

Is Cosatu playing with the devil?



Investigating the AFL-CIO and its Solidarity Center

The US labour centre, the AFL-CIO has a Solidarity Center in South Africa. Few unionists know what it does or stands for. **Kim Scipes**, in this revealing article, exposes some of its worldwide operations and wonders why Cosatu has a relationship with it.

The AFL-CIO, the major labour centre of the United States, has an office of its Solidarity Center in Johannesburg. There is no American trade unionist outside of the highest levels of foreign policy leadership that has the slightest idea of why the Solidarity Center is in South Africa, or what it is doing

there. Yet the Solidarity Center uses the fact that Cosatu works with them to undercut American union criticisms of the reactionary foreign policy of the AFL-CIO (AFL). The question must be asked: is Cosatu playing with the devil?

AFL-CIO HISTORY OF IMPERIALISM

The AFL has long had an imperialist foreign policy. This goes back to its predecessor in the early 1900s, the American Federation of Labour (AFL) when under President Samuel Gompers, the AFL intervened in the Mexican Revolution (1911-1917). The AFL worked hard to build support for the Allies during World War I, and pushed the US government to intervene. Later, Gompers and the AFL played central roles in the development of US foreign policy against the Soviet Union.

In the post-World War II period the US labour movement, first under the AFL and then, after 1955 when the American Federation of Labour merged with the Congress of Industrial Organizations to become the AFL-CIO, has been extremely active internationally. It has helped overthrow democratically-elected governments in Guatemala (1953), Brazil (1964) and Chile (1973). It has supported reactionary labour movements that have propped up

dictatorships in El Salvador, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea, Guatemala, Brazil and Chile after coups. It has undermined progressive governments in British Guyana (1963), Nicaragua (1980s), and Haiti under the first Aristide government in the early 1990s. It also undercut the new trade unions and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa until 1986 when it began to see the writing on the wall and decided to support Cosatu.

In 1995, the AFL held its first contested presidential election in 40 years of existence. John Sweeney, an insurgent, won and has served as president ever since.

Foreign policy was one factor that led to Sweeney's election. He used a language different from the traditional anti-communism of predecessors George Meany and Lane Kirkland, and argued for international solidarity. He restructured the AFL's foreign policy apparatus and combined previously semi-autonomous operations in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Western Europe into a centrally-controlled American Center for International Labour Solidarity (ACILS) or in popular terminology, the 'Solidarity Center'. He appointed a then-progressive to head the AFL's International Affairs Department, Barbara Shailor. It looked like the

foreign policy of the AFL had been transformed into something American unionists could be proud of.

What must be kept in mind is that *none* of the AFL's foreign policy programmes has ever been discussed or debated by rank and file unionists, or even by most senior union officials. There has never been any honest reporting of operations, even when requested by labour organisations, such as the California State AFL-CIO which, before the 2005 split, included 2.4 million members, one-sixth of the membership of the AFL.

Extremely few unionists know that these foreign operations take place. They operate without the knowledge of American unionists, but they are done "in our name." This foreign policy programme is the responsibility of very top-level labour leaders, and their hired staff. This imperialist foreign policy programme was developed from *within* the labour movement, and not by the US government, White House, or CIA.

NO TRANSFORMATION

Sweeney's election and the development of the Solidarity Center *did not* transform the AFL's foreign policy programme. The Solidarity Center was actively involved in the attempted coup in April 2002 against Venezuela's democratically-elected president, Hugo Chavez. Despite a more sophisticated operation since 1997 the AFL has maintained its historical role of labour imperialism.

Worse still, the AFL-CIO and its Solidarity Center do not work alone. The AFL was one of the founders of

the Reagan-initiated but horribly misnamed National Endowment for Democracy (NED), founded in 1983. The NED was initiated by the US government in response to the exposure of CIA secret activities during the 1960s and '70s and was designed to openly do what the CIA had done covertly. Critics believe the Solidarity Center gets over 90% of its funding from the US government.

The AFL's Free Trade Union Institute (replaced by the Solidarity Center in 1997) was one of the four core institutes of the NED, along with the international wings of the Democratic Party, Republican Party and the US Chamber of Commerce. No trade unionist outside of top leadership knows what a "core institute" of the NED means, other than that they channel money to groups they support. But it is suspected that they help set policy, and it is almost certain that Solidarity Center leaders helped to set NED policy regarding labour operations.

The NED although supposedly "independent" has been continually funded by the US Congress. Its Board has included top-level actors in the US government's foreign policy apparatus, including former Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and Madeleine Albright, former National Security Council Chair Zbigniew Brzezinski, current World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz, and former Secretary of Labour and US Trade Representative, Bill Brock.

The NED claims to "promote democracy" around the world, and it goes on about "free elections", but in reality, its efforts aim to establish top-down "democracy".

It has nothing to do with one-person, one-vote popular democracy that most Americans and people around the world see as democracy.

It is ironic that an organisation that trumpets "democracy" is in its organisational structure, completely undemocratic. The NED was set up so that even if a US presidential administration wanted to change its policies, it cannot. The NED sets its own foreign policy independent of any administration and the only people who can change its policies are members of its board of directors. These directors are self-chosen by NED leadership.

The NED has been, and is a reactionary force around the world. It has been active in a number of countries but we know most about its operations in Venezuela. Here we can see how the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center works with the NED.

UNDERMINING VENEZUELA

The NED has been active in Venezuela, the fifth largest oil producer in the world, since 1992. NED provided US\$4,039,331 to Venezuelan and American operations working in Venezuela between 1992 and 2001. Over 60% (US\$2,439,489) was granted between 1997 and 2001. Since 1997, almost one-quarter (US\$587,926) went to the Solidarity Center for its work with the Confederacion de Trabajadores Venezolanos (CTV - Confederation of Venezuelan Workers). In 2002, NED pumped in another US\$1,099,352, of which the Solidarity Center got US\$116,001 for its work with the CTV.

Altogether, the Solidarity Center received \$703,927 from NED for its work in Venezuela between 1997 and 2002.

Yet what work has the Solidarity Center in Venezuela carried out? The AFL-CIO claims it has concentrated on enhancing CTV's internal democracy, a notoriously non-democratic labour centre. The CTV has had a relationship with the AFL-CIO (meaning the US government-funded American Institute for Free Labour Development) for more than 30 years, and has been a pillar of pro-American, anti-communist unionism in the region. Some have tied it with the CIA.

In early 2002, CTV leaders visited Washington DC to meet with high level AFL-CIO and Bush administration officials. Among others, CTV leaders visited Otto Reich, the Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs.

Just before these visits Solidarity Center staff attended a series of meetings to bring together leaders of the CTV and FEDECAMARAS (Venezuelan national business confederation). These meetings, six in all, took place around the country and ended in a national meeting on 5 March, 2002. At that meeting, the CTV and FEDECAMARAS, supported by the Catholic Church, discussed their concerns and priorities regarding national development and identified common objectives and areas of cooperation. The CTV and FEDECAMARAS were anointed "flagship organisations" in the struggle against President Chavez.

According to an unearthed



AFL-CIO president, John Sweeney

Solidarity Center report, the joint action was intended to produce a "National Accord" to avoid a supposedly "deeper political and economic crisis... The Solidarity Center helped support the event in the planning stages, organising the initial meetings with the governor of Miranda state and the business organisation, FEDECAMAS, to discuss and establish an agenda for such cooperation in mid-January." The report concluded with: "The 5 March national conference itself was funded by counterpart funds," which suggests funds outside of the usual NED-Solidarity Center channels.

Barely 30 days after the 5 March conference, the CTV and FEDECAMARAS launched a national general strike on 9 April to protest the firing of oil company management on 7 April and the events leading to the coup attempt began, in which CTV and FEDECAMAS played central roles.

On 11 April, a massive march and demonstration was held to support CTV. "About midday on 11 April, speakers at the opposition rally, including the president of the CTV, Carlos Ortega, began calling for supporters to march on the Presidential Palace, Miraflores, to

demand Chavez's resignation." Lee Sustar wrote, "What is indisputable, however, is that Ortega joined with FEDECAMAS to call the strike and march that set the stage for the coup."

When the coup's military leaders decided to act and depose Chavez, FEDECAMARAS' Carmona was chosen by coup leaders to become the new president. Carmona was sworn in on 12 April, and immediately dissolved "all of Venezuela's democratic institutions, including the National Assembly, the Supreme Court, the Public Defender's Office, the Attorney General, the Constitution and the 49 laws Chavez had decreed in December."

The coup was denounced throughout the hemisphere, with two exceptions. The President of the International Republican Institute (a "core institute" of NED), George A. Folsom, issued a statement praising the coup leaders. Then the Bush Administration supported the coup. In response to the coup attempt, people mobilised in the millions, the military split and the coup failed. Chavez was returned to the presidential palace on 14 April, 2002, where he resumed

duties as president.

It turns out that the NED had quadrupled its annual budget to its Venezuelan clients to US\$877,000 in the year before the coup attempt. In addition to the US\$154,377 given to the Solidarity Center, the NED also provided the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs US\$210,000 "to promote the accountability of local government"; \$399,998 to the International Republican Institute for "political party building"; and the balance to Center of International Private Enterprise.

This destabilisation effort in Venezuela is one component of a multiple-track strategy to

government; a 'leadership group' that supports the metropolitan Caracas police, whose behaviour has become markedly more repressive over the past year; and a number of other anti-Chavez organisations which have received funding from NED.

The CTV was also involved in a major oil industry lockout that lasted 63 days between December 2002 and February 2003. This cost the country over US\$10 billion in oil revenues some of which was going into education and health care for the poorest Venezuelans which make up 80% of the society.

It is clear that the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center, working with the US Government's NED has played an incredibly reactionary role in Venezuela.

US UNIONS FIGHTING BACK

In the face of this aggression, a small number of US unionists have organised the new Worker to Worker Solidarity Committee (www.workertoworker.net). It aims to force the AFL to end its imperialist foreign policy, to cut ties with NED, and to open its books on operations, past and present, around the world. AFL leaders see this as such a threat that they openly undermined internal labour movement democracy at the 2005 National Convention in Chicago, in an effort to keep foreign policy challengers from speaking from the floor.

Facing a determined group of challengers, the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center brought a Cosatu representative to a conference in Philadelphia in August 2005 that was organised by the Labour Movements Section of the American

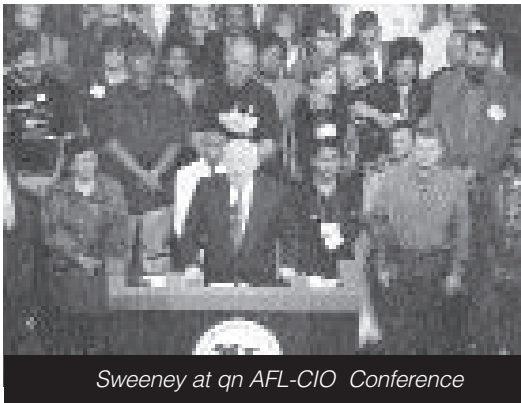
Sociological Association. It is not known whether she was acting in a personal or organisational capacity at the meeting. She was introduced as a representative of Cosatu and she spoke of solidarity received by Cosatu from the Solidarity Center.

Interestingly, she only spoke about how Cosatu could easily get money from the Solidarity Center in South Africa to finance its foreign policy initiatives. There was no talk about how the Solidarity Center was helping Cosatu to build worker-to-worker solidarity across national borders.

I don't know, other than this one report, what the Solidarity Center is doing in South Africa. Nor do I know what Cosatu's relationship is with the Solidarity Center. But I know that in this one case, the Solidarity Center has used a Cosatu representative to undercut efforts by American trade unionists to end the AFL-CIO's imperialist foreign policy programme. These relationships need to be exposed and ended. Cosatu has much to lose if it continues working with the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center.

LB

Kim Scipes is a member of the National Writers Union, AFL-CIO, and has opposed its foreign policies for over 20 years. He teaches sociology at Purdue University North Central in Westville, Indiana, USA. His on-line "Contemporary Labour Issues" can be accessed at <http://faculty.pnc.edu/kscipes/LaborBib.htm> with full documentation of claims in this article. He can be reached at kscipes@pnc.edu. He published "KMU: Building Genuine Trade Unionism in the Philippines, 1980-1994" in 1996.



Sweeney at qn AFL-CIO Conference

undermine Chavez's government. It also includes supporting a peasant organisation that opposes land reform; an educational organisation that has suggested no education reforms; an organisation seeking to incite a military rebellion; a civic association that has worked to mobilise middle class neighbourhoods to 'defend themselves' from the poor; a civil justice group that opposes grassroots community organisations because they support the Chavez