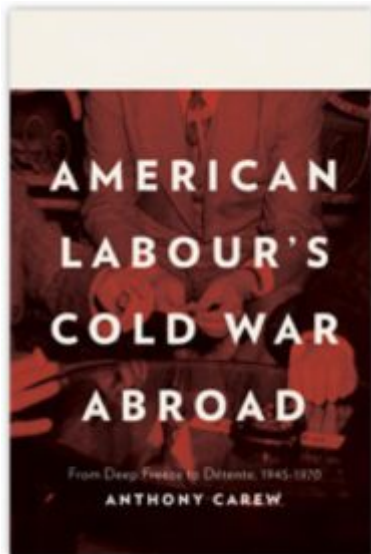


The AFL-CIO's Cold War



The Cold War was the period in the twentieth century, approximately between 1946 and 1991, where world politics were dominated by the confrontation between two blocs of states, led respectively by the United States and the Soviet Union. Even more so than during World War II, which had just ended, both blocs deployed vast efforts to enlist civil-society organizations in their camp: organizations of youth, women, artists, writers, academics, and others. Trade unions were a most sought-after strategic prize because they were disciplined mass organizations capable of exercising considerable political power.

Not much has been written about the subordination of the labor movement in the Soviet camp,¹ mostly because there was little to write about. The situation was clear: In the countries ruled under a system of bureaucratic collectivism ("Stalinism" in political terms) the trade union movement had been abolished as an independent social and political actor. In the USSR, the dramatic suicide on August 22, 1936, of Mikhail Tomski marked the end of an epoch. Tomski had been general secretary of the Soviet trade unions and an advocate of trade union autonomy. For that reason, he was removed from his position in 1927. Having witnessed the first Moscow Trial (August 19-24, 1936), Tomski expected to be among the accused in the next one, and decided to die on his own terms.

At the start of the Cold War, what passed for trade unions in the Stalinist world were organs of the state, tightly controlled by the NKVD and serving some minor foreign-policy purposes, such as hosting delegations of foreign trade unionists ready to be dazzled by the often-lavish hospitality.

The actual Cold War was conducted in the capitalist world, on the Soviet side through the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU)², the then Communist-controlled trade union confederations in France and Italy, and over contested territory in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Far more has been written about the involvement in the Cold War of trade unions in the coalition led by the United States which, for the sake of convenience, we shall call the "Western" camp, the reason being that here we are dealing with a real trade union movement, capable of independently debating political issues, with all its complexity arising from different histories and political traditions.

At first, the collaboration of trade unions with Allied intelligence services did not attract much controversy. During World War II trade union organizations, national and international, had been working as a matter of course with the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner of the CIA, and with the British government. Some of these relationships continued seamlessly against the new enemy power when the Cold War started. They became controversial when it became apparent that such relationships could undermine the fundamental purposes of the trade union movement itself. The AFL-CIO was a key trade union actor in the Western camp and as such became a center of controversy, both internally, as the Reuther brothers—who led the dominant faction in the United Auto Workers (UAW) from 1948—challenged its president George Meany and his policies, and on the outside, from social activists, trade unionists, and academics, mostly in the 1960s and 1970s. Such polemical writings, however, were for the most part case studies about specific situations.³ What has been lacking is a thorough, comprehensive and scholarly history of the AFL-CIO's role.

This very large void has now been filled beyond the best expectations. The British labor historian Anthony Carew⁴ has written a thoroughly researched history that is likely to

remain the definitive account of a now largely forgotten but crucial episode in American labor history. A massive volume, the book is the product of forty years of research, professionally carried out, scrupulously factual, devoid of political or academic jargon. At most, Carew allows himself the occasional dry, understated touch of humor.

Much of the research appearing in the book is entirely new: Importantly, Carew has accessed for the first time the papers and correspondence of Jay Lovestone, at the time the director of the International Department of the AFL-CIO, and of Irving Brown, his closest associate and international enforcer.

Jay Lovestone had been one of the founders of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), and one of its most influential leaders, until he miscalculated the outcome of the faction fight in the Soviet CP, believing that Nikolai Bukharin would prevail. When Josef Stalin prevailed, he forced Lovestone, suddenly deprived of the majority he thought he had, out of the American party. Lovestone then started the "Communist Party (Opposition)," together with co-thinkers in other countries who started similar groups, most notably the Brandler-Thalheimer former leadership of the German CP, of which remnants still exist today (a small organization called Arbeiterpolitik, which had no connection to Lovestone). Most of this current, however, became the international network known as the "Right Opposition,"⁵ which remained a potent vehicle for Lovestone's intrigues for another forty years.

In the 1930s Lovestone changed the name of his organization several times, removing the "Communist" reference. After failing to secure an influential position in the UAW, where he only succeeded in creating an insignificant split, Lovestone associated himself with David Dubinsky, president of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), one of the leading AFL affiliates. Dubinsky, a supporter of George Meany, eventually recommended Lovelace to Meany. who appointed him, in 1963, director of the AFL-CIO International Affairs

Department.

A basic fact needs to be understood about Lovestone and Brown: Neither were trade unionists. They were professional cadres of a Communist tendency operating in the trade union arena, as others could, and did, operate in other arenas of social life. Neither of them had risen from trade union ranks, ever organized a union, conducted a strike or a union campaign, ever been elected to a union office, or been accountable to a union governing body, before being appointed by Meany—in the case of Lovestone—as director of the International Department of the AFL-CIO, where he became accountable to Meany himself. Brown, in turn, was accountable to Lovestone, and Lovestone alone. In due course, Lovestone changed his politics, breaking with Stalin but not with Stalinist methods: secretive, manipulative and disruptive, which remained his distinctive *modus operandi* to the end of his life and, with the assistance of his international network of ex-Communists, intervening throughout the Cold War as an independent subcontractor of the CIA, rather than a mere agent.

Carew's book leads into many directions, nationally—in the United States—and internationally, into the politics of the wider international trade union movement. It would lend itself to becoming the reference and the starting point of further explorations, by Carew himself and by others.

One of its many strengths is that it corrects in passing some partisan lies that have been circulating on the internet. One example: The Wikipedia chapter on Irving Brown states that during the Algerian war of independence, in which he played a significant role, he “subsidized the Algerian National Movement (MNA), founded by Messali Hadj to oppose the National Liberation Front (FLN).” In fact, the opposite was the case: Brown was backing the FLN union and never supported the MNA either politically or financially.

Both the MNA and the FLN had founded trade union

confederations in 1956: The MNA's USTA, largely representative of the Algerian workers in France, with an initial membership of 15,000, on February 14; the FLN's UGTA, without a significant membership in either France or Algeria, two weeks later, on March 2. By September 1957 the USTA membership in France had reached 100,000 out of an estimated total of 400,000 Algerian workers employed in France at the time. The USTA had applied for affiliation to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) the same day it was founded; the UGTA, which had strong links with the French Communist Party, finally also decided to apply for ICFTU membership.

On July 8, the ICFTU Executive decided, at one o'clock in the morning, after several hours of debate, to accept the application of the UGTA, by a majority of one single vote. The intervention of Brown, representing the AFL-CIO on the executive, was decisive: He strongly advocated the acceptance of the UGTA application, opposing even the acceptance of both organizations. The UGTA, supported by the Tunisian and Moroccan confederations, which, like their governments, also supported the FLN, had threatened that in the event that its application alone would not be accepted, it might join the WFTU or the Arab Confederation of Trade Unions. The USTA would, of course, never resort to this kind of blackmail and was punished for its principled honesty.

Carew's research has unearthed a letter from Brown to Lovestone from April 15, 1956, "urging the need for UGTA to affiliate to the ICFTU speedily before it was upstaged by the rival Union des syndicats des travailleurs algériens" (163). In a note (411, Note 43), Carew adds, "Brown's support for UGTA over the more broadly based [USTA], with its stronger commitment to basic trade union aims, is interesting and was evidently based on the *hope* that the former would prove more nationalist than communist in the long run."

For an understanding of the significance of the AFL-CIO's

involvement in Cold War politics it is crucial to realize that the members of the AFL-CIO, for the most part, were no way involved in the activities of the International Department, and indeed had no idea what it was doing. Most of the rank and file, if they reflected on international activities at all, even of their own unions, would often view such activities as pretexts for international tourism by the officers concerned, but would not perceive that as a serious problem. Even the leaders of many AFL-CIO member unions were unaware and unconcerned about the activities of Lovestone and Brown and of their CIA connections. Broadly speaking, this was the largest group, with a smaller group allied with Meany and supporting his policies and an even smaller group also knowing what was going on and opposing it, but lacking the strength to prevail against Meany. Walter Reuther, president of the UAW and a social democrat, and his brother Victor, who had been in charge of international activities in the UAW and CIO, repeatedly challenged Meany, seeking to get control of the International Department, but failed and eventually were isolated. Carew documents this struggle in detail.

The Reuther camp also failed to involve its own rank and file sufficiently in international issues. When it finally tried to do so, it was too little and too late, so that the struggle remained one between top leaders assisted by experts, a situation always more favorable to the right wing of labor. In retrospect, the question arises whether the merger in 1955 between the AFL and the CIO did in fact strengthen the American labor movement or simply enabled the conservative element in the AFL to assert its predominance over the merged organization.

A key characteristic of the international operations conducted by the AFL-CIO in alliance with the CIA was the confederation's close partnership with employers, and not just any employers but leading transnational corporations. In that respect they were fundamentally different from the cooperation

of trade unions with intelligence services in the United States—the OSS—and in other Allied countries during World War II. This earlier form of cooperation never compromised basic trade union interests and principles. The operations conducted within the framework of Cold War politics, on the other hand, set the stage for some particularly crass instances of class collaboration.

The American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD) is the most telling example, although not the only one. As Carew notes, AIFLD was founded in 1962 by the AFL-CIO as a joint tripartite venture with financial contributions principally from U.S. government agencies (including foundations that were CIA fronts) and contributions from 95 transnational corporations, a number of which were represented on its board. In addition to preventing “communist infiltration,” its stated purpose was more generally to promote a form of trade unionism in Latin America that would support the agenda of U.S. business and the U.S. government.

George Meany boasted that the largest corporations in the United States (Rockefeller, ITT, Kennecott, Standard Oil, Shell Petroleum, Anaconda) were supporting AIFLD, “although some of these companies have no connection whatsoever to U.S. trade unions,” and J. Peter Grace, chair of the AIFLD Board in addition to being chair of the W.R. Grace Corporation, said that AIFLD urges “cooperation between labor and management and an end to class struggle.” In a letter distributed to businesspeople seeking their support, Grace asserted “This is the first time that management and labor have voluntarily joined forces to launch and support an operation which recognizes the capitalistic and private enterprise system.”

The companies involved in AIFLD were of course companies that were known to Latin American unions of most political tendencies as bitter enemies. The active participation of AIFLD staff and graduates from its training courses in the overthrow of the Goulart government in Brazil, and of the

Allende government in Chile, finally discredited AIFLD even among most AFL-CIO member unions. After the 1995 Convention of the AFL-CIO, where John Sweeney succeeded Lane Kirkland as president, AIFLD and three other regional institutes were abolished and replaced, in 1997, by the Solidarity Center.

In a sense, placing AIFLD in the context of the Cold War is misleading. The deeper agenda of U.S. policy, supported by the AFL-CIO under the presidency of Meany and Lane Kirkland, ostensibly to confront the Soviet Union and "Communism," was in fact a general war on the left, any left. Neither the government of Arbenz in Guatemala, nor of Goulart in Brazil, nor of Allende in Chile, was "Communist"—they were merely not repressive of the trade unions, including unions with a Communist leadership. And, of course, they threatened the interests of U.S. business by nationalizing some of their assets. All of them were succeeded by brutal military dictatorships, which suppressed the trade union movement irrespective of political affiliations. What the AFL-CIO was supporting was, in effect, a class war by the leading world power of the time against the international working class, a most outrageous betrayal of basic trade union principles.

If anyone had any doubts about this, the U.S. intervention in the civil war in the Dominican Republic in 1965 should have been an eye opener—and it did open some eyes. One of the longest dictatorships of the interwar period ended in May 1961 with the assassination of Rafael Trujillo, dictator of the Dominican Republic since 1930, by a group of military officers. After a short period of political turmoil, democratic elections were held in December 1962, which brought Juan Bosch to the presidency. Bosch, a democratic socialist and leader of the Dominican Revolutionary Party, the leading left party, proceeded to decree a new constitution. This was met with the immediate hostility of the right, which in September 1963 staged a military *coup d'état* overthrowing the left government and forcing Bosch into exile. This in turn was

met by a massive popular uprising demanding the restoration of constitutional democracy and the return of Juan Bosch. A civil war developed and, when it became clear that the left would win, U.S. President Lyndon Johnson ordered the intervention of the U.S. military (Marines and Army units) in April 1965. Eventually 42,000 American troops occupied the country. New elections were held under the U.S. occupation, and the right-wing candidate, Joaquín Balaguer, won. The rationale for the U.S. military intervention and occupation was totally unsubstantiated fears of "foreign influences," meaning Cuba. Bosch was a *democratic* socialist and as such an opponent of Stalinism in its Cuban or any other form.

Was there no opposition to any of the AFL-CIO policies from other members of the ICFTU, which did not necessarily share all of its positions? There was indeed, and Carew documents at length the tensions that developed, which led to the replacement of three ICFTU general secretaries (Jacobus Oldenbroek, Omer Bécu, and Harm Buiter) and to the temporary disaffiliation of the AFL-CIO. The issue was always the degree of hostility toward Communist organizations, which Meany kept suspecting was insufficient on the part of other ICFTU affiliates.

Another source of opposition, little known and never until now thoroughly researched, developed in some of the International Trade Secretariats (ITS), currently known as Global Union Federations. This will be an important theme in the second volume that Carew is planning, covering the 1970s and 1980s. Contrary to the ICFTU, which had largely abandoned its traditional ideological basis in social democracy and had in practice adopted anti-Communism as a substitute—thus sharing political ground with the AFL-CIO—some ITSs adopted a different approach: the defense of trade union independence against all threats, regardless of the political camps where they originated. The Communist control of labor organizations in the Soviet Union, its satellites and allies and the CIA

control of unions in the West were thus seen as equal threats, and one could not be credibly fought without also fighting the other. Another aspect of their position was an affirmation of political independence from the ICFTU.

Three ITSs in particular, the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF), the International Chemical Workers (ICF), and the International Union of Food and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF), defended this approach in the 1960s. This was mainly due to the influence of three persons, Dan Benedict, IMF assistant general secretary; Charles Levinson, ICF general secretary; and Dan Gallin, assistant to IUF General Secretary Juul Poulsen. Benedict and Gallin were members of the Independent Socialist League (ISL), a radical socialist organization in the United States, which Gallin had joined as a student in the United States originating a split in the American Trotskyist movement led by Max Shachtman (hence "Shachtmanites").

The ISL held that the USSR was in no sense a "workers' state" but a new form of class society, which Shachtman called "bureaucratic collectivism." Therefore the labor movement and left had to fight on two fronts: capitalism and this new society, both based on the exploitation and oppression of labor. This position became known as Third Camp Socialism and became the political basis of how the IMF and IUF positioned themselves. Levinson, with a different political background, had arrived at the same conclusions.

However, Benedict lost his bid to become elected IMF general secretary at the IMF Congress of 1974, against Herman Rebhan, also a former Shachtmanite but who had joined the AFL-CIO camp, despite broad support. Rebhan was elected with seven million votes from just three countries: Germany, Japan and all U.S. unions but one, even including Victor Reuther, for personal reasons. The whole rest of the world supported Benedict but only reached four million votes.

Levinson became vulnerable because of administrative mistakes that were seized upon by the right-wing unions in the ICF and had to resign as ICF general secretary at the following ICF Congress. Gallin alone survived because the two principal U.S. affiliates of the IUF, the Amalgamated Meat Cutters led by Pat Gorman and the United Packinghouse Workers led by Ralph Helstein, representing together a very large majority of the U.S. membership, were both opponents of Meany and of his international policies. Gallin was elected IUF general secretary 1970 and reelected at each following congress without opposition until his retirement in 1997.

It should be noted that the exposure in the late 1960s of CIA activities in the American labor movement, by publications such as *Ramparts* (New Left radicals) and *New Politics* (Third Campists), discussed at length by Carew, at no point involved any participation or influence of Communist organizations, in the United States or internationally. The Communists were entirely absent from the controversy before it became public and covered in the mainstream daily press, to the point where some were wondering whether they had even been aware of the issue. In that sense, this story is not really a part of the Cold War, as it remained internal to one of its camps. After it entered the public domain, the CPUSA of course weighed in with its own comments. However, what the story really illustrates is the capacity of a free trade union movement, where critical investigation and controversy is accepted as a natural function of democracy, to clean its own house. As for the AFL-CIO, decades of depoliticization and uncritical association with various U.S. government services undoubtedly contributed to the decline of its influence in national and international affairs.

For years American trade unionists have been calling for AFL-CIO files covering the murky dealings of the Cold War years to be opened and for a full accounting of what really was taking place. Carew's book, which covers the years 1945 to 1970, has

gone a long way to facilitate the latter, and for that the labor movement generally should be grateful. A promised second volume covering the final two decades of the Cold War should complete the task and will be widely anticipated.

Notes

1. The USSR and the countries under its occupation and control in Eastern Europe and (before 1964) also China, later Vietnam, North Korea. and Cuba.
2. The World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) was founded in Paris in 1945 to replace the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU). dissolved the same year. Its membership included the former members of the IFTU and the trade union organizations of the Soviet bloc, reflecting the World War II alliance between the USSR and the Western Allies. By 1949 it had become clear that the USSR sought to control the organization, and the former IFTU affiliates left to form the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). The trade union centers of Yugoslavia and China also eventually disaffiliated, leaving the USSR in unchallenged control of the organization. After the collapse of the USSR much of WFTU activity was conducted from Havana. Its headquarters were moved in 2006 from Prague to Athens, where its secretariat is held by PAME, the Communist fraction in the Greek Confederation of Labour (GSEE).
3. For example, *Where Were You Brother? – an account of trade union imperialism*, by Don Thomson and Rodney Larson (War on Want: London, 1978).
4. Also by Anthony Carew: *The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions*, Marcel van der Linden, Anthony Carew, Michel Dreyfus, Geert and van Goethem, eds. (Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2000); *Walter Reuther* (Manchester University Press, 1993); *Labour Under the Marshall Plan:*

The Politics of Productivity and the Marketing of Management Science (Manchester University Press, 1989);
The Lower Deck of the Royal Navy 1900-1939: The Invergordon Mutiny in Perspective (Manchester University Press, 1983).

5. The "Left Opposition" was constituted by the followers of Leon Trotsky, first in the Soviet Union in 1929, then internationally, when Trotsky founded the Fourth International in 1938.