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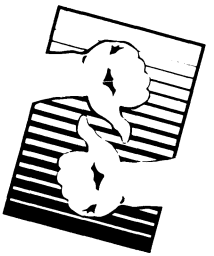

Beyond the Cold War

New Directions for Labor Internationalism

■ *Paul Garver*

In 1985 the Pittsburgh labor movement held its first Labor Day Parade in many years. Organized around the slogan "Put America Back to Work: Buy American-Made Products," the most popular float portrayed a brawny American steelworker smashing a Japanese-made car and its buck-toothed passengers.

The collapse of the steel industry in the 1980s was experienced as a foreign invasion in the landlocked river valleys of Western Pennsylvania. As imports of foreign steel rose, steelworkers joined the companies in appealing for protection from the "invasion," and the appeals sometimes had an ugly chauvinist edge.

But about the same time as our revival of Labor Day parades, other trends began to appear in the local labor movement. By the mid-1980s it had become evident that the only flag U.S. Steel (now USX) saluted was the dollar (or its foreign equivalent) and that Pittsburgh's own Mellon Bank preferred to finance steelmaking in Brazil rather than in the Mon Valley. Steelworkers and other unionists began to question whether American companies were committed to the patriotic "Americanism" that was as traditional in these valleys as mining coal and making steel. United Steel-

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workers (USWA) literature for the 1988 elections, for example, heavily emphasized that "unfair foreign imports are stealing our jobs," but blamed big corporations and Republican policies rather than "foreigners." Foreign *workers*, USWA President Lynn Williams emphatically explained, are to be considered allies, not enemies.

The USWA also recently endorsed the campaign of the International Metalworkers Federation to treat abuse of workers' rights as an unfair trading practice. Through the Metalworkers Federation, the USWA and other U.S. affiliates like the UAW, IUE and IAM are assisting the consolidation of strong federations of metalworkers in South Korea, South Africa and Brazil.

This is just one indication that we in the American labor movement are beginning to recognize that for the long haul, international labor solidarity will be more effective than flag-waving and foreigner-bashing. The major "comparative advantage" in the Third World, for example, is low wages and the repression of labor unions. Either U.S. wages are reduced towards the level of Korea or Brazil, as Goodyear Executive Vice-President Stanley Mikelick has suggested, or strong union organization in the Third World will raise compensation toward "First World" levels. There is no permanent alternative in the global workplace.

I approach international labor issues as a citizen residing in Pittsburgh, an occasional teacher of labor economics for labor leadership courses, and as contract director for an SEIU public sector local in Western Pennsylvania. In all these capacities, I have seen in the 1980s a gradual awakening of interest in and concern for the interlocked fate of workers and communities in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world. There is increasing recognition that the world we must function in is being shaped by a global assembly line, controlled by a few hundred giant transnational corporations. And there is a growing realization that *international labor solidarity* is essential for confronting these corporations.

Achieving real solidarity across national borders and around the globe is a difficult undertaking, one which little in our experience has prepared us for. Language barriers, differences in cultures and political traditions, very different styles of unionism—all these make simple communication, let alone real understanding of foreign workers' interests and concerns, difficult. Unfortunately, the AFL-CIO's official agency for helping us sort through these difficulties—the Department of International Affairs (DIA)—is not much help in doing so. In fact, as I argue here, the DIA is often an obstacle to building real solidarity.

After making this case, I will make some suggestions for how

U.S. unions can move toward solidarity by avoiding the DIA structure—through direct participation in the International Trade Secretariats (ITSs), like the Metalworkers Federation mentioned above, and through forming "sister union" relationships with relevant unionists in other countries. But, eventually, the DIA must be opened up to reflect the broad and diverse interests of labor's rank-and-file rather than the narrow sectarian face it has shown the world for the past several decades.

U.S. Labor's Foreign Service

As the rest of us were focused on bargaining contracts and processing grievances, often not seeing much beyond our own workplace, employer and local community—the AFL-CIO's Department of International Affairs developed into labor's official "foreign service."

The international activities of labor's foreign service have been oriented toward fostering pro-U.S. labor organizations in the Third World, and to opposing labor organizations seen as hostile to U.S. interests. In much of the world, the DIA and the regional Institutes it coordinates are viewed simply as agents of the U.S. government. Rumors of various DIA agencies and individuals being connected with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) are vigorously denied by DIA officials, and little evidence of such connections has ever been produced.

But the DIA's independence from the government is often questioned because the vast majority of the DIA's budget comes from U.S. government sources like the Agency for International Development, the U.S. Information Agency and the tax-based National Endowment for Democracy. These government-related funds amounted to almost 98% of the DIA's $29.4 million budget in 1987.

Despite this overwhelming dependence on government monies, as a voluntary organization the DIA and its Institutes are not subject to congressional oversight nor to the Freedom of Information Act. As a result, no detailed public record exists of how this money is spent. Most AFL-CIO union members, whose dues pay about $700,000 toward DIA activities, know very little about those activities.

The vast majority (about 75%) of the DIA's budget is directed toward Third World countries through three regional Institutes:

—The American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), which is directed at Latin America and is the largest and most active of the Institutes.

—The African-American Labor Center (AALC).
—The Asian-American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI).

Throughout its history, the DIA has reflected a very hard-line Cold War anti-communist view of the world, one which tended to see events exclusively through the lens of the Great Power conflict between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. As Carl Gershman, the president of the National Endowment for Democracy, explained in his authoritative defense of labor's foreign service:

> "The central preoccupation of American labor in the field of foreign affairs . . . has been to mobilize democratic forces to counter the threat posed by totalitarianism . . . . Towards this end, labor has helped democratic trade unions in other countries develop the strength and ability to function effectively and to resist communist subversion . . . . It has also waged—often single-handedly—a vigorous campaign to expose the totalitarian nature of communism, thereby attempting to deny it the legitimacy it would gain through collaboration with free trade unions."

This preoccupation with fighting communist subversion naturally led to the practice of "shunning" any labor organization suspected of communist influence. Whatever value sign is put on this "central preoccupation" of anti-communism, it is a policy developed and hardened more than a generation ago in a different historical era, when a triumphant and economically dominant United States squared off with a militarily powerful but economically and socially primitive Soviet Union over the ruins of a prostrate Europe and Japan. The polarization of the world labor movement into a Soviet-dominated World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) and a U.S./European-led International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) inevitably followed the Cold War polarization of the superpowers. Both versions of "solidarity" were enlisted in the Cold War, corrupting both the rhetoric and practice of solidarity in the process.

The Soviet Union has rigidly controlled the WFTU, using it, for example, to stifle protests over the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The AFL-CIO left the ICFTU in the same year, disgruntled because of growing European labor contacts with Eastern Europe. As a result, the DIA developed its Third World programs in close cooperation with U.S. business and the U.S. government, and in isolation from ICFTU-affiliated unions in Europe and elsewhere. Though we rejoined the ICFTU in 1982, there remain wide differences between the AFL-CIO and most other "First World" ICFTU affiliates over U.S. policies in Central America and on whether

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to "shun" Soviet and Soviet-influenced trade unions.

The conflicting international labor activities of the AFL-CIO and the Soviet-sponsored WFTU have resulted in many countries with polarized, fragmented labor organizations incapable of exercising effective economic or political power. The most courageous and principled union leadership in the Third World rejects any ideological litmus test. In country after country, like South Africa, Brazil, Columbia, the Philippines, and Guatemala, the best union leaders refuse to become dependent on the agents of either superpower and stubbornly maintain their autonomy and non-alignment. As the world becomes more multi-polar, these union leaders are able to make diversified alliances with a number of national union movements. Sometimes ICFTU national federations provide support to unions being "shunned" by the DIA: the powerful Danish LO supports the Nicaraguan farmworkers; various Scandinavian unions give aid to Salvadoran unions that are outside the AIFLD-sponsored UNOC; and Australian and New Zealand ICFTU affiliates support federations outside the AAFLI-supported TUCP in the Philippines.

The current situation of workers in Hong Kong graphically demonstrates the growing irrelevance of East-West conflicts to unions in the global economy. Hong Kong's "economic miracle" has largely bypassed its working class, whose unions until recently were linked either to the pro-Taiwan TUC (an ICFTU affiliate) or to the pro-Red Chinese FTU, both of which concentrated on political propaganda rather than representing workers. As 1997 approaches when Hong Kong will revert to China, capitalist businessmen increasingly cooperate with the FTU, reassured by the the Beijing-controlled unions' pro-business stance in the "Special Economic Zones" on the mainland. Hong Kong workers, however, increasingly favor unions independent of both the discredited traditional federations and, with support and encouragement from international bodies like the International Union of Food Workers, are creating a burgeoning independent trade union movement. Obviously the AFL-CIO's AAFLI, which has

traditional connections with the TUC, cannot play a useful role in helping a genuinely independent union movement to root itself in Hong Kong.

AIFLD in El Salvador

Because DIA and the Institutes' policies in the Third World were developed more in cooperation with the U.S. government and U.S. business interests than in multilateral cooperation with other free trade unions, they have always been suspected of serving U.S. national interests more than genuine international labor solidarity. Nowhere is this more true than in Latin America, where AIFLD is a force to be reckoned with.

Unionists trained by AIFLD helped destabilize and overthrow democratically-elected reformist governments in Brazil in 1964 and in Chile in 1973, helping into power repressive military regimes that proceeded to dismantle all independent trade unions. Today AIFLD plays a major role in supporting the U.S. counter-insurgency program in El Salvador, despite substantial opposition within the American labor movement and from many European ICFTU-affiliated unions.

In October 1988 the ICFTU lodged a formal complaint with the United Nations' International Labor Organization (ILO) against the Salvadoran government for the repressive operations of the armed forces and paramilitary groups against labor unions. According to the ICFTU, rural workers affiliated with the AIFLD-sponsored UNOC were massacred by the Fifth Army Brigade on September 21, and 27 other trade unionists were killed, arrested or "disappeared" in September alone. The U.S.-based human rights group, Americas Watch, working with information supplied by the Human Rights Commission of the San Salvador Catholic Archdiocese, has documented numerous killings and "disappearances" of union leaders, largely (but not exclusively) from public sector unions in the militant UNTS labor federation which AIFLD opposes.

What was the response from AIFLD to the growing wave of savage union-busting in El Salvador? AIFLD furiously denounced Americas Watch and defended the Salvadoran government and the private businesses accused of repression. If death squads are unleashed against UNTS unionists who criticize the corruption of the military officers who run the Salvadoran telephone and electric utilities, they had it coming. Only "supporters of the guerrillas" would try to strike a public service.

The UNTS unions negotiate 77% of all union contracts in El

Salvador, according to the Salvadoran government itself. But according to AIFLD, they are not "genuine" unions, just guerrilla fronts. When UNTS unions strike for higher wages, benefits or health and safety, AIFLD claims, they are merely trying to destabilize a "democratic" government. The large majorities who chose UNTS unions over the feeble parallel unions supported by AIFLD are characterized as "dupes" of the guerrilla leaders.

For those of us within U.S. labor who put genuine international labor solidarity above the dictates of U.S. foreign policy, AIFLD's stance in El Salvador causes both sorrow and anger. In El Salvador, AIFLD is nothing more or less than an arm of the U.S. government. Funded by the State Department's Agency for International Development, its constant interference with and manipulation of Salvadoran labor unions has resulted in one shaky umbrella organization after another falling apart like a house of cards. AIFLD's current favorite, UNOC, replaces two earlier labor federations which it set up as "independent free trade unions," but then abandoned when these unions organized against the labor policies of the Salvadoran government.

When a union activist in El Salvador is arrested, killed or disappeared for his or her union activities, we should stand in solidarity, and not be distracted by alleged political connections or choice of labor federation. In fact, UNTS and UNOC unionists in El Salvador agree on more than they disagree. In September 1988 when a broad range of union leaders from both federations came together with religious and community representatives in a "National Debate" sponsored by the Archdiocese of San Salvador, they reached substantial agreement and signed a unity statement that rejects the entire logic of U.S. intervention in that country.

Despite the savage repression of labor in El Salvador, the DIA has opposed any review of Salvador's trade preferences and has instead attacked the credibility of Americas Watch. In contrast, the AFL-CIO has filed petitions for review of trade preferences on allegations of much more minor transgressions in other countries. In 1987, for example, it petitioned against Singapore on the grounds (true but trivial) that its dominant labor federation, NTUC, was politically close to the Singapore government. The NTUC, an ICFTU affiliate, angrily protested that the AFL-CIO had not bothered to consult with them before filing the petitions. In this case, as with El Salvador, real international labor solidarity is subordinated to a political agenda unilaterally decided by the DIA with little regard for the interests of foreign unionists and little input from the AFL-CIO's membership.

Is There Another Way for Labor?

In some important cases, the DIA is currently following a more pragmatic, multilateral approach that permits the creation of broader, more inclusive union formations.

COSATU and NACTU in South Africa have achieved wide legitimacy within U.S. and world labor while avoiding even the appearance of outside interference. The Chilean labor movement has created a new unified central organization with diverse ideological tendencies. In Guatemala unions from several political origins cooperate in a broad labor/popular coalition. These positive developments are clearly linked to the diminishing ideological appeal of both the American and Soviet versions of "labor solidarity." At a time when high-level Russian delegations are visiting Scandinavia to learn how to restructure labor unions and when independent trade unions are proving more attractive than party-controlled unions in Poland and Hungary, the Soviets have little to offer Third World unions materially or politically.

All this suggests that the present era is a good time for the AFL-CIO's foreign service to end its divisive operations in El Salvador, Nicaragua and the Philippines—operations which are heavily dependent on U.S. government money, closely aligned with narrow Reagan-Bush foreign policy goals, controversial within U.S. unions, and opposed by many of our labor allies within the ICFTU.

When we act in cooperation with the ICFTU and the International Trade Secretariats (ITSs), in areas of greater political

consensus, in areas of greater consequence in the global economy, we are more effective. By rejoining the ICFTU in 1982, we started to reduce our isolation in the world labor community. We should continue that process by consistently acting multilaterally through international labor organizations rather than as an instrumentality of the U.S. State Department.

If labor's foreign service has been over-committed to anti-communist interventions in the Third World, critics of the AFL-CIO's policies, like myself, have thus far been largely restricted to exposing those activities. Very few U.S. union members, even activists, know much about these obscure disputes or feel much of a stake in their outcome. What is needed are pragmatic, effective policies that materially advance the interests of U.S. workers in the era of the global workplace. Only when American unionists actually see such policies in action will this natural solidarity overcome the barriers of geography, language and parochialism.

Direct union-to-union contacts around workplace issues and common employers is the primary way that effective strategies and policies can be developed. Asking for assistance *from* foreign unions, instead of always assuming that only we have something to offer *to* them, is an essential step. Many unions have begun to do this in response to European transnational corporations operating in the U.S.

The Steelworkers, for example, made contact with the Swedish Metalworkers to complain about the Sweden-based transnational Electrolux's tactics in opposing a USWA organizing drive at a Tennessee microwave manufacturing plant. Though the Metalworkers were contacted too late to help win that particular campaign, the Swedish union has two members on Electrolux's board of directors and they have promised to oppose all anti-union activities by the U.S. subsidiary in future drives. Similarly, the Belgian SECTA, which represents workers at the Belgian transnational Delhaize, owner of Food Lion in the U.S., has begun a series of rolling strikes in Belgium to protest Food Lion's failure to recognize or negotiate with the United Food & Commercial Workers.

When the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers (ACTWU) was trying to organize a Virginia plant of the London-based Courtaulds Group, the newly formed clothing and textile workers union in South Africa supported the drive by instituting a complete overtime ban against two Courtaulds plants in South Africa. Another South African union struck a 3-M plant in South Africa in support of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers' effort to stop 3-M from closing its plant in Freehold, New Jersey.

A number of U.S. locals have established "sister union" relationships with beleaguered unions in El Salvador and Nicaragua, including those opposed by AIFLD. The national SEIU has a sister union relationship with two small independent black trade unions in South Africa. Such efforts have potential for the unfolding of mutual, reciprocal solidarity ties with Third World unions.

Such direct union-to-union contacts, while essential to beginning a process of building solidarity, are limited by their essentially ad hoc and case-by-case nature. As the ICFTU declared at its 1988 World Congress: "In an era of economic interdependence, unions need to be able to exert leverage across [many] international boundaries.... [They need] international organizations to translate the sentiment of solidarity into *a reliable system of mutual support*." (Emphasis added.)

The best mechanisms currently in place for evolving toward a "reliable system of mutual support" are the various industry-based International Trade Secretariats (ITSs), which are connected with the ICFTU but which are generally open to affiliation from "non-aligned" Third World unions as well. The more active ITSs have recently been establishing international networks of unions that represent workers at units of the same giant transnational corporation. The Metalworkers Federation has developed such a network for General Motors workers. The International Union of Food & Allied Workers has one for unions at Nestles, and the International Federation of Chemical, Energy and General Workers Unions has one for Hercules.

In addition to facilitating exchanges of information and experiences among unionists from many different countries, the ITSs are often able to effectively assist struggling Third World unions in situations where the AFL-CIO's regional Institutes have been unwilling or unable to become involved. Member unions of the COSATU black trade union federation of South Africa have affiliated with the appropriate ITSs, while refusing involvement with AALC for fear of getting involved in Cold War politics. Similarly independent unions in Central America and Asia achieve international labor connections through ITSs. The Food Workers ITS, for example, helped coordinate international labor support for the long struggle of the Coca-Cola workers in Guatemala, and it maintains an office in Guatemala that assists food sector unions regardless of ideological affiliations.

The potential of the ITSs to more rapidly develop channels for international labor solidarity remains limited by scant resources and very limited U.S. union knowledge of or involvement in their activities. Only two of the ITSs—the Food Workers and the

Chemical, Energy and General Workers—currently have permanent representatives in the U.S. Hopefully, more U.S. unionists will become involved through a conference several of the ITSs are sponsoring in July on "Fighting Union-Busting in the Global Economy."

Conclusion

If international labor solidarity is to move beyond a vague ideal, it must be fleshed out in practical and effective strategies like those being pursued by the ITSs. Actual concrete ties among local leaders and rank-and-file members in their daily struggles must be established across national borders.

This will not happen within U.S. labor unless a broad and diverse movement experiments with and develops grassroots approaches to international solidarity. The pursuit of solidarity is too vital to our survival and growth to remain the property of the DIA's government-financed anti-communist crusade. The DIA's single-minded Cold War has created suspicions about U.S. unionists around the world that make solidarity contacts abroad more complicated and difficult. At home the DIA's incessant and hysterical attacks on all critics of current DIA policies are a major obstacle to developing an integrated grassroots movement. Serious dialogue and open discussion must replace denunciations, red-baiting and innuendo if we are to find common ground within the U.S. labor movement.

My experience in my own union over the past several years makes me hopeful that such common ground is possible. After lengthy (and sometimes heated) discussions at the 1988 SEIU convention, we arrived at reasonable compromises on various resolutions concerning complicated international issues like El Salvador and Nicaragua. We also agreed on an approach that continues dialogue and discussion between conventions by establishing a representative standing International Affairs Committee that will make recommendations on specific issues to the SEIU Executive Board.

We hope that an approach that fosters sustained attention to international issues through rational dialogue and greater access to information will replace the sporadic swapping of angry charges and counter-charges that has often characterized the initial phases of what hopefully will become a widespread debate on how best to achieve international labor solidarity. The differences among us, at home and abroad, are not as deep as our need to stand united in the global workplace. ■