

Recent Labor and Foreign Policy

Sometimes Labor Supported Dictatorships, But Iraq War Shows Labor Opposition

Labor's activities in foreign affairs during the cold war were criticized while the movement's opposition to the Iraq War was praised during the afternoon panel discussion, "Recent Labor and Foreign Policy."

Kim Scipes, assistant professor of sociology at Purdue University North Central, described his past rank-and-file background including his 9 years as a member of the Graphic Communications International Union and four years as a Marine. He said that gave him a good perspective to look at the impact of labor's role in foreign policy.

He urged progressives to take on the foreign policy issues "to again be proud of this incredible labor history that we're part of." He said the most "despicable part" of labor's history has been its "imperialistic" foreign policy practices, and it's something that should be corrected within the movement.

Scipes said that labor's foreign policy decisions often involve seeking to control foreign labor movements which result in undermining radical work struggles, creating conservative unions, and working with the U.S. government to overthrow democratically elected governments.

He listed such activities, including assisting the U.S. in overthrowing democratic governments in Guatemala in 1954 and in Brazil in 1964 and in Chile in 1973 and aided the 2002 Venezuelan right wing attempted coup against the democratically elected government of Hugo Chavez. He claimed

labor's involvement was a key to the maintenance of dictatorships, such as supporting the right wing labor movements after coups in Brazil and Chile and in El Salvador in 1980s, in Nicaragua in the 1980s, and elsewhere.

The key point, he said, is that labor is doing this without the input of their memberships and without any kind of mandate. There is no accountability, Scipes said, and there is no one outside of the AFL-CIO Executive Council who knows anything substantive about this practice.

Scipes cited the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) as a "cynical" creation of the AFL-CIO that sought to carry out the activities through an institute called the Solidarity Center; it is funded about 90% by the U.S. government, but it is still referred to as a private nonprofessional organization. The NED was openly and actively involved in sowing the seeds of the coup of the democratically elected government of Venezuela in 2002. This is substantiated by first hand reports, he said.

"I can back up everything I say," Scipes said, noting he had specific sources.

Scipes said there are some positive things happening, citing a California State AFL-CIO resolution that criticized the Solidarity Center. That resolution, however, failed to get full discussion on the floor of the National AFL-CIO Convention.

Scipes is involved in the "Worker-to-Worker Solidarity Committee" which wants to reform AFL-CIO foreign policy. (Refer to <http://workertoworker.net>.) The group seeks to have the AFL-CIO sever all ties to the NED and to open up books on its foreign policy operations.

He urged passage Build Unity and Trust Resolution passed by the California AFL-CIO in 2004; he said change must come from local unions, state and local councils and international unions.

Candice Owley, in discussion later, noted that the Solidarity Center had done some commendable work, particularly in Africa. She had seen the efforts personally, she said. Scipes responded that the group has done some “good work,” but that in most cases their efforts were stifling the free trade union movements in the world.

“If the work they’re doing is so good, why don’t they tell us about it,” he added.

David Newby, president of the Wisconsin State AFL-CIO, played a short video of a speech he made from the floor of the National AFL-CIO Convention in 2005, supporting the call for an early end of the war in Iraq, proper support for the U.S. troops, decent benefits for veterans and the development of a free labor movement in Iraq. The discussion involved a resolution that combined some 18 resolutions from State and Local councils.

All the speakers at the convention that supported the resolution were loudly applauded.

Carol Weidel, a leader of the U.S. Labor Against the War (USLAW), said the group grew out of a January 2003 conference in Chicago. She said the leadership of the group had all been deeply involved in leadership

positions in the labor movement, and “saw the train coming down the track” in expanding the war. She noted that during the Vietnam War, labor never came out against the war, but instead “supported the war.” The USLAW leadership sought to keep the issue focused on the potential war and its impact upon working people, including the fact that working families provide the armed services personnel and that local and state government services would be severely affected as funds were drawn to war costs.

USLAW leaders visited Iraq and also participated at the AFL-CIO convention mentioned above. She said she was surprised by the lack of opposition to USLAW positions, even at a time before the majority of U.S. citizens supported the war.

The USLAW sponsored a tour of Iraqi labor leaders throughout the United States, including Madison and Milwaukee. She said it was an expensive difficult feat to bring about, with concerns over funding, translations, visas and travel fatigue.

The Iraqi leaders met with John Sweeney, she said, but without representatives of USLAW; she noted Sweeney had strongly spoken out against the war, but was ambivalent about “letting USLAW in the door.”

The next steps for USLAW is continuing the same work, with more demonstrations, the sponsoring of a tour of a woman Iraqi labor leader and a representative of the Iraqi oil workers union. She encouraged the participants to get active in USLAW