

From Tunisia to “Occupy Wall Street”: Who is the AFL-CIO’s Stuart Appelbaum?

David Walsh
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In a widely reproduced article October 5 (“Seeking Energy, Unions Join Protest Against Wall Street”), the *New York Times* pointed prominently to the attitude and role of Stuart Appelbaum, president of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), in relation to the current Occupy Wall Street protests.

The *Times* first explained that “Appelbaum, an influential union leader in New York City, was in Tunisia last month, advising the fledgling labor movement there, when he received a flurry of phone calls and e-mails alerting him to the rumblings of something back home.”

Thus “alerted” to the spreading protests, “Mr. Appelbaum recalled asking a colleague over the phone to find out who was behind Occupy Wall Street—a bunch of hippies or perhaps troublemakers?—and whether the movement might quickly fade.”

The article went on to observe that this week “several prominent unions ... made their first effort to join forces with Occupy Wall Street.” The newspaper cites Appelbaum’s comment: “The labor movement needs to tap into the energy and learn from them ... They are reaching a lot of people and exciting a lot of people that the labor movement has been struggling to reach for years.”

As we noted yesterday on the WSWs, the AFL-CIO officialdom is intervening in the Occupy Wall Street protests to prevent them from emerging as a mass movement independent of the Democratic Party and oriented toward socialism. Nothing terrifies the union leadership more than the thought of working class revolt in the US.

When the *Times*, equally anxious to see the political strangulation of the Occupy Wall Street movement, comes to write about the AFL-CIO and the Wall Street protests, the first name that comes up is Appelbaum’s. Who, or it might perhaps be better phrased, *what* is Stuart Appelbaum?

First, what was Mr. Appelbaum doing in Tunisia? The *Times* does not say, but the general outlines of the AFL-CIO intervention there are clear, based on the organization’s history and recent activity.

Through outfits such as the American Institute for Free

Labor Development (AIFLD), a joint effort of the AFL-CIO, the US government and corporate executives, the American trade unions have been engaged for decades in pursuing the reactionary political aims of the US ruling elite. Founded during the Cold War in 1961, under the tutelage of former AFL-CIO president George Meany, the AIFLD gave direct aid to US-backed coups in Brazil, Argentina and Chile.

Under Meany’s successor, Lane Kirkland, the AIFLD stepped up its backing of right-wing unions in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, at the same time the Reagan administration increased its funding for the death squad regimes in Central America and the contras seeking to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

The AFL-CIO continues to run filthy operations around the world through such organizations as the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS), or “Solidarity Center,” 96 percent funded by the US government. The ACILS is a constituent element of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a conduit for government funds that used to be funneled covertly from the CIA. The ACILS has been active in efforts to overthrow the Chavez regime in Venezuela, among other operations.

This is the significance of AFL-CIO operations in Tunisia. The chief concern of the American trade union officials is to see that workers in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere do not challenge US imperialist interests in the region. The trade unions they help establish have as their mission the defense of capitalism and the suppression of left-wing elements.

In Tunisia, as the WSWs has noted, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)—in collaboration with the AFL-CIO and the British TUC—“works through its affiliate, the UGTT [Tunisian General Labour Union], a long time ally of [former dictator] Ben Ali, which initially denounced the mass demonstrations against him and then, after he fled, joined the bogus ‘national unity’ government of his henchmen until protests forced the UGTT officials to resign.”

The AFL-CIO’s website is filled with hypocritical articles about the struggle for “human rights” in Tunisia, a struggle

that never concerned US union officials for decades while the Ben Ali regime was firmly in power. The website notes that a Tunisian trade union activist, Jamel Bettaieb, was feted in Washington in June and received one of the National Endowment for Democracy's 2011 "Democracy Awards," along with a Syrian, a Libyan, a Bahraini, a Yemeni and an Egyptian. (The various national origins of any given year's NED award winners would probably be a useful guide to those areas the US government and CIA consider to be "hot spots.")

Three AFL-CIO officials, Mark Gaffney, president of the Michigan State AFL-CIO, William (Bill) Fletcher, director of field services and education for the American Federation of Government Employees, and Shannon Lederer, associate director for international affairs at the American Federation of Teachers, visited Tunisia (along with Palestine and Egypt) in June, in a trip sponsored by the aforementioned "Solidarity Center." They met with officials of the UGTT, as well as union officials from Libya and Algeria.

This is the type of US government-sponsored operation in Tunisia from which Appelbaum recently returned to try to help put out the fire closer to home.

However, it would be doing Appelbaum a disservice to refer only to this particular Tunisian venture. His interests and activities are far more wide-ranging. This is a busy man.

As well as serving since 1998 as president of the 100,000-member RWDSU, now a division of the United Food and Commercial Workers (Change to Win Federation), Appelbaum is president of the Jewish Labor Committee, a pro-Israeli lobby within the American trade unions. In this capacity, he regularly defends Zionist policy, although in its "moderate" Labor Party version, and denounces Palestinian resistance. He is also associated with Ameinu, the successor to the Labor Zionist Alliance.

Prior to the disaffiliation of the UFCW from the AFL-CIO, Appelbaum functioned as a Vice President of the national AFL-CIO and a member of the federation's Executive Council from 1998 until 2005. He also currently serves as a vice president of the New York State AFL-CIO and the New York City Central Labor Council.

He plays a prominent role in the Democratic Party, having served formerly as Chief House Counsel of the Democratic National Committee. Appelbaum was elected a delegate to the 1996, 2000, 2004 and 2008 Democratic National Conventions and an alternate delegate to the 1992 Democratic National Convention. In 2008, he served as a member of the Electoral College as an Obama elector from New York.

The RWDSU president also finds time to sit on the board of trustees of Freedom House, a Washington DC institution most closely associated with CIA-directed anti-communist

propaganda during the Cold War against the Soviet Union and the other Stalinist regimes. Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, in their *Manufacturing Consent* (1988), noted Freedom House's "interlocks" with various ultra-right outfits "and U.S. government bodies such as Radio Free Europe and the CIA." It "has long served," they wrote, "as a virtual propaganda arm of the government and international right wing."

Appelbaum sits on Freedom House board with a variety of right-wing academics, trade unions officials and assorted US government operatives past and present, including Kenneth Adelman, formerly an assistant to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (under Gerald Ford), and later a member of the Defense Policy Board. Another Freedom House trustee is Diane Villiers Negroponte, wife of John Negroponte, ambassador to Honduras during the 1980s, who played a key role in supplying and supervising the CIA-backed "contra" mercenaries who were based in that country, and whose operations claimed 50,000 lives.

Another member of the board is Dr. Paula J. Dobriansky, Under Secretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs from 2001 to 2009. Dobriansky belongs to the Leadership Council of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), an ultra-right think tank set up after 9/11 to combat Islamic fundamentalism. Dobriansky hobnobs in the FDD with billionaire Steve Forbes, right-wing journalist Bill Kristol, former FBI director Louis J. Freeh, Sen. Joseph Lieberman, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, former national security adviser Robert McFarlane, convicted for his part in the Iran-Contra scandal and former CIA director James Woolsey.

These are the deeply reactionary and sinister circles in which Appelbaum lives and breathes. What he brings to the Occupy Wall Street protests is a ferocious hostility to the working class and to socialism.

AFL-CIO officials such as this should be driven out of the protests as the agents of big business and political reaction that they are.



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