The AFL-CIA's Solidarity Center expands operations in Latin America

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The AFL-CIO is rapidly expanding its operations across Latin America to levels not seen since the 1970s, when it trained and sponsored thousands of union officials in support of CIA-backed coups and dictatorships.

The American trade union federation operates internationally through its misnamed Solidarity Center, which was granted a budget of $15 million for Latin America and the Caribbean in 2022, according to its latest yearly report. This represented a massive jump of between 58 and 138 percent above all other years reported on its website since 2010. Globally, the Center has also more than doubled its budget in this period and has opened offices in numerous new countries.

Over 95 percent of the Solidarity Center's revenue comes from the US federal government, under Democrats and Republicans alike, and it is one of the four core affiliated institutes of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which was created under Ronald Reagan to overtly organize the kind of operations the CIA had previously sponsored covertly.

While promoting "Buy American" nationalism and scapegoating workers of other countries and immigrants for the sellout contracts and plant closures it has forced upon workers at home, the American union bureaucracy has long been sabotaging workers' struggles abroad against corporations and helping US imperialism subject workers to desperate conditions.

The AFL-CIO has never made a formal acknowledgment of its historical crimes abroad and continues to keep rank-and-file members in the dark about its operations because it was and is still up to no good.

That this is true today is most clearly shown by the efforts by the Solidarity Center and the Biden administration to strengthen their ties with the Peronist leadership of the General Confederation of Workers (CGT) in Argentina, especially since the election of the fascistic President Javier Milei.

On September 2-4, the Solidarity Center co-sponsored a seminar in Buenos Aires on "Collective bargaining in the public sector" with the participation of unions from almost all countries in Latin America. Acting as hosts, the CGT leaders boasted about refusing to convoke strikes and demonstrations and otherwise helping suppress opposition to the economic "shock therapy" program of Milei and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Speakers celebrated as a victory that Milei has reciprocated by reversing initial cuts to sources of income to the bureaucracy, like automatic dues payments from non-union members.

In little publicized meetings, the Biden administration and the IMF gave direct orders to the CGT and the Milei officials to collaborate.

A CGT official who participated in a recent meeting with the IMF staff said anonymously to *La Nacion*, "The Fund is concerned, it wants guarantees that there will be no social turmoil. In addition, it is interested in preventing Chinese investments in the region from advancing."

It is no surprise that US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said last year that the Argentine CGT was a "model" of trade unionism. This is entirely in line with Biden's recent description of the AFL-CIO as his "domestic NATO."

At home and abroad, the union apparatus is seen as an instrument to secure key natural resources and manufactured inputs for US industry and defense against potential disruptions from the working class and competition from China and other rivals. Especially in Latin America, the union bureaucracy is to prevent super-profits from turning into super-losses.

The predecessor of the Solidarity Center, the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), began promoting the most right-wing currents within the Peronist union bureaucracy in Argentina since the early 1960s. Labor Historian Larissa Rosa Correa cites estimates that 80,000 union members participated in AIFLD courses of "business unionism" during this period, with a select group being bankrolled and sent to Front Royal Virginia, Georgetown University and Loyola University to become anticommunist leaders.

The right-wing Peronist circles were involved in setting up the Triple A death squads that killed hundreds of left-wing workers and union leaders under the Peronist governments that preceded the 1976 US-backed military coup. Then, Correa writes, "A significant proportion of union leaders who were able to develop a more stable activity during the last two Argentine military dictatorships (1966-1973 and 1976-1983) were trained in programs in the US."

The crimes of the second dictatorship, including the killing of 30,000 leftists and torturing many more, have been openly celebrated by Milei, and now the AFL-CIO is following the same footsteps in facilitating such crimes.

After its creation in 1961, the AIFLD sponsored unions across Latin America, organized purges of leftist workers and union officials, financed strikes and employer lockouts to instigate US-backed military coups, organized scabbing to break strikes against US-backed regimes, gathered information about suspected left-wing workers and peasants and handed it to fascist dictators, directly organized fascist shock troops and, in the Dominican Republic, backed the invasion of US Marines.

By June 1978, the AIFLD boasted that it had trained 338,000 union members and maintained offices in 18 countries in Latin America. Summing up the content of the training, one of its initial sponsors, the business magnate Peter Grace, who controlled extensive mining, agribusiness, shipping and other industries in Latin America, said the AIFLD "teaches workers to help increase their company's business."

The AIFLD was specifically animated by the John F. Kennedy administration's efforts to stomp on the growing influence of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow and the fear of social revolution after the 1959 overthrow of the US-backed Batista regime in Cuba.

Kennedy's aide Arthur Schlesinger Jr. wrote to the President: "If the possessing classes of Latin America made the middle-class revolution impossible, they will make a 'workers-and-peasants' revolution

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inevitable." Such "middle-class revolution" meant US-backed coups to install fascist-military dictatorships and were prepared by developing "assets" in unions, student and peasant organizations, small political parties and the media. In countries like Brazil, Chile and Argentina, the AIFLD, working as an arm of the CIA, was a major player in these operations.

"Workers in the US must oppose their dues and tax money being used for this"

A major focus of the Solidarity Center in the last period has been training union bureaucrats in Mexico, which hosts suppliers completely integrated with US and Canadian industry.

The Center highlighted in its latest report that the unions it sponsors signed contracts involving 20,000 workers in the past two years. This followed the announcement by US Vice President Kamala Harris of a $130 million fund for "democratic unions" during a visit to the country in 2021.

These operations take place in the framework of a 2019 Labor Reform demanded by the US and Canadian governments as part of trade negotiations. The reform ordered all Mexican unions to ratify their contracts at each workplace through votes, as a step meant to help channel a growing rebellion against the gangster-ridden unions of the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) behind so-called "independent unions" sponsored by the United States.

The first successful replacement of the CTM by an "independent" union under the new rules took place in February 2022 at the General Motors complex in Silao. An active worker at the plant recently summarized the outcome to the *World Socialist Web Site*: "There have been no significant changes as such for the benefit of the worker. The workers are not the ones who accept this. It is the union leaders who accept it in complicity with the companies, accepting very corrupt collective bargaining agreements favoring the interests of the employers."

There is no democracy, he said, indicating how decisions are now made in assemblies where a tiny fraction of members takes part, while the leadership is manipulated by its secretary, Alejandra Morales, and a law firm financed by the Solidarity Center called CILAS.

The worker then made an appeal: "Workers in the United States must oppose their dues and tax money from being used for this. Do not give her any more help. She and CILAS, all the support has only been used for their own benefit, not for the benefit of the workers."

The background of how the new union, called SINTTIA, was established, shows that the AFL-CIO intervened not to build "solidarity" against transnational capital, but to break the initial push by workers to expand their fight internationally.

In 2019, a group of rank-and-file workers called "Generating Movement" that was opposed to the CTM union came in contact with the WSWS and American GM workers, who were about to launch a national strike. The group in Silao then called for refusing overtime and speed-ups that could be used to undermine the US strike, which led to the firing of several workers.

The Solidarity Center, working with the law firm CILAS, then contacted the group to offer training and cash payments of 6,000 pesos per week to help build a campaign to vote the CTM out. Once this was accomplished, CILAS selected a handful of the workers as the leadership to register a new union, which was named SINTTIA. In the process, it sidelined the rest of the group, particularly those workers who had been fired.

A more recent case took place at the Delta Staff sweatshop in Nazareno, Durango, in Northern Mexico, where nearly 1,000 workers make pants for brands like Levi's, Dockers, Old Navy and GAP.

A lawyer and organizer who worked for the Solidarity Center in starting a union at the plant approached the *World Socialist Web Site* to speak out about the real character of the "organizing" by the Border Workers Committee (CFO) and its associated trade union La Liga, which "is 100 percent financially dependent on the Solidarity Center."

According to the lawyer, the CFO first targets a workplace and begins organizing seminars, aimed at nearby residents and workers, on women empowerment and unionizing to establish networks of contacts and pick out potential organizers.

She explains: "They stick to the issue of feminism to gain a plus over other organizations and pretend to be doing rank-and-file work. But they have never done rank-and-file work; it is the least they are interested in. They look for workers who have some economic need or a very particular situation that generates a bond of dependence towards the organization."

At Delta Staff Nazareno, the main organizers were brought into the fold, trained and then introduced into the plant.

Referring to the head of the CFO, Julia Quiñonez, the lawyer says, "I can confirm from my experience, the CFO is not interested in improving the working conditions. The interest of the organization is to sustain itself and maintain the salaries of its director, which exceed 100,000 Mexican pesos (US$6,000), an income that is not even earned by any company manager."

At Delta Staff workers made a minimum wage of 257 pesos (US$15.45) per day, and the CFO was paying the leading organizers an additional 1,000 pesos per week. In order to register the union, they had workers sign a document without a clear understanding of what they were signing and paying them to sign in some cases.

In January, workers voted to replace the CTM with the newly registered union affiliated to La Liga, which rammed through a new sellout contract in late August, with nine pay tiers, none above poverty wages.

The CFO organizer at Delta Staff said to the WSWS that the US government intervenes "not really to awaken labor organizing. Intermediaries such as the Solidarity Center, CFO, CILAS, far from promoting a democratic, real and horizontal unionism, become managers of a controllable and manipulable unionism that is always profitable for them, it always results in a benefit for them and they seek to continue having control of the workers."

The campaign for US-trained "independent unions" has frequently served to simply smoke out and fire the most militant workers. In recent months, VU Manufacturing and Caterpillar simply shut down auto plants without bothering with severance pay after such unions were elected.

A history of financing pro-imperialist unionism

The lawyer in Durango made the historical parallel with the purges of the CTM after its creation: "When workers with a class, communist and militant ideology were expelled, they were always segregated in this way. They always wanted to keep the red unions and their demonstrations isolated from the factories. Today it is a preemptive measure in order to have a more controllable situation."

The American Federation of Labor (AFL) first established significant ties in the region with Mexican unionists, starting with the efforts by AFL president Samuel Gompers to channel some of the country's first craft unions established during the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) behind support for one bourgeois faction after the other, including the deployment of workers against the peasant armies of Emiliano Zapata and Francisco Villa.

After the creation of the CTM, the AFL trained and backed a right-wing

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faction led by Fidel Velasquez, who eventually displaced the leader close to Moscow, Lombardo Toledano, in 1941. Velazquez and the AFL proceeded to purge leftists for several decades.

The model of unionism promoted by Gompers, who maintained a pro-war corporatist and personal relationship with President Woodrow Wilson, was praised by the ex-Socialist and founder of Italian fascism, Benito Mussolini, at the time. After Mussolini took power in 1921 and implemented corporatist unions, Gompers applauded during a visit to Italy, declaring that the fascist leader was "rapidly reconstructing a nation of collaborating units of usefulness."

Coming full circle, it was Mussolini's corporatism that inspired Gen. Juan Domingo Peron, when the future Argentine president was a military attaché in Italy, and led to the Peronist "model" of unionism in the CGT, now celebrated by the Biden administration.

The Mexican bourgeoisie integrated the union apparatus into the state almost since unions first appeared. In 1940, Leon Trotsky, who was living in exile in the country, wrote:

> In Mexico the trade unions have been transformed by law into semi-state institutions and have, in the nature of things, assumed a semi-totalitarian character. The stateization of the trade unions was, according to the conception of the legislators, introduced in the interests of the workers in order to assure them an influence upon the governmental and economic life. But insofar as foreign imperialist capitalism dominates the national state and insofar as it is able, with the assistance of internal reactionary forces, to overthrow the unstable democracy and replace it with outright fascist dictatorship, to that extent the legislation relating to the trade unions can easily become a weapon in the hands of imperialist dictatorship.

Time and time again, the American union bureaucracy has worked with the CIA across Latin America to encourage the further integration of the union bureaucracy into the state and management as a means of employing the union apparatus as weapons in the hands of pro-imperialist dictatorships.

In 1997, the AFL-CIO sought to varnish the image of the AIFLD by changing its name to Solidarity Center. Most apologists, including publications like *Labor Notes* and *Jacobin* would have workers in America believe that the US government continues to fund the AFL-CIO as a beacon for workers rights and "labor internationalism," even as it sends billions of dollars in weapons for the Zionist genocide in Gaza.

But the opposite is the case. As summed up by David North in "Trotsky's Last Year," the existence of unions as "workers organizations" is a thing of the past:

> The process of corporatist degeneration over a period of eighty years precludes, in all but the most exceptional circumstances, the resuscitation of the old unions. The alternative strategical course, raised by Trotsky in *The Transitional Program* in 1938, is the policy that conforms to present-day conditions; that is, "to create in all possible instances independent militant organizations corresponding more closely to the tasks of mass struggle against bourgeois society, and, if necessary, not flinching even in the face of a direct break with the conservative apparatus of the trade unions."

Globalization and financialization since the 1980s have intensified the drive of imperialism to gain control over strategic minerals, fuels and nodules of global production networks through recolonization and war. The response by all factions of the national ruling elites and the trade union bureaucracies to globalization has been to become more "competitive" for investments at all costs.

The fight against inequality, war, fascism and imperialist oppression today means rebelling against the entire union apparatus and building the International Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. To lead this fight, a new revolutionary leadership needs to be built as sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International across Latin America and the world.

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