



**Andrew Battista: “Unions and Cold War Foreign Policy in the 1980’s: The National Labor Committee, the AFL-CIO, and Central America,” *Diplomatic History*, Volume 26, Issue 3 (Summer 2002): 419-451.**

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The Cold War period (1945-1992) coincides almost perfectly with the brief zenith and gradual decline of the organized labor movement in the United States. Not coincidentally, the same period also encompasses the reign of hardened cold warrior, George Meany over first the AFL (1952-1955) and then the AFL-CIO (1955-1970). He was followed by his handpicked successor, Lane Kirkland (1979-1995). Cold War issues served to divide and weaken the labor movement and prevented it from exhibiting the unity and strength that it needed throughout the period. Further, the AFL-CIO’s unequivocal support of United States Foreign Policy (USFP), in Vietnam and later in Latin America led the Federation to support right-wing oppression both domestically and overseas. Thus, the AFL-CIO was complicit in its own decline if not destruction-it is too early to tell if the Federation will recover. The AFL-CIO International Executive Board and advisors of the period share the blame with its presidents.

Andrew Battista’s excellent essay explores the activities of the rarely examined National Labor Committee in Support of Democracy and Human Rights in El Salvador (NLC), which opposed the AFL-CIO’s support for USFP in Central America. The NLC was an organization composed of some of the top leaders of national labor unions. By 1985, the NLC had twenty-five members from twenty-three unions. Membership was, with one exception, restricted to presidents of national unions. Most of these were chiefs of manufacturing unions-in other words, former CIO unions that had long opposed the top leadership of the AFL-CIO. Thus, though the Federation was formed in 1955, many ideological differences between the AFL and CIO remained.

The NLC was formed primarily to work against the AFL-CIO’s official support of the Reagan administration’s activities in El Salvador and Nicaragua. But a larger, if unarticulated, goal was to oppose the Cold War mentality that had plagued the nation and the AFL-CIO since at least the end of World War II. The NLC contended that Central America’s conflicts arose not from communist or Soviet subversion but rather long-term poverty and injustice. Further, labor unions and their leaders were often the target of right-wing oppression. Battista is correct in asserting that it was and is possible to be anticommunist while still opposing American foreign policy. Opposition to flawed government policy whether domestic or international does not equate to anti-Americanism and is indeed patriotic. This lesson was forgotten in the case of Vietnam and Latin America by the AFL-CIO leadership.

When Ronald Reagan took office in 1980, the nation was still smarting from its defeat in the Vietnam War. That war divided the country as no other conflict had since the Civil War. The divisions that arose over Vietnam in the years from 1964 through 1975 manifested themselves strongly in the American labor movement. After all, it was, in Christian Appy's words, a "Working Class War." The AFL-CIO, George Meany, et al, supported American policy in Vietnam during the Johnson and Nixon administrations, disregarding the growing opposition within the organization and among the American workers they claimed to represent. Meany believed a monolithic international communism was out to conquer the world and that it was the AFL-CIO's duty to involve itself in international affairs to help counter this threat. After Meany retired at 84 in 1979, Lane Kirkland maintained Meany's implacable Cold War policies and mentality. However, as Battista argues, by 1980, Americans, for the most part, realized that there was no communist monolith and the threat of the Soviet Union on the world stage was far less than originally imagined. The Reagan administration, in part to counter the dreaded "Vietnam Syndrome," revitalized the Cold War, once again envisioning a commie behind every tree and an "Evil Empire" out to destroy the world.

What is most difficult to comprehend is why an organization claiming to represent the interests of workers both nationally and internationally would make common cause with the most virulent anti-labor presidencies of the 20th Century, those of Nixon and Reagan. After all, it was Nixon that introduced the "Philadelphia Plan," a cynical attempt to race bait to divide and conquer the construction trades. One of Reagan's first actions in office was to break PATCO, the air traffic controller's union. In this he succeeded over the protests of a weak and ineffective AFL-CIO. Indeed, both Nixon and Reagan came to power partially because the Federation failed to adequately support the Democratic alternatives, particularly in the elections of 1972 and 1980. The labor movement in general and the AFL-CIO leadership in particular were so focused, and poisoned by the Cold War mentality that it turned inward. Thus, after World War II, the CIO purged many of the individuals that had created the organization in a move that can only be characterized as the revolution eating its children. Both the AFL and CIO, despite initial opposition, used the Taft-Hartley Act of 1948 to continue the purges while their leadership strengthened its stranglehold on the organizations. After the merger of 1955, the Federation forgot about social and economic justice for all workers and instead, under George Meany and Lane Kirkland, practiced a pernicious form of "business unionism." These issues are given a thorough, if polemical, treatment in Paul Buhle's *Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland, and the Tragedy of American Labor*, (Monthly Review Press, 1999).

Battista does an excellent job of describing the NLC's role and influence on both the AFL-CIO and USFP. His essay raises questions regarding union "democracy," the role (or total lack of it) of the rank and file in foreign policy decisions, and even the influence of internal dissent on union governing bodies at the national leadership level. The membership of the NLC was composed solely of presidents of national unions. Battista asserts that these leaders represented the will and interests of their members. The AFL-CIO's leadership always made the same claim. Finding the truth may be an impossible task. Given the weakened state of the union movement by the 1980s and beyond, it's

difficult to estimate the influence of the AFL-CIO on domestic and international politics and policies. The \$64,000 question for the new millennium might even be if the union movement matters at all in this age of internationally mobile capital and defeat after defeat for the union movement on both national and international stages. One encouraging fact is that current AFL-CIO president John Sweeney was a member of the NLC as president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). There is light at the end of the tunnel, but no one knows whether the train is coming or going.

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