



Jon V. Kofas, “U.S. Foreign Policy and the World Federation of Trade Unions, 1944-1948,” *Diplomatic History*, Volume 26, Issue 1 (Winter 2002): 21-60.

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Causation has long been the Holy Grail of historical research. An historian learns early that what separates this discipline from others is its appreciation of complexity and its willingness to acknowledge multicausal explanation for events, great and small. Often one constructs new interpretations that do not refute the importance of previously anointed factors in explaining an event, but rather attempt to add to the list of forces shaping history. Jon V. Kofas’s article examining the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) falls squarely in this tradition. He suggests that beyond the domestic factors that led to the decline of American trade unions after World War II, one must also look at how U.S. foreign policy, especially the Cold War, contributed to their atrophy.

Throughout the article, Kofas carefully traces how the WFTU’s initial promise rapidly faded in the hard light of the developing Cold War. The centrist and leftist trade unions that comprised the majority of the organization’s members felt proud of their contributions to the Allied victory and hoped to build on the goodwill they had fostered within their respective countries to secure a permanent voice in the policy process “from local government to the United Nations” (p. 21). But instead of cooperation and gratitude, the postwar era greeted them with suspicion and redbaiting. The U.S. Department of State had encouraged the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to join in the formation of the WFTU. Yet, during the same period, the department worked with the rival American Federation of Labor to undercut the organization through the creation of labor unions in Europe and Latin America that supported American economic and political hegemony (p. 21-22). As the Cold War intensified, the U. S. government became increasingly antagonistic to the WFTU, claiming it was a tool of Soviet foreign policy. Hostility toward the Marshall Plan from some member unions led to the CIO and the British Trade Union Congress (TUC) leaving the federation and by 1950 Soviet domination of the organization had become an undeniable fact.

While Kofas provides a detailed and well-documented account of the brief career of the united WFTU, one is left pondering the tale’s significance. At several points in the article, Kofas asserts that the WFTU would have disintegrated even without the effects of the Cold War because unions were too nationalistic to cooperate successfully and worldwide economic changes would have eventually weakened unions in the United States and elsewhere. He does, however, contend that the collapse of the WFTU and the flourishing of U.S. hegemony in the postwar era did have adverse effects on the development of strong trade unions in “Columbia, Peru, Greece, Turkey, Iran, the Philippines, South Korea, South Vietnam, South Africa, and other countries receiving U.S. economic and military aid” (p. 60). But this claim largely falls outside the bounds of

his study, which focuses on the years from 1944 to 1948 when the CIO and TUC were still founding members of the WFTU. Was the collapse of transnational trade union cooperation inevitable, or was the WFTU a lost opportunity for international labor organizing? Did the U.S. government's scheming with the AFL cause the WFTU's demise or merely bring it to a quicker end? One is ultimately left to conclude that the trade union cooperation would have never succeeded, but the United States would have made sure that it failed even if it had merely the slimmest chance of success. The U.S. government could not afford to let a strong challenger to its globalist economic policies emerge and therefore worked to undermine the WFTU from its inception.

Although Kofas illuminates the existence of foreign policy motivations for U.S. hostility to the WFTU, he often neglects the domestic context for American policy. The 1930s and 1940s loom large as especially auspicious times for labor unions in the United States, but the grand scope of American history reveals a much less promising pattern. The courts and government at every level have most commonly been hostile to labor unions. The New Deal seemed to reverse that trend, but its effects proved temporary. As Alan Brinkley argues in *The End of Reform* (1995), the Roosevelt recession of 1937-1938 had already threatened labor union gains prior to World War II. Conservatives in both parties felt empowered after the 1938 election left a greatly reduced New Deal contingent in both houses of Congress. The war placed a premium on labor peace but many conservatives favored the stick over the carrot as the Smith-Connally Act (1943), passed over FDR's veto, clearly illustrated. The law mandated a thirty-day "cooling off" period in non-war plants before strikes could be implemented, empowered the president to seize war plants where workers went out on strike, established criminal penalties for anyone encouraging war workers to strike, and made union contributions to political campaigns illegal. Although the law had little effect on unions, it signaled that the political tide had begun to turn against unions prior to the onset of the Cold War. The Taft-Hartley Act (1947) in many ways was just a peacetime version of Smith-Connally. The Cold War may have eased its passage but it does not wholly explain its genesis. Other weapons in the conservative arsenal also predated the war, including the House Un-American Activities Committee, first formed in 1938, which worked so ardently to prove communist influence on the CIO in the 1940s and 1950s. One thus gets a sense that the 1930s and 1940s represent a brief reprieve from the otherwise uninterrupted hostility toward unions in the United States. The Cold War merely intensified this antipathy and gave union opponents a larger audience for its claims that labor leaders were communist sympathizers or dupes.

The WFTU seems to have foundered in the same waters as numerous other internationalist efforts in the postwar years, including the United World Federalists and the effort for international control of atomic energy. Many people believed that the war had so shook the world that great changes were possible. But ultimately, physical transformations were not matched by intellectual and political alterations and the postwar era contained as much continuity as change. The United States globalized its foreign policy after the war but it did not internationalize it--it wanted cooperation on its own terms, not alliances on the basis of equality. The Soviet Union also proved reticent to support international cooperation, preferring to construct a security zone along its

frontiers rather than trusting in international cooperation. That process also meant that the labor unions in Eastern Europe ceased to be independent entities, just as they had in the Soviet Union. The absence of a true civil society in the Soviet sphere of influence raises even more troubling questions about the viability of the WFTU even in the absence of U.S. antipathy. In the end, it would seem that nationalism, both among the unions and within the governments of their home states, stands as the dominant reason for the WFTU's failure and the ideological conflicts which the Cold War spawned merely hastened an inevitable outcome.

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