

The AFL-CIO's role in the Venezuelan coup

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An agency directed by the AFL-CIO trade union federation played a key role in funding and advising those who organized the recent abortive military coup attempt in Venezuela. The AFL-CIO's role in the US-backed plot underscores the fact that even as the union apparatus becomes increasingly irrelevant as a significant factor in American politics and the lives of US workers, it continues to conspire against the democratic rights and class interests of workers internationally.

The revelations of AFL-CIO involvement concern the role in Venezuela of the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS), an AFL-CIO-run agency that is largely funded by the US government.

Evidence of US involvement in the April 11-12 coup attempt has continued to mount in recent weeks. An official investigation by the Venezuelan government has revealed that two high-ranking US officers joined the Venezuelan military commanders who backed the coup at Fort Tiuna, the largest military base in Caracas, where President Hugo Chavez was forcibly taken after being captured by soldiers supporting the overthrow of his government.

According to this account, Lt. Col. James Rodgers, the US military attaché in Caracas, had advised the generals who turned against Chavez and stayed with them for 48 hours, until the coup collapsed in the face of mass demonstrations and rioting, and fractures within the Venezuelan military establishment. The second officer, US Army Col. Ronald MacCammon, was also present throughout the coup, Venezuelan officials reported.

"Several Venezuelan officers implicated in the coup mentioned they were aware of this officer's [MacCammon's] presence during the events," a source close to the investigation told the French news agency AFP. "They were assured that the movement had the full support of the United States and for this reason they participated."

Washington denied these reports, making the improbable claim that two US officers had merely made a "drive-by" inspection of the coup headquarters. "They never got out of their vehicle," a State Department official insisted.

But Rodgers' office was located on the fifth floor of the main building of Fort Tiuna. The US was the only country whose military attaché enjoyed this privilege. Chavez had ordered that the office be removed, but the Venezuelan military never carried out his instructions.

The Pentagon, meanwhile, announced that it is carrying out its own investigation. "We just want to be sure that nobody was acting on their own," a Defense Department spokesman said.

There is no indication that the AFL-CIO is conducting a similar probe, though there is no question that its operatives in Caracas were just as intimately involved in the attempted overthrow of an elected government. A spokesman for the labor federation did not return a call seeking comment.

The AFL-CIO involvement took place through an outfit called the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS), which has provided aid and "technical advisors" to the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV).

CTV President Carlos Ortega was one of the main participants in the coup attempt, joining with the head of the main big business association in

organizing an anti-government march on the presidential palace. More than a dozen people were shot to death, most of them Chavez supporters felled by snipers' bullets to the head. The military blamed the killings on Chavez and seized on them as the pretext for overthrowing the president.

Pedro Carmona Estanga, the leader of the business group FEDECAMARAS, was proclaimed the president of an "interim government," a junta dominated by senior military officers and extreme rightists. He quickly ordered the disbanding of the national legislature, the scrapping of the constitution and the repeal of all laws passed over the previous four years of Chavez's presidency.

After the coup collapsed, the CTV's Ortega remained in hiding for weeks, while warning that Venezuela would erupt in a "civil war" unless Chavez made major concessions to those who tried to topple him.

The overthrow of Chavez was prepared over the previous two months by a series of strikes and protests organized by the CTV with the backing of Venezuelan business, culminating in a joint labor-employer general strike on the day of the coup.

During the same period, the ACILS had expanded its operations in Venezuela in conjunction with three other "non-governmental organizations," representing the Democratic and Republican parties and US big business.

All are funded by the National Endowment for Democracy, an agency founded in 1983 by the Reagan administration with the aim of providing a legal framework for operations that had previously been carried out covertly by the CIA. Among the founding directors of the agency were Henry Kissinger, Nixon's secretary of state and national security adviser, as well as then-AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland and American Federation of Teachers President Albert Shanker, two of the labor bureaucrats with the closest ties to the State Department.

Over the past two years, the NED has quadrupled its funding for Venezuelan operations to nearly \$1 million. Out of this, \$154,377 was given to the ACILS for its activities with the CTV, which included help in organizing internal elections that were forced on the labor bureaucracy by the Chavez government. The AFL-CIO, which has enjoyed the closest relations with the corrupt bureaucracy of the CTV, worked to ensure that its top officials retained power.

In addition, the ACILS worked in conjunction with a fourth NED-sponsored group representing US big business to organize "an informed democratic debate on legislation that affects economic reform, taxes and private property." Both US and Venezuelan business interests have strongly opposed limited reform measures implemented by the Chavez government to redistribute unused land and limit foreign control of the country's extensive petroleum resources.

Even more money went to two outfits that function as foreign policy wings of the Democratic and Republican parties. Over \$210,000 was allotted to the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, which went to "advise" local government officials, while the International Republican Institute received a grant of nearly \$340,000 for "party-building" activities.

While the *New York Times* cited an unnamed State Department official as saying further funding had been placed on hold to ensure that it was not

used “to underwrite an unconstitutional overthrow of the government of Venezuela,” the Bush administration quickly denied the report, indicating that another million dollars is already in the pipeline for the next fiscal year.

With his ringing endorsement of the coup, the International Republican Institute’s president, George Folsom, undercut denials by the Bush administration and the NED of US involvement. “The Venezuelan people rose up to defend democracy in their country,” Folsom said in a statement. “Venezuelans were provoked into action as a result of systematic repression by the government of Hugo Chavez.” This claim is unsupported by the facts. Whatever its faults, the Chavez government has no political prisoners and has tolerated a business-controlled media that openly collaborated in the coup attempt.

In the months leading up to the military overthrow, the International Republican Institute had organized trips to Washington by leading Venezuelan political figures opposed to Chavez for meetings with top Bush administration officials.

Previously, the AFL-CIO carried out its operations in Latin America through an outfit known as the American Institute for Free Labor Development, or AIFLD. Through decades of collaboration with the US government, AIFLD became internationally known as the CIA’s “labor front,” dedicated to subverting independent militant unions and provoking “labor” unrest against governments targeted by Washington.

In Guatemala it helped organize a union approved by the United Fruit Company and the military to enforce labor peace on the banana plantations. In Guyana in the early 1960s, the AIFLD instituted a series of strikes and stoked racial tensions between East Indian and Afro-Caribbean workers in order to bring about the overthrow of the nationalist regime of Cheddi Jagan. In Brazil, AIFLD-trained communications workers’ union leaders aided the military in the seizure of power in 1964, and in Chile the AIFLD served as the conduit for CIA funding for professional and managerial employees, as well the truck owners’ “unions” that carried out strikes to cripple the economy and set the stage for the military’s seizure of power in September of 1973.

During the US-backed “dirty war” in El Salvador, AIFLD advisors flooded the country, working to build a pro-military peasants’ association and engineering a “land reform” modeled on the counterinsurgency programs developed during the war in Vietnam.

With the end of the Cold War and the subsequent change in leadership in the AFL-CIO itself, the federation’s incoming president, John Sweeney, sought a cosmetic change in the international front, thus creating the ACILS, which inherited the network of international offices as well as the personnel of the AIFLD and three other regional organizations maintained jointly by the labor bureaucracy and the government.

The ACILS still receives the lion’s share of its funding from government sources, to the tune of roughly \$15 million a year. This includes a \$45 million, five-year grant from the Agency for International Development, \$4 million from the NED, \$1 million over two years from the State Department and \$300,000 from the Labor Department. The AFL-CIO itself chips in another \$1 million a year.

What does the US government get for its money? Job notices recently placed by the ACILS advise candidates that their responsibilities will include providing “information on country conditions and labor issues as requested by Washington-based US government offices.”

While ACILS continues the AIFLD’s role as an arm of US imperialist foreign policy, including the counterrevolutionary intrigues of the CIA, the union bureaucracy has tried to portray it as a new organization, dedicated to international labor organizing against sweatshops. In reality, it promotes a protectionist, “buy American” form of chauvinism with a “human rights” window dressing.

The ACILS executive director is Harry Kamberis, a veteran of the Asian

American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI), the AIFLD’s Asian counterpart. Before that, he worked for many years as a State Department operative, posted in Greece, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Kamberis’ chief “labor” experience was in the Philippines, where the AAFLI’s efforts were dedicated to propping up the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP), an outfit created by Ferdinand Marcos to defend his dictatorship. Between 1983 and 1989, when Kamberis was active in the Philippines, the AAFLI gave the pro-Marcos labor federation nearly \$6 million.

The TUCP used these funds to oppose the emergence of more militant unions, particularly those under the wing of the KMU (Kilusang Mayo Uno) Labor Center. To this end, and under the direction of its US “advisors,” the TUCP allied itself with the dictatorship, the employers, police and right-wing death squads.

Having failed to mount any opposition to the theft of the 2000 election by Bush and the Republican right, the Sweeney leadership of the AFL-CIO has over the past year-and-a-half drawn closer to the Republicans. In part, this merely recognizes the political fact that the Democratic Party provides no alternative to the Republicans’ unabashed defense of corporate interests. However, the AFL-CIO also welcomed the Bush administration’s turn toward unrestrained militarism as an opportunity to prove its worth as a loyal defender of US imperialist interests.

Now the US labor bureaucrats are working intimately with a cabal of ultra-right-wing conspirators, veterans of the Reagan administration’s illegal conspiracies in Central America in the 1980s. Pulling the strings in the Venezuelan coup plot and ultimately directing the activities of the ACILS “labor front” are men such as Otto Reich, the undersecretary of state for Latin American affairs. A rabidly anticommunist Cuban émigré, Reich formerly served as the head of an illegal government effort to spread false propaganda against Nicaragua’s Sandinista government and in support of the CIA-backed contra mercenaries.

The sordid episode in Venezuela makes clear that the AFL-CIO continues its counterrevolutionary services to the US government abroad, even as it oversees an endless series of betrayals, defeats, concessions and layoffs for unionized workers at home.



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