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American Labour's Cold War Abroad: From Deep Freeze to Détente, 1945-1970 by Anthony Carew: A Review Essay

Abstract

With Anthony Carew's new book, we are much closer to having a definitive empirical history of US Labor's foreign policy operations across this 25-year period, including the AFL's, the CIO's, and the AFL-CIO's foreign operations between 1945 and 1970. Based on extensive archival research and personal interviews by a careful and extremely meticulous scholar, we now have more details than all-but-a-few specialists may want to know. While not the first book to cover this subject, nor particular aspects of this subject, Carew's intervention adds greatly to what we know and, in a number of ways, re-establishes the groundwork from which future works on this subject must build.

Keywords

Labor, AFL-CIO, Foreign Policy

Cover Page Footnote

Kim Scipes is a Professor of Sociology at Purdue University Northwest in Westville, Indiana, USA. His latest book is an edited collection, "Building Global Labor Solidarity in a Time of Accelerating Globalization" (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), and his writings (many linked to on-line articles) can be found at <https://faculty.pnw.edu/kim-scipes/publications/#2>.

With Anthony Carew's new book, we are much closer to having a definitive empirical history of US Labor's foreign policy operations across this 25-year period, including the AFL's, the CIO's, and the AFL-CIO's foreign operations between 1945 and 1970. (A second volume is apparently in progress.) Based on extensive archival research and personal interviews by a careful and extremely meticulous scholar--he visited 12 different archives in the US, Canada, the UK and Belgium, with multiple sets of files examined in many of them; conducted interviews with 39 different informants (a few more than once); and utilized six interviews by other researchers--we now have more details than all-but-a-few specialists may want to know. While not the first book to cover this subject, nor particular aspects of this subject, Carew's intervention adds greatly to what we know and, in a number of ways, re-establishes the groundwork from which future works on this subject must build.

While it will be elaborated below, Carew definitively establishes four themes: (1) that US Labor's foreign policy comes from *within* the labor movement, albeit limited to top officials; (2) that this foreign policy was a labor imperialist one (my term, not his), where the needs and/or analyses of American labor foreign policy leaders prevailed over those of "allies," establishing clientelistic relations (patron-client) instead of the solidaristic relations (equal to equal) they rhetorically exalted; (3) that Labor worked extensively with, and at times was heavily funded by, the US Government's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) over several years (i.e., that it was a systematic and not a one-off relationship); and (4) that it was undemocratic, being neither reported to, nor accountable to, rank and file members of the US labor movement, nor even to most trade union leaders. It is a devastating account of the top-down business unionism developed within US labor and projected around the world.

Carew establishes the importance of his research in the first paragraph of his Introduction:

The book is about American trade unions and how their efforts in the international field during the Cold War helped decisively to shape our modern world. Today, when the strength of organized labour is much diminished, it requires an effort of memory to recall that, for many decades, trade unions in America and Europe were a substantial force in national politics, whose views on matters of foreign and defense policy, no less than domestic affairs, had to be listened to by governments. Organized labour was a key player throughout the years of ideological confrontation between the Cold War East and West--here a contributor to cold-war antagonisms, bringing the Cold War into the heart of trade union practice, there a vocal critic of dangerous cold-war initiatives by governments, but never a bystander. Indeed, understanding the role played by organized labour is essential to understanding the course and social dimension of the Cold War (p. 3).

What Carew has done is identify key players in US labor's Cold War project--most importantly, Jay Lovestone, Irving Brown, George Meany and Walter Reuther--and exhaustively mine their respective and related archives. Thus, we get to understand their thinking in general, and especially between both Lovestone and Brown but also Meany and Reuther. Additionally,

we get accounts of how their thinking respectively developed in relation to labor leaders in European countries, the ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions) overall, and among a few other labor leaders around the world.

The correspondence of Lovestone and Brown--both former members of the Communist Party and life-long Leninists--is incredibly rich. Secrecy, deceit and manipulation was second nature to them. Lovestone, who had been the national leader of the Communist Party before he ran "afoul" of Stalin, turned into a rabid anti-communist, with Brown his acolyte but "enforcer." Carew writes:

As the archival records amply show, it was Lovestone and Brown who dominated the scene, setting out the information, ideas and strategies that essentially fixed the agenda for the AFL-CIO and its activities abroad. But beyond being significant 'players', Lovestone and Brown were also major chroniclers of events through their extensive correspondence and reportage (5).

More appropriate "informers" could not be found for examining US labor activities during this period.

Where we get most new information is in the activities of the "Free Trade Union Committee" (FTUC), which operated primarily in Western Europe in the late 1940s-early 1950s. This was the AFL's independent organization, headed by Lovestone and staffed by Brown, and which worked closely with the organization that became the US's CIA (Central Intelligence Agency). Carew provides detailed information on their efforts in Finland, France, Italy and Greece--some of it previously known, but a considerable part that was new. All of this was conducted under particularly George Meany's "guidance" so as to undermine the global trade union confederation, the WFTU (World Federation of Trade Unions), which was established by the US's CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations), the British TUC (Trades Union Congress) and the Soviet Union's AUCCTU (All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions) in 1945.

The WFTU grew out of the successful global fight against Nazism, and was intended to give working people and their organizations a unified voice for peace and for social and economic justice in post-World War II global affairs. The AFL leadership on foreign affairs (Lovestone and Brown, supported and encouraged by Meany) opposed any efforts to work with the Communists (in the USSR or elsewhere) in any manner, and decided to "blow apart" the WFTU; ultimately, they succeeded. Through events *inside* the CIO (that Carew does not report in any detail), the CIO leadership expelled 11 affiliated unions in 1949-50, claiming they were dominated by "the left," afterwards enabling the CIO leadership to shift further rightwards politically, and then to withdraw the CIO from the WFTU. Following, the British TUC left the WFTU as well, and joined with the AFL and the CIO to create the ICFTU (Intercontinental Confederation of Free Trade Unions) in late 1949.

Thus, AFL and then AFL-CIO efforts were conducted to vigorously pit the "free trade unionism" of the ICFTU against the state-dominated WFTU, which was ultimately controlled by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. And, as Carew establishes conclusively, the American labor leaders worked closely with US governmental figures and often turned to the CIA for money to advance their various projects. [CIA funding ended in 1958; governmental funding increased dramatically with the development of AIFLD (American Institute for Free Labor Development) in Latin America in the early 1960s and expanded thereafter.]

However, adding more complexity, over time, the AFL-CIO leaders came to disdain most of the European labor leaders of the ICFTU. The AFL-CIO leaders felt that the Europeans, whose politics were “social democratic,” were insufficiently anti-colonial in the struggle against Western colonialism in Africa. [A point not drawn out by Carew was AFL-CIO leaders’ motivation; arguably, they did not really care about Africa or its peoples, but sought to dominate these it could reach, so it could use them in their global war against “communism.”] Thus, ultimately, not only did the AFL-CIO leadership fight against the Communists, but they also fought against the social democrats of the ICFTU--and their American allies, Walter and Victor Reuther of the United Auto Workers (UAW)--thus bringing these struggles into the AFL-CIO’s Executive Board, the highest governing body of the organization between national conventions.

Carew takes this incredibly complex, but very important, set of processes and presents how they developed over the 1945-70 period. Ultimately, the AFL-CIO left the ICFTU in 1969, dissatisfied that union affiliates of national trade union centers that were members of the ICFTU were developing links to unions and labor centers behind the “Iron Curtain,” and upset that the ICFTU leaders were unwilling to try to stop them.

The strength of the book--and where it is authoritative--is in detailing the struggles by the AFL-CIO leadership against Communists and the unionism they extolled globally. This certainly includes details of their interactions and funding with the CIA. Thus, by following Lovestone, Brown and Meany’s activities in detail, Carew produces an account that far exceeds any other account to date and, I believe, will remain unsurpassed.

This, however, leads to a serious weakness: if Lovestone and Brown both are not seriously involved--as in AFL-CIO activities in Latin America--then the account is much less authoritative. [Following Brown, who was integrally involved in AFL-CIO activities in Africa and became the first director of the African American Labor Center in 1964, adds important details of these activities--including close connections with Joseph Sese Seko Mubutu of the Congo (later Zaire), a ruthless, incredibly corrupt and long-serving dictator--but without the authoritative nature of the rest of the book; Lovestone was not integrally involved.] For example, while there is a section on the founding of AIFLD (American Institute of Free Labor Development) in Latin America, there is nothing on the AFL’s preceding involvement in the overthrow of the democratically-elected government of Guatemala (in 1954), and very little on its involvement subsequently in the overthrow of the democratically-elected government in Brazil (1964); their operations helping to overthrow the democratically-elected government in Chile (1972-73) are beyond the parameters of the period under consideration.

The book also has all-but-no discussion of the AFL-CIO’s position regarding the war in Vietnam. Meany, et. al., strongly supported the American war. Yet support for the war was anathema to most labor leaders around the world, and the AFL-CIO lost no little respect because of its’ associated position. At the same time, an anti-war movement emerged within US labor, causing internal conflict and, to no small effect, resulted in the Reuther-led UAW disaffiliating from the AFL-CIO in 1968.

Finally, there was no discussion of the lack of informing/discussing/considering the position and interests of rank and file members regarding AFL-CIO foreign policy and operations. In Carew’s telling, there was nothing to show on this issue.

In short, to focus on Lovestone and Brown was a crucial decision, and it is doubtful that a more complete understanding of the events they were intimately involved in will be developed. The same thing cannot be said, unfortunately, in the areas and events in which they were not

intimately involved. Nonetheless, a stunning, authoritative account of the former, and useful information about the latter.

The above comments relate to the empirical research; it is time to discuss the analysis of such. Issues that affect anyone working in this field, however, must be presented and discussed.

The biggest issue is the larger political-economic-social context of such a study. Implicit throughout Carew's work is an acceptance of the US's efforts to dominate the post-World War II world, and especially efforts to undercut or undermine similar efforts when carried out by the Soviet Union or its allies. Now, while many of us might agree that it was better that the United States was successful in its efforts and that it was good that the Soviets were thwarted, nonetheless, we must recognize that the goal of the United States' elites were to dominate the world. This was not "natural," "God given," nor "pre-ordained"; it was the result of conscious political discussion and decisions by the dominant elites in the United States who controlled--directly or indirectly--the US Government during the war and thereafter. In short, US foreign policy was a social construction, and should always be recognized as such. Thus, for social researchers, we must problematize US foreign policy and efforts to fully develop a US Empire through efforts to dominate the world instead of accepting them as a "given" or "natural" (see McCoy, 2017).

This problematization of US foreign policy in relationship to the Soviet Union is especially important. The US elites have demonized the Soviet policies since 1945 with no effort to understand how the world looked to them at the end of World War II. Their country had been invaded three times from the West in less than 150 years--by Napoleon in early 1800s; by the West (including the United States) in 1918 and 1919 after the Bolshevik Revolution; and by the Nazis in 1941-45, and in the immediate preceding years, the Soviet Union had lost over 27 *million* dead and suffered incalculable devastation of the Western third of their country--and they were determined not to let it happen again. (Had the US been invaded by Mexico even once, any US president would have done all he or she could do to prevent its reoccurrence.) This recognition is not to excuse what they did in post-war Eastern Europe, but to at least put in an understandable, rational context; the Soviet leadership was not the irrational "evil empire" that we been incessantly warned about, but were addressing a crucial national security "problem" facing their nation. They can be criticized/denounced for how they approached this problem, but the necessity for them of doing this makes perfect sense.

This need to problematize also applies specifically to the labor movement. The trade unionism espoused and encouraged by Meany and his associates, likewise, was a social construction. As I conclusively established in my Ph.D. dissertation--currently under consideration for publication--there was an alternative, arguably a better form of trade unionism, that had emerged prior to the establishment of the CIO and which later challenged business unionism inside of the CIO (Scipes, 2003, and see Scipes, 2014). Business unionism, and especially Meany's form of business unionism, was not the only way forward, and not even the best way forward. Again, it must be problematized, rather than accepted as normal.

Where this comes together is in uncritically accepting the AFL's, CIO's, ICFTU's, AFL-CIO's and the UAW's (United Auto Workers') "Western" view of the world. Supposedly, their overall conception is that of "free trade unionism," and that it was better than that of the "Eastern" Soviet Union. The West's labor leaders denigrated the unionism of the East,

condemning it for being controlled by the state or government. This was counterposed by the “free” trade unionism of the West, where workers got to democratically develop their own form of unionism without outside interference of the state or government. If one limits “outside interference” to that of a state or government, then they have a strong case.

However, if they see trade unionism being developed by their “leaders” without significant consultation and ultimate approval from their members, and where their leaders work with and seek financing from outside forces without the informed consent of their members--and here I’m explicitly thinking from the “intelligence community,” and mostly by the CIA, but also later from the US Agency for International Development (US AID)--then the issue of “outside interference” in any form must be included, and not just limited to outside interference from a “state” or “government.” Thus, whether Western unionism is better or no worse than Eastern unionism becomes an empirical question that can be addressed, rather than an “essential” finding that cannot be questioned.

Implied in the above is acceptance of the AFL-CIO or any other Western labor organization intervening in the internal affairs of other labor organizations, whether in Western Europe or particularly in the “developing” world.

In fact, it is the ultimate irony (not a strong enough term) that the AFL-CIO and at least some of its Western allies engaged in the exact same behaviors to defeat their so-called “enemies” -- lack of internal popular democratic organizational behaviors, secrecy, as well as secretly seeking/accepting governmental financial support without knowledge of their members-- that were the “reasons” they gave as to why Eastern union needed to be opposed in the first place! Did I mention this was ironic?

This means, altogether, that rather than accepting the business unionism of the AFL or the CIO, or the merged organization, as natural, we need to problematize them, asking if this was the best way forward. It also means valuing those studies that have done such.

For example, my study, *AFL-CIO’s Secret War against Developing Country Workers: Solidarity or Sabotage?* (Scipes, 2010), did not even get a mention in Carew’s references, nor were the issues it raised addressed. More irony here: although not using the same terminology, Carew’s empirical evidence concretely supports all but one of my major claims: that the US labor leaders believed that the United States *should* dominate the world, and that they worked to ensure its success; that this labor foreign policy came from forces *internal* to the labor movement, and not from *external* sources (US Government, State Department, CIA) as previous studies had claimed; that the AFL-CIO leadership had operated to overthrow democratically-elected governments (e.g., Brazil in 1964), and that the AFL-CIO leadership had supported dictatorships (Mobutu of Zaire in addition to others that I had named); and that US labor leaders hid all of this from rank and file members of the AFL-CIO (and even most union leaders), acting in their name but behind their backs.

So while I had sketched out a picture of the beast from the early 1900s to 2007, Carew has now colored in that part covering the years 1945-1970.

The one thing Carew did not do in this volume is that he did not and could not confirm that these same processes had continued post 1970, as I have claimed (Scipes, 2010). That is ok: we now have a Ph.D. dissertation covering the activities of the Solidarity Center from 2002-2009 (Bass, 2012); we have another showing the impact of the challenges to AFL-CIO foreign policy

on unionism in Latin America (Collombat, 2011); plus, I know of two works currently in progress looking at AIFLD. Plus, it goes further within the global labor movement: a Ph.D. dissertation from Canada similarly examines and finds wanting the foreign policy and operations of the Canadian Labour Congress (Nastovski, 2016). And there may be more in the pipeline.

We also have a peer-reviewed study, examining AFL-CIO leaders' overall activities since 1980, which shows that the energy devoted by the AFL-CIO toward foreign affairs has not been matched by interest in domestic affairs, hurting workers in the United States (see Scipes, 2017).

In short, we have multiple studies conclusively establishing the foreign policy processes of the AFL and subsequently, the AFL-CIO; this book by Anthony Carew being the most detailed for the years covered. These studies have established the labor imperialism of the US labor movement; shown that it has been carried out to support the political program of the AFL-CIO leadership; and that it has not been democratically approved by AFL-CIO members or even most leaders, as the leadership has been acting behind our backs but acting in our name. And we have arguments that this has hurt US workers in addition to workers in most of the countries in which they have intervened.

Eventually, this lack of internal democracy and all that has ensued is going to have to be confronted by the members and lower-level leaders of the AFL-CIO. We cannot have a democratic labor movement at home, and an anti-democratic labor movement overseas--this must be replaced with a labor movement that operates democratically both at home and abroad.

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- The most complete listing of works on AFL-CIO foreign policy that I know of is on my "Contemporary Labor Issues" Bibliography, on-line for free, with links to many original articles, at <https://faculty.pnw.edu/kim-scipes/contemporary-labor-issues-bibliography/#AFL-CIOForeignOperations>.