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Review Essay--Blue Collar Empire: The Untold Story of US Labor's Global Anticommunist Crusade by Jeff Schuhrke

Abstract

This is a very detailed examination of AFL and AFL-CIO foreign policy program between 1940s and 1990s, showing not only their efforts but the process by which they carried out this work. Focuses on anticommunism to rationalize its repressive work against workers around the world, with especially strong focus on the work of the American Institute of Free Labor Development (AIFLD) in Latin America.

Keywords

AFL-CIO, AFL-CIO Foreign Policy Program, Anticommunism, labor repression

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Cover Page Footnote

Kim Scipes, PhD, is a long-time labor and political activist who has been publishing on AFL-CIO foreign operations since 1989; his path-breaking book is "AFL-CIO's Secret War against Developing Country Workers: Solidarity or Sabotage?" (Lexington Books, 2010, 2011 paperback). He is a co-founder of LEPAIO, the Labor Education Project on AFL-CIO International Operations whose web site is <https://aflcio-int.education>. For a list of Dr. Scipes' writings, many with links to original article--go to <https://www.pnw.edu/personal-faculty-pages/kim-scipes-ph-d/publications>.

Jeff Schuhrke begins his new book, *Blue Collar Empire*, with a powerful story: how the CIA, operating through the offices of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), a US-based international union, helped sustain a bitter three-month strike against the government in the British colony of Guiana during 1984, effecting the post-colonial period after decolonization. (Today, this South American country is known as Guyana.) While targeting the CIA connection in this case and using it to dramatize US efforts to intervene in other countries' internal affairs, it is ultimately a powerful indictment of how upper echelon people in the AFL-CIO have worked to attack progressive workers' and their political allies in struggles around the world.

Professor Schuhrke writes, emphasizing the contradiction at the heart of his book: "... the same twentieth-century labor movement that brought a measure of economic security and personal dignity to millions of working people also participated in some of the most shameful and destructive episodes in this history of US imperialism" (p. 3). It is the latter part, what I have long termed as "labor imperialism" (my term; Schuhrke does not use it), that Schuhrke documents so well in this book:

This book tells the story of US labor officialdom's quest to control the workers' movements in Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia between the 1940s and 1990s—and the bitter conflicts exacerbated along the way. When thinking about labor's role in the Cold War, it is important to understand that 'the Cold War was not only an East-West struggle between rival superpowers, but also a series of imperial, often grotesquely violent intrusions by the Global North into the Global South. Like a roving picket line marching from country to country, the AFL-CIO's international agents carried out their own imperial intrusions, expending incredible energy and resources to block revolutionary ideologies and militant class consciousness from taking hold in foreign labor movements.

In practice, this means meddling in the internal processes of other countries' unions, stoking internecine rivalries, creating and financing splinter labor organizations, grooming cadres of conservative unionists, and occasionally using the power of the strike to sabotage left-wing governments. American labor officials usually carried out such activities without the full knowledge or approval of the rank-and-file union members they purported to represent (p.5).

He also points out while early researchers saw the labor movement as little more than "a puppet for the US Government," later researchers "demonstrated how the CIA was only the most notorious government entity that organized labor partnered with. In reality, the AFL-CIO became closely allied with almost the entire US foreign policy apparatus—not only the CIA, but also the State Department, Agency for International Development, and National Endowment for Democracy." He follows with a damning conclusion: "Scholars in the early twentieth-century rightly contend that American labor leaders were not just dupes of the government, but were instead *aggressive cold warriors in their own right*" (emphasis added, p. 6). [Although uncredited here, I made this argument in a 1989 article, "Labor's Foreign Policy: Its Origins with Samuel Gompers and the AFL," that was published in *The Newsletter of International Labor Studies*, and updated in Scipes, 2010.]

But, interestingly, Schuhrke also makes a powerful damning connection: "When we examine top labor officials' actions in the realm of foreign policy, it becomes clearer how the global Cold War directly contributed to US labor's decline in the latter half of the twentieth century" (p. 6), noting that in 1947,

approximately 35 percent of private sector, non-agricultural workers were in unions, but in 1991 (the end of the Cold War), only 11 percent were in unions.¹

To me, this is the heart of Schuhrke's book: that the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and later, after 1955, the combined AFL-CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) have operated globally to subjugate workers and their allies who sought goals different and in opposition to US labor's goals; that this "labor imperialism" came from within the labor movement and was not imposed by outside entities such as the US government, the State Department or the CIA; that these efforts were all-but-unknown by the overwhelmingly large numbers of the affiliated unions' members and the large majority of their leadership (i.e., knowledge of these foreign policies and operations was confined to a very small group of people at the very top of the AFL-CIO directly involved with "international affairs"); and that these operations were responsible for at least some of the disintegration and declawing of the US labor movement.

How does Schuhrke establish these points? By a very detailed discussion of the process of AFL-CIO interventions, particularly in Latin America and to a lesser extent also in Africa and Asia. After his excellent introduction, he divides the book into three sections: Free Trade Unionism between 1945-1960, Free Labor Development between 1960-1975, and the Free Market Revolution between 1973-1995.

The first section is an examination of the key activists—particularly George Meany, Jay Lovestone, and Irving Brown, who were to "lead" AFL-CIO foreign operations over these years and into the 1970s. This not only talks about the AFL's efforts to undermine the post-World War II World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), but also focuses on Brown's leading role in splitting the French labor center, the CGT through creating *Force Ouvriere*, a rival trade union center. From there, Schuhrke discusses AFL operations in Latin America. Then he jumps back to Europe to undermine the Communists by supporting the 1947 Marshall Plan. He concludes that the US created an "informal" empire after the war, and that it has been working to enhance or maintain it ever since, and he talks about how the AFL and right-wing leaders of the CIO, along with the British and Dutch, joined together with a number of labor centers to create the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions in 1949 to challenge the WFTU. What you see here is that these US labor leaders have been involved at least since the end of World War II in advancing the US Empire.

Schuhrke then details US labor's involvement with the CIA, primarily in Europe but also in places like Indonesia and China, and how labor was a "partner" with the CIA, but not a subordinate one: CIA funding was cut off in 1958, yet US labor kept operating around the world with money from other US government agencies, such as the US Agency for International Development. He returns to events in Latin America.

The second section focuses on the "Institutes" period, where the AFL-CIO established regional organizations in Latin America (1962), Africa (1964), and Asia (1967). This was after the AFL supported the coup against the democratically elected government in Guatemala (1954), and in this following period, the AFL-CIO was intimately involved in overthrowing the democratically elected governments in Brazil (1964) and in Chile (1973), using its regional organization AIFLD, the American Institute for Free Labor Development. What we see in both Brazil and Chile is that AIFLD helped overthrow two labor-friendly regimes and replaced each with a dictatorship that was focused on labor repression. And thousands of workers and their supporters were arrested, tortured and many subsequently killed by the

¹ Note: in 2023, only six percent of these private sector workers were unionized—KS.

newly-installed dictatorships, and previously established labor centers and unions were destroyed. Also described herein are the strikes in Guyana, mentioned above, and intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965.

Schuhrike shifts his focus in Chapter 9, he concentrates on Africa, and briefly discusses operations across that continent, and then moves on to Vietnam in Chapter 10. The latter is a particularly rich chapter, and not only shows the AFL-CIO leadership supporting the war, but the emerging cracks by union leaders against the war. And then, in 1967, the magazine *Ramparts* exposed CIA activities around the world, including with labor, and opens up further opposition to the war and the US Empire.

The third section (1973-1995) focuses on “Free Market Revolution.” Beginning with the Chilean coup on September 11, 1973—the first “9-11”—Schuhrike focuses on the economic “solutions” due to the failure of capitalism with the development of “neoliberalism,” which is based on privatization, liberalization, and deregulation. Advanced by economists from the University of Chicago, who were advising the dictator Pinochet after the Chilean coup, it was ultimately advanced throughout the “developing world” (also referred to as the “third world”) as the way forward, and then, in 1981, by US President Ronald Reagan and subsequent administrations, both Republican and Democratic, in the United States. These were attacks on the social safety network established by President Roosevelt’s administration in the 1930s that had helped Americans survive the Great Depression. This included selling off public services and assets, such as bridges and airports, as well as reducing restraints on businesses.²

Schuhrike then talks about Lane Kirkland replacing George Meany in 1979, and Kirkland’s efforts to stay involved in foreign affairs. He provides a major overview of the AFL-CIO’s support for Solidarnosc, a Polish labor center, right after the AFL-CIO stood by and allowed Reagan to destroy PATCO, the Professional Air Traffic Controllers union, in 1981. Yet he also discusses the formation of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in 1983, established by that “democrat,” Ronald Reagan, which combined the international wing of the Democratic Party, the international wing of the Republican Party, the international wing of the AFL-CIO’s domestic arch enemy, the US Chamber of Commerce, with the international wing of the AFL-CIO, at that time, the Free Trade Union Institute. (The AFL-CIO, through its “Solidarity Center” still works with the imperialist NED today. See Scipes, 2010: 96-105.) In this period, Schuhrike also discusses briefly some of their work in the Philippines in the late 1980s, as well as more fully, South Africa across the 1980s.

He also discusses AFL-CIO operations in the 1970s and ‘80s in El Salvador and Guatemala, each torn by guerrilla uprisings, which AIFLD sought to undermine, as well as their projects in Grenada and Nicaragua. This allows him to discuss the emergence and development of the National Labor Committee in Support of Democracy and Human Rights in El Salvador (NLC), where a few progressive union presidents worked to support these struggles, and also rank and file union members’ and their allies’ efforts to support the struggles. And eventually this takes us up to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, then the fateful 1995 election of John Sweeney to the presidency of the AFL-CIO.

² If you want an excellent visual representation of this, go back and watch Michael Moore’s 1989 movie, “Roger and Me.” He vividly illustrates the impact of deindustrialization on Flint, Michigan during the late 1970s and throughout the ‘80s, showing the social devastation on one city by these policies, although this devastation spread extensively across what became known as the “Rust Belt” because of these policies, as well as in California, neither of which Moore unfortunately does not mention.

Evaluation: Data and Analysis

First and foremost, Schuhrke has done a truly remarkable job simply telling us in detail about the AFL and the AFL-CIO operations around the world during these years. He has weaved together a sprawling, extremely complicated chain of events that extend around the world, and over roughly a 50 year period: I think this is a *tour de force*, and that this book should be read by every trade unionist and people studying US global operations over these years; *labor's contributions simply cannot be ignored in the development of the US Empire across these years*. More importantly than merely detailing these developments, Schuhrke explicates the processes by how these developed; this is first class work! So, data provided in this book will almost certainly never be surpassed overall, although there might be arguments about specific situation. (For any scholar thinking about initiating new research on the AFL-CIO's operations across these years, I'd suggest not: we need much research on the post-1995 period, and that's where I'd encourage you to engage.)

Schuhrke provides an in-depth account of labor politics on US politics and operations on a global level, as well as at national ones as well, especially in Latin America. For the specialist, this is valuable information. For trade unionists, who want the focus to be on unions, I would begin by trying to understand the situation in particular countries and/or regions, and expand from there, rather than trying to understand everything at the beginning.

Now, as complimentary as I have been—and this is genuine—I have some complaints about Schuhrke's analysis of his data. Somewhere along my career, however, I came to a very important understanding about *reporting* research: you never want to claim more than your empirical evidence supports, but you want to claim *everything* your evidence supports. In my opinion, Schuhrke's evidence is much stronger than his analysis; *his argument is much stronger than he claims*.

His focus, bluntly, is on the AFL's and then AFL-CIO's war against "communism." (And by the way, I think some publicist got carried away in the subtitle to his book: this is not the "untold story" about labor's global anticommunist crusade, and Schuhrke knows this, but it *is* the most *detailed* story.) While he delves into the earlier history of the AFL's fight against the left (i.e., including communists, but also including anarchists, Trotskyists, black and Latino nationalists, militant rank and file trade unionists of all colors, ethnicities, etc.) in the Introduction, his book really zooms in on the perceived war against communism. I say "perceived war" because he accepts this "battle" as presented by the US labor protagonists; his scholarly detachment, to me, privileges one side against the other; while extremely critical, nonetheless, he acts as though US labor's positions are "normal" and a place to start from.

Where you can see this is that there is almost no discussion in this book—certainly not for a long time—about rank and file union members in the United States in regard to these issues. They are basically not considered in the bulk of the book although they are truly the "meat" of the labor movement. So, this book is *not* about the US labor movement; it really is about the upper echelons of the AFL/AFL-CIO foreign policy leadership, who has done almost everything to consciously keep rank and file members (and most of their leaders across the country) from knowing what they are doing in the members' names, but behind their backs, in countries around the world. In fact, my research has shown that involvement in these foreign politics began in the late 1890s, not the mid-to-late 1940s (i.e., long *before* the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917), and in over 100 years, the AFL-CIO leadership has *never* given an honest report to the rank and file that can be verified by independent researchers. And Schuhrke suggests but does not explicitly make this point; I think it's important.

It is important because the labor movement claims to be a democratic institution and yet by leaders consciously hiding overseas operations—again, done behind the backs and in the name of American workers, without honestly reporting these efforts to their members about these operations—guts the very concept of “labor democracy.”

Accompanying this, Schuhrke doesn’t challenge what is meant by “communism.” To domestic rank and file activists, when discussing it, “communism” is at least somewhat conflated with “workers’ control” or at least “workers’ democracy”; i.e., one person, one vote, get to discuss everything that might affect a particular group of workers. That’s very different from these AFL-CIO foreign policy actors, who see anything that challenges *their control* to be a project of the Soviet Union; in other words, many activists get labeled as “communists” not as an explicit label but as a general label to denigrate their unwillingness to simply stand in line and do as their told by their “leaders” no matter how unacceptable their leaders’ actions might be seen. (This is often referred to as “red baiting.”) Note that any discussion of “communism” is not based on specific analysis of this policy or that but is a general denigration of anyone who might think in a progressive, life-enhancing manner.

This means, of course, that in the case of any workers’ struggles in other countries, anyone who thinks “outside of the box” or differently from their leaders, is automatically a communist. That means they should be killed, and their organizations destroyed, and doing so is “legitimate” and desirable.

And should any government in the so-called developing world have the temerity to question the US Empire, or even US foreign policy, or to try to make life better for workers by limiting capitalist exploitation and accumulation, then they should be overthrown, their leaders arrested, killed or exiled, and being replaced with a dictatorship that puts an iron straitjacket on workers’ and allies’ organizations.

Without questioning these basic positions, then people who bought into US propaganda—in Schuhrke’s time period, served almost daily in the mainstream media and utilized mercilessly by US government officials and corporate executives—can see that “fighting communism” is a good thing. We have to preclude this option, whenever possible.

Ironically, even if “communism” equals Soviet Union, as our so-called “leaders” project, then—if being honest—they would recognize that the position of the Soviet government in regard to labor varied over time. Before 1935, they wanted to create revolutionary labor organizations in countries around the world to overthrow the capitalist system. In 1935, in response to the failure to stop the Nazis from taking power in Germany, they renounced their revolutionary aspirations, at least in the imperial countries, and were willing to work with any labor organizations willing to fight fascism. In 1939, after the Nazi-Soviet pact, they switched to trying to keep the US out of the European War, but in 1941—after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June—they fought for the US to join the war on the side of the Soviet Union and for increased production in US factories to support the war effort (acting to constrain class conflict on the shopfloors in expense of enhancing it, as previously). After the war, the Soviets were willing to unite with the CIO and the British Trades Union Congress to work against the restoration of fascism through the creation of the World Federation of Trade Unions, but after mid-1947, they realized no matter what they did or said, the US and Britain would oppose them, and this realization led to their sole focus on their national interests. (In this quick sketch, I’m not saying they were necessarily “good” or “desirable,” but to point out that their position changed over time.)

Why recognizing this is important is that the AFL in particular did not care: “communism,” as they saw it was evil and everything they did or said must be removed from human consideration. But this quickly demonstrates that the AFL’s position was based only on ideology and not on any rational analysis.

And what accepting the AFL’s position—including after the 1955 merger with the CIO right-wing, after throwing out most of the left wing of the CIO in 1949-50—cannot explain is why the AFL fought the left both *before* the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and continues to fight the left today, over 30 years *after* the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the ensuing “death” of Soviet-style communism. The so-called “war against communism” by AFL/AFL-CIO foreign policy leaders was (and continues to be) an on-going effort to support the US Empire’s effort to dominate all of the other countries of the world, which it has specifically done since at least 1945. This has not been an “informal” empire, but rather is simply another form of empire, albeit differing from the Romans.

And the politics and policies of the AFL-CIO international operations today are intended to advance such domination around the world. Even as domestically, the AFL-CIO leadership continues to fail the American public, and especially working people.

I go into this long explanation here because I think Schuhrke would have been better served by focusing on their ideological war against “communism” as a tool to dominate the world (and the US labor movement) during a certain period of world history and not as an end in and of itself. In my opinion, this is what he shows, and his book is an important intervention in the struggle against AFL-CIO labor imperialism.

Together with my 2010 book, Jeff Schuhrke provides an unassailable account of US labor operations around the world between the 1940s and the 1990s. I think US trade unionists must consider Schuhrke’s arguments, and decide whether to ignore AFL-CIO international operations, or whether to eradicate these under current leadership and rebuild US unions to fight for working people at home and abroad.