving generally the interests of the elites—have used the economic, political, military and cultural power that has been developed in this country to advance US interests around the world; the latter, however, cloaked as being “national” interests when, in reality, they have been those of the elites. The books used in our primary and secondary schools have legitimized these interests as those of the peoples of this country, as has much of the mass media. And for most people who have not taken a critical approach to understanding this country and its role in the world, this myth—and the white supremacy it has been based upon—has been generally accepted as truth.

The reality, I argue, is that the American people as a whole have been consciously lied to by our “leaders.” For this analysis, this means that the AFL-CIO leaders have been lied to; accepted those lies; refused to consider extensive amounts of new research that challenge these lies—even when some of these challenges have been from members of their affiliated unions; continued to operate on the basis of those accepted lies; and then propagated and/or acted on the basis of those lies as though they were proven “truths”; in turn, lying to their members (through omission and commission) and to the US public.

The greatest lie that these “leaders” have accepted and then propagated is that the United States is simply just another country. While it can be argued this has *never* been true since the founding of this country (1789), or that it has not been true since the global expansion of US around the time of the Spanish-American and Philippine-American wars (1898), it is *absolutely wrong* since 1945, and the end of World War II: US foreign policy, since at least then, has been designed to dominate the other countries of the world. Period. In other words, the United States is simply not just another country, but it is the heartland of the US Empire.

Now, when people hear the term “empire,” they probably think of the Roman Empire, which expanded outward from Rome to conquer land and peoples, and directly subjugate them for the leaders of Rome. That is, however, not how the US Empire has functioned: leaders of the US Empire realized that having economic and political control over other countries could be more powerful than mere territorial acquisition, and it would be much less costly to the empire (both economically and politically). Without doubt, the US is the heartland of the US Empire.

The Empire is also more complex. It includes having “junior imperial powers,” such as Canada, France, Israel and the United Kingdom, and allowing them to control their respective “part of the world” (i.e., each of their respective empires) as long as, ultimately, they remained subservient to the US Empire. It could allow the development of economic competition from junior powers after World War II—such as Germany and Japan, and later, Brazil, South Africa, South Korea and Taiwan, as long as each of these countries and their leading corporations accepted dominance of the US. And it also has meant that when deemed necessary, the US Empire would militarily “defend” its so-called “interests” through war and invasion (see Vietnam, et. al.). Almost anything was accepted as long as these other countries recognized the dominance of the United States and, when demanded by the US, that they would follow its lead.

As I argued in my 2010 book on AFL-CIO foreign policy, the AFL-CIO foreign policy leaders think this is ok and, in fact, think the US *should* dominate the world.

There are three major problems with this perspective. It has put the US labor movement on the side of the US Empire, and has resulted in myriad operations around the world *against* fellow workers, as I and others have documented (see, especially, Scipes, 2010a). Thus, in practice, the AFL-CIO foreign policy leaders have been undermining through their practices globally the very ideals that they state to believe in, harming all workers.<sup>26</sup> For American workers, as argued above, it means that *the AFL-CIO foreign policy leadership has been more*

worried about US foreign policy than it has worried about the well-being of American workers, and thus there has been little or no interest in defending American workers' well-being and economic/political interests, much less trying to propose a viable way forward. And finally, the world has been changing so radically in the past 30-plus years that a "global revolt from below" has emerged: by both nation-states such as China and non-nation "states" such as ISIS, and global social movements—of women, peasants, environmentalists, indigenous peoples, workers, students, urban poor—is increasingly developing, and each, in their respective ways, ultimately threatens the US Empire. This, in turn, means that Americans of all backgrounds are going to be increasingly encouraged to join global social movements in a revolt from below—against the US Empire—or be subjected to going down with it, as it endures "torpedo" after "torpedo" hits below the water line, and sinks fitfully under the waves.

In any case, the results of AFL-CIO leadership's actions have been devastating. At best, the AFL-CIO has fiddled while "Rome" (i.e., American workers' lives and well-being) burns; at worst, while "fiddling" at home, they have overwhelmingly operated as global oppressors, helping to overthrow democratically elected governments; supporting labor movements that support dictators (and working to undercut labor movements that challenge dictators); and indirectly supporting local labor movements that challenge progressive governments.

Either way, their actions have been disastrous for working people at home and, as we now know, for working people in numerous countries around the world.

If that is not acceptable to US labor activists, then we have to expand our thinking globally and develop our work accordingly, which means we have to work at home and abroad for the benefit of all workers and their allies.

## **Reclaiming *Our* Labor Movement**

There are a number of things that must be done to reclaim our labor movement and make it a force for social justice, in the United States and around the world.

I think the most important approach is to demand the establishment of popular democracy inside our labor organizations. This means, first of all, that union leaders, staff and members recognize that most of our unions are not democratic, and many have never been democratic—they have been led by leaders without the participation of the members. We must not only fight for member participation and control, but institute and implement procedures to remove those in office who refuse to accept membership participation and control. This also includes implementing term limits for leaders at every level of the unions.

Tied to that must be implementation of a membership education process that is designed to encourage and promote membership participation and development of leadership. This must be broader than current "shop stewards" or contract enforcement training, and must be extended to all members; not just officers and staffmembers. It must be built on the concept of respect for each member.

This education process must have a purpose. To me, it comes down to leadership development among every member. We need to create leaders for our unions and our communities—we need to create fighters for the well-being of all working people.

This education process must be deep and wide. It must include issues such as developed above in this article (and could certainly go even further—these are initial suggestions) including:

- a real discussion of US history, with recognition of the role of white supremacy in undercutting unity among working people, in turn, hurting *both* white workers and workers of color, and the need to repudiate it;
- discussion of labor's history, focusing on labor's contribution to social improvement but also including its reactionary behaviors across the past 140 or so years with a goal of ending the latter;
- discussion of sex and gender issues, affecting our relations among our members and between them and others, and the need for social equity;
- discussion of the type and form of unionism we want our unions to practice; and
- a critical discussion of current issues, including the future development/non-development of capitalism, addressing climate change, how to take out the extreme amounts of money being used to distort our political processes, relations with the Democratic Party, or whether labor should join with other progressive forces to establish a new, nation-wide independent political party, etc.

In short, and at very least, we must work to transform our unions from business unions to social justice unions (see Scipes, 2014b).

The point here is that the elites thrive on division: remember that saying, “United we stand, divided we fall”? They want to keep people separate, isolated, and thinking only of the concerns of themselves and those of close loved ones—to hell with anyone else: they will only drag you down!

It is collective organization that scares the elites more than anything. People cooperating and working together to improve things for expanding networks of people across rural areas, suburbs, cities, states and globally is their worst nightmare, and that intensifies even more when these efforts are determined to go outside the “box” in which the elites want us confined, and especially when people seek to replace the elites and their elite-dominated social order.

Perhaps nowhere else is this collective organization feared than in the production, exchange and distribution aspects of any particular society. The elites need these processes to keep people occupied and from thinking about how things could be made better—and they further divert our attention through extensive efforts to validate our self-worth through consuming more and more crap, whether professional sports, television/movies, the latest fashions, or so many things that are simply not needed. Yet, at the same time, collective organization in these areas of the economy has real power to disrupt the status quo, and this becomes intensified when joined in unity with community organizations for the good of all.

Unions developed when workers recognized that they had this power to disrupt the status quo. Unfortunately, most American unions confined their activities to workplaces, ignoring community. This was arguably sufficient as long as there was widespread union membership that positively affected a large percentage of local communities. As union membership and impact decreased over time, this weakness became more and more observable—and since the early 1980s, activities limited to workplaces are clearly insufficient. Those of us concerned about labor must recognize this problem and directly address it, because our “leaders”—in their infinite wisdom—certainly have not, and there are no indications that they will do it in the future.

We need to open discussion across each union and each community in the country: what do we want for the good of the large majority of us, in the United States and around the world, and how can we organize to make it happen?

Collective organization gives us a realistic way forward. But as Filipino workers in the KMU have shown us (Scipes, 2014b), collective organization does not evolve simply by joining an organization: the members must be consolidated through collective processes that are designed to educate and incorporate members into each organization. We must recognize that most union members in the US today have *not* been through these processes and consolidated, and this must be done. Collective organization must be created, not assumed, if we want to build a solid foundation on which we build our house. There is no simple way to do this. We must organize within our unions and our communities for a better life for us all.

## **Conclusion**

In this wide-ranging article that has tried to pull together many strands not usually considered at the same time or place, we have covered a lot of ground. It is based on the belief that working people should be respected, and that we must organize to create a new social order for the good of all.

It recognizes that the established labor leadership in the AFL-CIO has utterly and miserably failed to consider and advance the well-being of American working people, much less those of anywhere else, nor is there any reasonable expectation that this will change in the future.

Those of us who believe that working people should be respected—and I'm talking about the 99 percent—have to realize that the “big boys” and “big girls” (the elites) are not going to take care of us; in fact, their respective well-being comes at our direct expense. If we want respect, we have to demand it; and we have to develop our collective organizational power across the country and around the globe. As far as I can tell, there is no other way.



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1 See <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm> (accessed July 2, 2017), Union Members Survey, as reported by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, January 26, 2017.

2 See Trumka's December 28, 2016 op-ed in the *New York Times* and what I consider his obsequious plea, "Don't Let Trump Speak for Workers" (Trumka, 2016), after millions of workers voted for Trump.

3 For an extensive listing of writings on mainly US labor, but some from other countries, please go to my "Contemporary Labor Issues" Bibliography" at <https://faculty.pnw.edu/kim-scipes/contemporary-labor-issues-bibliography/> (accessed July 2, 2017). Unlike many academic compilations, this bibliography includes many resources and writings by activists. This web site has been transferred fairly recently from one web page to another, and while the information is solid, we need to re-insert bookmarks to make it more user friendly. It also needs more updating. We are working to get it back to the standard we once had—please be patient!

4 Devan Pillay (2013: 14) has subsequently identified different forms of political unionism: Marxist-Leninist, Nationalist and Social Democratic (see Scipes, 2014, FN 11).

5 This is currently under consideration for publication.

6 Since 2013, I have been writing for and serving on the board of *Substance* ([www.substancenews.net](http://www.substancenews.net)) (accessed July 2, 2017), arguably the single most important source on public education in the US from a pro-union perspective. *Substance*, based in Chicago, has been publishing since 1978, and is led by George Schmidt, a former high school teacher and Chicago Teachers Union member (CTU) with over 35 years of experience. *Substance* has been in the center of every fight for democracy within the CTU throughout *Substance's* existence. Although the 2012 strike by the CTU has encouraged activists across the country, the reform caucus that led the strike, CORE (Caucus of Rank-and-file Educators)—CORE had won most union leadership positions after its founding in 2010—has had numerous internal problems over the subsequent years.

According to Schmidt, the 2016 CTU contract was the worst in recent history.

As we have discussed in *Substance*, social justice unionism must not ignore workplace issues—they are the center of trade unionism—but must build on them, and go beyond them, NOT ignore them. Arguably, some of the problems of CTU—but definitely not all of them—are due to social justice advocates refocusing union activities outside of the union, at the expense of defending union members in the workforce. This, in my opinion, has been a mistake: the union must have a strong mobilized presence in the workplace, and from this strong base, then join with community organizations.

7 The most complete understanding of business unionism is Buhle, 1999.

8 A book just published gives an inside, personal look to a major CIO unionist, who played a central role in the creation of the United Packinghouse Workers of America, Herb March. Written by his son, Richard, this provides a new look at what the CIO meant to members (see March, 2017); for a review, see Scipes, 2017c.

9 To see how this affected the formation and development of the Steel Workers Organization Committee and then the United Steel Workers of America, see Scipes, 2003: 141-259.

10 I experienced this first hand while working on printing presses in a non-union print shop in rural Kentucky that I was trying to unionize in 1982. The company bought a new web press that reduced the number of workers in a crew from five to three, while producing less waste while starting up and providing higher quality printing, which was needed because some of our top-end printing was for the diamond industry. At that time, I was making \$4.85 an hour with minimal benefits—the owner was complaining I was overpaid—and I worked 40 hours a week; a comparable union job at that time in San Francisco Bay Area (from where I had moved) paid over \$20 an hour, with a 35-hour workweek (and time and a half over seven hours in a day, as well as for Saturdays, with double-time on Sundays.). The point being that this technological upgrading and related unemployment was also taking place in low-wage areas such as rural Kentucky; it was not limited to just high-wage areas.

11 Glenn Perusek (2017), in his analysis of what happened during the 2016 presidential election—with a specific focus on the industrial Midwest—and suggestions for ways forward, presents data from the US Bureau of Labor, noting that "as late as 2000, there were still more than 17 million manufacturing jobs in the United States. Both before and after the Great Recession (2007-2009), these jobs disappeared at an astonishing rate. 30 percent of manufacturing jobs have been lost since 2000."

12 And now, as reported in the *New York Times*, even the retail jobs that provided some measure of work for those who lost factory jobs—albeit, at much lower rates of pay—are now being destroyed by e-commerce; see Abrams and Gebeloff, 2017.

13 I met Peter Knowlton, President of the United Electrical workers (UE) at the April 2016 National Meeting of US Labor against War (USLAW), but the UE is not a member of the AFL-CIO nor has it been since it left/was expelled in 1950.

14 The Solidarity Center's web site is at <https://www.solidaritycenter.org> (accessed July 2, 2017). It is a visually very attractive site, and tells of some of their work around the world. In some places, they appear to be doing good work. See also G. Nelson Bass III's comments about Timothy Ryan's chapter, "It Takes More Than a Village: A Case Study of Worker Solidarity in Bangladesh," in Bass' review of Kim Scipes, ed. *Building Global Labor Solidarity in a Time of Accelerating Globalization*, which can be found in Bass, 2017: 3. However, many questions about their work remain—the web site is not near as transparent about their overseas work as they suggest. They say they are "allied" with the AFL-CIO, yet every member of their Board of Trustees works for the AFL-CIO or an affiliated organization. They also report they work in over 60 countries around the world, but there is nothing about why they are in 60-plus countries, nor why those particular 60-plus countries, and I've never seen an explanation for this. Its budget appears to be clear, but it explains little: in 2014, they received

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\$32,582,066 from “Federal awards” and “in-kind contributions for Federal awards”—neither explained—which was 98.0 percent of their total budget of \$33,234,492; in 2015, the comparable numbers were \$30,828,599, which was 98.3 percent of their total budget of \$30,828,599. (Budgetary data found at <https://solidaritycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Annual-Report-2015.pdf> (accessed July 2, 2017). But they don’t explain which Federal agency/organization(s) gave them over \$30 million each year, or what it was for. Nor have they *ever* given an honest, in-depth report for their overseas operations to AFL-CIO members.

15 The other core institutes include the international wing of the Republican Party, the international wing of the Democratic Party and, especially interesting, the international wing of the US Chamber of Commerce. No one in the AFL-CIO foreign policy leadership has explained why they are collaborating with the US Government and these organizations, especially the US Chamber of Commerce. The NED, while claiming to promote democracy, promote a “top-down” model of democracy—polyarchal democracy (Robinson, 1996)—to counter the bottom-up, popular democracy that Americans have been taught is real democracy. It is a major component of the US Empire. People are invited to read what they say about themselves—see <http://www.ned.org/about/history/> (accessed July 2, 2017) and compare it to my analysis (Scipes, 2010a: 96-105).

16 On April 13, 2012—while Chair of the Chicago Chapter of the National Writers Union (UAW #1981)—I was interviewed by Steve Zeltzer of the Labor Video Project in San Francisco about my book. This remains on-line at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzUsLrlie\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzUsLrlie_Q) (accessed July 2, 2017; see Scipes, 2012b). Since that date, over 6,000 people have at least clicked on the interview. For an even earlier account of our efforts to challenge AFL-CIO foreign policy, from 2005, see Scipes and Hirsch, 2005.

17 Saddam Hussein was on the CIA’s payroll from 1958 until 1991—unknown to most, he was the US’s “boy” until he slipped his leash and invaded Kuwait in 1991 (Morris, 2003).

18 For her actual, televised statement, go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omnskeu-puE> (accessed July 2, 2017).

19 The most complete study of the human impact of the war on Iraqis is Burnham, et. al., 2006.

20 Source: NBC News, January 9, 2017: <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-bombing-iraq-syria-pakistan-afghanistan-libya-yemen-somalia-n704636> (accessed July 2, 2017).

21 To put this in a larger context, again according to the 2017 Economic Report of the President of the United States, the preliminary figure for the US GDP (Gross Domestic Product) at the end of the third quarter was \$16.712 trillion. This means that the National Debt is approximately 117% of the GDP, meaning that even if all that production was done and no one got paid for their work, no one got a return on their investment for the entire year, and no one got any payment on any debt owed, the National Debt still could not be eradicated in one year—this would have to continue another 62 days into the next year! Source for data: *2017 Economic Report of the President of the United States*, on-line at <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/ERP-2017/pdf/ERP-2017.pdf> (accessed July 2, 2017), Tables B-2, p. 566, and B-20, p. 587.

In an article I published in 2009, based off 2006 numbers, I wrote, “... the US Economy, the most productive in the world, had a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of \$13.061 trillion in 2006, but the National Debt was \$8.451—64.7 per cent of GDP—and growing...” I quoted one investor, who put it into context. He wrote (in April 2006) that “the US Treasury has a hair under \$8.4 trillion in outstanding debt. How much is that? ... if you deposited one million dollars into a bank account every day, starting 2006 years ago, that you would not even have ONE trillion in that account.” (Scipes, 2009: 30.) So, the National Debt/Gross Domestic Product ratio has grown from 64.7 percent to 117 percent, almost doubling in 10 years.

22 Obviously, Donald Trump and his senior level administration officials threaten this part of the myth.

23 Even the adopted name of “America” is an imposition, suggesting that the entire hemisphere is “our’s.” The proper term of our country is the United States of America, and should be referred to as the United States, not America.

24 While much has been passed on about the “1960s” (which in social terms really covered the years from about 1964 to 1975), one of the most important ramifications has been the boom in college enrollments (from men seeking to evade the Vietnam War-related draft, and women being affected by the women’s movement), and the resulting explosion of research about this country and many other countries of the world; we know so much more today than did previous generations.

However, for some strange reason, most of this new research has *not* been incorporated into high school history textbooks, where most Americans learn about this country. For example, when I query my students about what they learned about US History in Indiana high schools, their reports are overwhelmingly—with the exception of those limited few who had exceptional teachers here and there—that they got told there was a war in Vietnam, and that was about it. My analysis is that they got basically the same historical understanding as I did in high school—and I graduated in 1969!

25 The development of a “working middle class” (Metzgar, 2000) did not really develop until the late 1940s-early ‘50s, and only after the rise of industrial unions in the 1930s and early ‘40s. The first year after the end of World War II saw 116,000,000 working days of production “lost” due to militant workers’ strikes (Preis, 1964: 420), including national strikes in steel, auto, electrical parts and meatpacking, major strikes in a number of industries, along with general strikes in Oakland, CA, Stamford, CT, and several cities in Pennsylvania.

Together with the “traditional” middle class of lawyers, doctors and other professions—including school teachers and funeral home operators in the black community—this working middle class became part of the “Great American Middle Class.”

26 As stated above, there are some exceptions over the last few years, but as far as can be ascertained, these are simply exceptions.