

# Labor's Foreign Policy Heads in a New Direction

By Tim Shorrock | August 11, 2005

Lost amidst the publicity about the breakup of the AFL-CIO at its convention last month were two events that, in their own ways, could point to a radically new foreign policy for American unions and workers.

The first was the convention's passage of a resolution placing organized labor squarely behind a rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq—the first time that the AFL-CIO has ever taken a public stance against an ongoing U.S. war. The significance of the resolution was slightly muted by the fact that the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Teamsters, and other members of the Change to Win Coalition that had just left the federation did not vote. But it sent the unmistakable message that labor is single-minded in its opposition to an illegal war that has now cost 1,800 American and countless Iraqi lives.

The resolution itself was a triumph of grassroots organizing, primarily by U.S. Labor Against the War, a coalition of unions and labor councils that has brought the concerns of Iraqi workers to scores of union halls across the country. The bridge between what has historically been a foreign policy chasm between conservative and radical unions was made possible by a slight change in wording concerning the speed of U.S. withdrawal, from “as soon as possible” to “rapidly.” This might seem like a small, semantic victory, pointed out *CounterPunch* labor correspondent Joann Wypijewski, “Until you consider the historic magnitude. From the floor, no one spoke against the resolution: not the building trades; not Tom Buffenbarger of the Machinists, who after 9/11 called for “vengeance,” not justice; not the American Federation of Teachers, which has typically held high the flame of intervention.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, noted Wypijewski, not a

single resolution was introduced seeking support for the war.

The second event unfolded on the conference floor in the waning hours of the convention, and went virtually unmentioned in the mainstream and left-wing press. This was an unsuccessful resolution, advanced by the California Federation of Labor with the support of a dozen other labor councils, calling on the AFL-CIO to make a thorough examination and public explanation of its foreign policy activities, from the Cold War to the present, and to “exercise extreme caution” about seeking or receiving money from instruments of U.S. foreign policy, particularly the National Endowment for Democracy and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Together, these two agencies account for more than 90 percent of the funds provided to the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS—aka the Solidarity Center), the AFL-CIO's foreign policy arm and the successor to four institutes that became notorious during the Cold War for working with USAID, the Labor Department, and the Central Intelligence Agency to manipulate and control union movements in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe.

## Unity and Trust Resolution

The debate behind the Unity and Trust resolution has been raging in earnest for several years. In 2002, several West Coast labor councils, citing the example of the AFL-CIO's



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involvement in Chile prior to the 1973 coup, demanded an explanation from the Sweeney administration and his International Affairs Department (IAD) about labor's past misdeeds, and sought to open a dialogue on the future direction of labor's foreign affairs.<sup>2</sup> The ramification of the debate became clear last June, when Sweeney—responding to a financial crisis partly brought on by the imminent departure of the Change to Win coalition of unions—announced it was eliminating the IAD altogether and transferring its director, Barbara Shailor, to run the Solidarity Center.

In effect, this meant that AFL-CIO unions would no longer be represented overseas by an independent arm of the federation, but by a government-funded organization that aligns its policies with the U.S. government. This, too, has received virtually no attention in progressive circles and blogs. But it should: as an institution based solely on government funds, the Solidarity Center lacks the legitimacy to represent U.S. unions at multilateral venues like the International Labor Organization, where policy is set by “tripartite” organizations representing states, business, and legitimate union federations. Moreover, global labor union coalitions that have worked with the AFL-CIO in the past, such as the International Transport Workers Federation, might well be suspicious of maintaining in their ranks a new organization that could not exist without its government largesse. After all, if the AFL-CIO can challenge the legitimacy of

state-run unions in China and Cuba at these venues, what's to stop a genuine labor federation from challenging the credentials of an ACILS delegation?

Sweeney's team may have grasped the logic of this situation only too well. Over the past three years, while saying little about its own programs, it has been mostly in a defensive crouch, fending off the demands for a full accounting

of the AFL-CIO's institutes around the world and defending its bungled attempts (using NED money) to fund the anti-government union federation in Venezuela that sought through illegal means to bring down the government of Hugo Chavez in 2002. Last spring, however, after it became clear that the Unity and Trust resolution would be presented to the convention, the Sweeney forces quietly began

floating their own resolution on international affairs to labor councils in Georgia, North Carolina, and other states. Essentially, they sought an official AFL-CIO blessing on the Solidarity Center and completely ignored the requests from a huge number of workers (the California federation represents a full one-sixth of union members nationwide) for either an open look at the past or a change in course in the future. Using bureaucratic techniques borrowed from the Lane Kirkland era, convention organizers—led by AFSCME President Gerald McAntee—allowed only a cursory debate on the subject and approved their own resolution—submitted by the AFL-CIO's executive

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council—by voice vote. A key section reads: “The Solidarity Center will continue to seek public funds, while at the same time it will work to diversify its funding base.”

The question now is, what will the unions who have left the AFL-CIO do in response? As the debate about labor’s future played out over the last year, with the SEIU and Teamsters pressing for a huge infusion of resources into direct organizing and the AFL-CIO arguing for equal focus on political campaigns, little was said by either side about foreign policy. It will be intriguing to see what, if any, attention is paid to the need for cross-border campaigns and an independent foreign policy center at the Change to Win coalition’s opening convention in September. The only indication of the coalition’s position is a short section on its website stating that the “central thrust” of labor’s international work “must be developing united strategies and actions” around multinational corporations and what the coalition calls the “Wal-Martization” of the global economy. According to one labor veteran now working with the SEIU, the breakaway unions will henceforth focus “on global trade union action against global companies, as opposed to either altruistic ‘solidarity’ or traditional ‘subversion’.”

There are plenty of contradictions, however, and neither the AFL-CIO nor Change to Win can claim the progressive mantle in international affairs. While the Solidarity Center was

promoting U.S. policies in Latin America and Africa as a client of NED and USAID, Teamster President James Hoffa was a member of the White House-backed Committee for the Liberation of Iraq, which was organized by the neoconservative think-tanks Project for the New American Century and the American Enterprise Institute to drum up public support for the 2003 invasion. Even as they criticize the AFL-CIO’s approach, the SEIU and other unions make many of their international contacts through ACILS—although Solidarity Center staff, fearing retribution from their funders, play down any work that could be publicly construed as anti-corporate. And in 2002, SEIU President Andy Stern bucked strong opposition from the AFL-CIO when he led a union delegation to China that included a top aide to AFSCME President McAntee.

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Still, there are signs that unions on both sides of the split have abandoned the AFL-CIO’s old-style labor diplomacy in favor of direct contacts with workers and unions overseas. The SEIU, for example, is engaged in a global campaign to organize security workers employed by Wackenhut Corp., and has built strong alliances with members of UNI, a coalition of service and telecom unions, to pressure the UK’s FirstGroup to stop the union-busting tactics of its U.S. busing subsidiary. The Teamsters’ Port Division has been working with unions in Central America and Europe to pressure Maersk Inc., the giant Danish shipping

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line, to allow thousands of port drivers worldwide to bargain for wages and benefits. The Communications Workers of America, also a UNI member, recently helped a group of Taiwanese telecom workers bring their fight against privatization to the Securities and Exchange Commission. It is in such campaigns, emerging directly from workers' struggles and demands rather than from the dictates of labor bureaucrats or government funding, where the future of labor's foreign policy lies.

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## END NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "Scenes and Silver Linings from Labor's Crack-Up," <http://www.counterpunch.org/jw07302005.html>.
- <sup>2</sup> See my article, "Labor's Cold War," in *The Nation*, <http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20030519&cs=shorrock>

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, formerly Interhemispheric Resource Center, online at [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at [www.ips-dc.org](http://www.ips-dc.org)). ©2005. All rights reserved.

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### Recommended citation:

Tim Shorrock, "Labor's Foreign Policy Heads in a New Direction," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, August 11, 2005).

### Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/261>

### Production Information:

Writer: Tim Shorrock

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC

