

Unions and Cold War Foreign Policy in the 1980s: The National Labor Committee, the AFL-CIO, and Central America*

The relationship of American labor to the Cold War, both at home and abroad, has long engaged the attention of historians. A common refrain of many studies is that organized labor embraced the Cold War consensus, leading the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to expel eleven communist-led or “left” unions in 1949–50 and to join the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in support of the anticommunist foreign policy of the United States. This was certainly a significant development, and few American institutions proved as resolute in support of the Cold War as the merged AFL-CIO. Yet this was hardly a development unique to American unions, since noncommunist (including socialist) labor movements throughout Western Europe also supported the Cold War foreign policies of their respective states. Moreover, labor’s integration into the Cold War consensus was not a uniform or immutable development. There were differences between the versions of anticommunist foreign policy advocated by AFL and CIO unions, both before and after their 1955 merger. Further, segments of organized labor did dissent from the Vietnam War and question its Cold War justifications, notwithstanding the indelible image of hard hats pummeling youthful protesters. Finally, when the Reagan administration sought to overcome the “Vietnam syndrome” and revive Cold War interventionism in Central America, an important group of U.S. unions quickly and forcefully opposed the policy and its Cold War premises, even as the AFL-CIO largely supported the administration’s efforts in the region.¹

*I wish to thank the leaders and staff of the National Labor Committee, especially Jack Sheinkman, David Dyson, Charles Kernaghan, and Barbara Briggs, for granting interviews and access to the NLC’s documents at its headquarters in New York City. Photocopies of nearly all NLC documents cited in this paper are in the author’s possession. Research for this paper was facilitated by a Research Committee Grant from East Tennessee State University. I thank my colleagues Kenneth Mijeski and Hugh LaFollette, and especially two anonymous reviewers for *Diplomatic History*, for suggestions that improved this paper.

1. Among the many works that treat the relationship of American labor to the Cold War are: Ronald Radosh, *American Labor and United States Foreign Policy: The Cold War in the Unions from Gompers to Lovestone* (New York, 1969); Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict that Shaped American*

The 1980s was a decade of political and military crisis, and foreign involvement, in most of Central America, especially El Salvador and Nicaragua. Amid growing landlessness and poverty, armed insurgencies as well as reformist political oppositions arose in the 1970s against the military governments of both of these countries, but the course of the conflicts differed in the two nations. In Nicaragua, an insurrection led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) toppled the government of Anastasio Somoza in 1979, and the Sandinistas soon consolidated control over the Junta of National Reconstruction that assumed power upon Somoza's fall. Throughout the 1980s the leftist Sandinista regime was opposed and attacked by counterrevolutionary forces known as the Contras, which were organized and financed – sometimes officially, sometimes covertly – largely by the government of the United States. In El Salvador, guerrilla groups united into the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN) in 1980, and in the same year political opposition groups coalesced into the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR) and allied with the FMLN. Over the next decade the FDR/FMLN waged both armed and political struggle against a succession of Salvadoran governments that were, even when headed by centrist Christian Democratic President Jose Napoleon Duarte, dominated by rightists in the legislature, courts, military, and paramilitary death squads. The FDR/FMLN could not dislodge the government, but neither could the government and military defeat the armed opposition. El Salvador was locked in a bloody civil war in which some seventy-five thousand people lost their lives during the 1980s, mostly at the hands of the Salvadoran military.²

The administration of President Ronald Reagan viewed the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua and the rebel insurgency in El Salvador through the prism of Cold War and declining U.S. global power (in the wake of Vietnam, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the hostage crisis in Iran, and other developments). It considered the Nicaraguan revolution and Salvadoran guerrilla war to be products of Soviet and Cuban intervention, and regarded both the Sandinista regime and the FMLN rebels as Marxist-Leninist and totalitarian. The Reagan administration further viewed the Central American crisis as yet

Unions (Princeton, NJ, 1977); and Robert H. Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions* (Baltimore, 1994), 2d ed. On West European labor movements and the Cold War, see Adolph Sturmthal, *Left of Center: European Labor Since World War II* (Urbana, IL, 1983), and Denis MacShane, *International Labour and the Origins of the Cold War* (Oxford, 1992). The differences between the AFL and CIO versions of anticommunist foreign policy are examined in John P. Windmuller, "The Foreign Policy Conflict in American Labor," *Political Science Quarterly* 82 (June 1967): 205–34; and Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO, 1935–1955* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1995), 328–32. On union opposition to the Vietnam War, see Philip S. Foner, *American Labor and the Indochina War: The Growth of Union Opposition* (New York, 1971) and Peter B. Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s* (Urbana, IL, 1994), ch. 3.

2. Two valuable collections of essays on the Central America crisis of the 1980s are: Morris J. Blachman, William M. LeoGrande, and Kenneth Sharpe, eds., *Confronting Revolution: Security through Diplomacy in Central America* (New York, 1986); and Nora Hamilton, Jeffrey A. Frieden, Linda Fuller, and Manuel Pastor, Jr., eds., *Crisis in Central America: Regional Dynamics and U.S. Policy in the 1980s* (Boulder, 1988).

another indication of – and challenge to – waning American authority in the world, but also as an opportunity to restore U.S. influence. Constrained from direct military intervention by public and congressional opposition, the Reagan administration organized and sustained the Contras in order to destabilize the Sandinista government, and provided both military and economic aid to the Salvadoran government in the hope of defeating the FMLN guerrillas and their political allies. While the U.S. government under Reagan supported the opposition in Nicaragua but the government in El Salvador, the objective of U.S. policy in both countries was the same: to prevent the left from exercising or coming to power in America's own "back yard." However, the Reagan administration's provision of military aid to the Nicaraguan Contras and the Salvadoran government was at times conditioned, reduced, or even halted by Congress, which led the administration into the Iran-Contra scandals that undermined its policies in the region.³

Although the AFL-CIO (or the Federation, as it is sometimes called) strongly opposed the election and the domestic policies of Ronald Reagan, its views and positions on the Central America crisis were broadly similar, though not identical, to those of his administration. Like the latter, the Federation's top leaders and Department of International Affairs (DIA) emphasized Soviet and Cuban sponsorship of the Nicaraguan revolution and the Salvadoran guerrilla insurgency and insisted on the Marxist-Leninist and totalitarian character of the Sandinistas and the FMLN. Not surprisingly, then, the AFL-CIO leadership and DIA supported U.S. military aid to both the Nicaraguan Contras and the Salvadoran government, although their support was sometimes unofficial or (formally) conditional. The AFL-CIO never officially endorsed military aid to the Contras (for reasons explained below), but Federation President Lane Kirkland sat on the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America – or Kissinger Commission, established by President Reagan in 1983 and chaired by former secretary of state Henry Kissinger – which did endorse such aid, high officers and other leaders of the AFL-CIO participated in a prominent pro-Contra lobbying group, and several affiliated unions actively supported Contra aid. The Federation also sometimes endorsed human-rights conditions that Congress imposed on military aid to the government of El Salvador, but it consistently argued, as did President Reagan, that such conditions had been met and that aid should be disbursed. Furthermore, while the AFL-CIO supported land reform and economic development in Central America, it never let lack of progress on this front alter its support for military aid to the Salvadoran government, and when (in the latter 1980s) it was forced by dissident unions to compromise and to endorse political negotiations between governments and oppositions in Central America, it nonetheless continued to support U.S. military aid that prolonged the armed conflicts in the region.

3. The sources cited in the previous note also contain many essays on the Reagan administration's policies in Central America. For a good overview of U.S. policy in the region, see also Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (Chicago, 1996), chs. 2–3.

Thus, the AFL-CIO's Central America policies were more nuanced than those of the Reagan administration, but fundamentally it supported the latter's Cold War view of the crisis in the region and preference for military resolution of the conflicts there. The Cold War orientation of AFL-CIO policy was also evident in its own operations in Central America. The AFL-CIO and its foreign policy arm for Latin America, the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), recognized and supported only those trade unions and labor federations that were aligned with the Salvadoran government or against the Sandinista regime and shunned all labor organizations that espoused leftist or nationalist ideologies or that supported the Nicaraguan government or the Salvadoran rebels.⁴

Unlike the AFL-CIO, however, many U.S. unions strongly dissented from the Central America policies of the Reagan administration. The instrument of this union opposition to Cold War foreign policy in Central America was the National Labor Committee in Support of Democracy and Human Rights in El Salvador (hereafter the National Labor Committee, or NLC). The role of the National Labor Committee in contemporary labor and political history has not been adequately examined or appraised. It was an integral part of the U.S. Central America peace movement that opposed the Reagan administration and influenced congressional action on Central America, the most divisive foreign policy issue of the 1980s. The NLC also challenged the Central America policy and anticommunist international outlook of the AFL-CIO and sought to chart a new foreign policy for the U.S. labor movement, and thereby provoked the most serious and open foreign policy split in American labor in several decades. Further, the NLC contributed to the long and difficult task of rebuilding a strong labor-liberal coalition in American national politics. Last but not least, NLC was part of a larger and ongoing rift in the leadership of American labor that lay in the background of the dramatic 1995 leadership change at the AFL-CIO.

The NLC was created in September of 1981 by Jack Sheinkman, then secretary-treasurer of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU). Douglas Fraser, president of the United Auto Workers (UAW), and William Winpisinger, president of the International Association of Machinists (IAM), agreed to serve with Sheinkman as co-chairs of the NLC, and David Dyson, director of ACTWU's Union Label Department, assumed the top staff position of executive director. Sheinkman, Fraser, and Winpisinger recruited the NLC's membership gradually over a period of three or four years. By the October 1985 convention of the AFL-CIO – at which a sharp debate took place over U.S. policy in Central America – the NLC was at full strength, with twenty-five members from twenty-three unions, including many of the Federation's largest and most important affiliates. That the NLC was able to recruit

4. The views and policies of the AFL-CIO on Central America during the 1980s will be documented in detail later in the paper.

and retain this membership was no small accomplishment. As Dyson explained, "Putting a national committee together . . . it was a real act of independence, defiance, a real vote of no confidence in the way the AFL-CIO was handling the Central America policy question and the question of unions in Central America." Referring to AFL-CIO officials, Sheinkman concluded this line of thought: "They did everything they could to undermine us and to get some of the international [i.e., union] leaders to withdraw, but I'm proud that over the years we not only held fast but added [members]."⁵

Membership in the NLC was restricted to presidents of national unions – with the temporary exception of Sheinkman himself, who rose from secretary-treasurer to president of ACTWU in 1987 – for three reasons. First, at the time the NLC was founded, lower levels of trade union leadership and activists were already being mobilized by emerging local labor committees opposed to U.S. policy in Central America. Second, as the NLC was going to dissent from the rigidly anticommunist approach of the AFL-CIO, its founders excluded non-labor groups and individuals in order to protect it from red-baiting by the Federation, which had a long history of discrediting dissenters in labor by claiming outside leftist influence on them. Finally, national union presidents

5. David Dyson and Daniel Cantor, "Anaheim and After: A Proposal for General Support Funding of the National Labor Committee," September 1986; National Labor Committee, "Background on the National Labor Committee," nd; National Labor Committee in Support of Democracy and Human Rights in El Salvador, *The Search For Peace in Central America* (New York, May 1985); David Dyson, interview, New York City, 10 May 1993; Jack Sheinkman, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993.

As of 1985, the membership of the NLC was as follows, with all members being presidents of their respective unions unless otherwise noted: Jack Sheinkman, secretary-treasurer, ACTWU; Douglas Fraser, president emeritus, UAW; William Winpisinger, IAM; Morton Bahr, Communications Workers of America (CWA); Owen Bieber, UAW; Kenneth Blaylock, American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE); Kenneth Brown, Graphic Communications International Union (GCIU); Bernard Buttsavage, International Molders and Allied Workers Union (IMAW); William Bywater, International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE); Cesar Chavez, United Farm Workers of America (UFW); John DeConcini, Bakery, Confectionary, and Tobacco Workers Union (BCTW); Murray Finley, ACTWU; Mary Hatwood Futrell, National Education Association (NEA); James Herman, International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU); Keith Johnson, International Woodworkers of America (IWA); James Kane, United Electrical Workers (UE); Frank Martino, International Chemical Workers Union (ICW); Gerald McEntee, American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME); Joseph Misbrenner, Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW); Henry Nicholas, National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees (NUHHCE); Charles Perlik, The Newspaper Guild (TNG); Carl Scarbrough, United Furniture Workers of America (UFWA); Vincent Sombrotto, National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC); John Sweeney, Service Employees International Union (SEIU); and J. C. Turner, International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE). In the late 1980s three unions – IMWA, IWA, and IUOE – left the NLC, but by 1993 it had added four new union presidents to its roster: Ron Carey, Teamsters Union (IBT); Mac Fleming, Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWE); Jay Mazur, International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU); and William Wynn, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). Sources: National Labor Committee in Support of Democracy and Human Rights in El Salvador, *The Search for Peace in Central America*, 3–4; National Labor Committee in Support of Democracy and Human Rights in El Salvador, *El Salvador: Critical Choices* (New York, June 1989), inside front cover; and National Labor Committee Education Fund in Support of Worker and Human Rights in Central America, *Haiti after the Coup: Still in the Hands of Thugs*, April 1993, 4–5.

had the positions and legitimacy that would enable the NLC to most effectively challenge the views of the AFL-CIO and provide an alternative labor voice on Central America in national politics.⁶

Most of the union presidents in the NLC joined as individuals, but they represented their respective unions. In most cases, the membership of union presidents in the NLC signified a larger commitment by their unions – or at least the broader leaderships of their unions – to the NLC. This is indicated by two facts. First, eleven unions were represented in the NLC by successive presidents. Second, two unions (the Service Employees International Union [SEIU] and the Communications Workers of America [CWA]) formally instructed or informally pressured their presidents to join the NLC. To a considerable degree, the NLC was a committee of unions as organizations as well as of union presidents as individuals. Three kinds of unions supplied the bulk of the NLC's member presidents. Focusing on the twenty-three unions in the NLC as of 1985, thirteen (57 percent) were based in manufacturing industries, four (17 percent) in government employment, and two (9 percent) in the service sector; no more than one NLC union came from any other industrial sector. Opposition to Cold War foreign policy in Central America was thus concentrated among unions in the manufacturing and public sectors, for reasons explained later.⁷

Member unions varied in their level of participation in and contribution to the NLC. Until it merged with another union in 1995, the ACTWU was the principal sponsor of the NLC, and devoted far more time, effort, and resources to the NLC than any other union. Indeed, the NLC was in many ways Jack Sheinkman's project, the product of his initiative and political views. Four other unions – the UAW, the IAM, the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), and the National Education Association (NEA) – played a vital role in the NLC and, along with ACTWU, comprised its core unions. They supplied the co-chairs of the NLC, were among its earliest and permanent members, made significant financial or organizational assistance available to it, and participated extensively in its political activities. An intermediate group of about twelve unions made a more modest contribution to the NLC, and the remaining half-dozen unions played a limited role.

In 1985 the combined membership of the NLC unions was just under 7.2 million, a majority of the unionized workforce. The NLC could thus claim to speak for a large number of unionists and citizens, an important resource for political action. Its other resources were limited, though not as meager as might

6. Jack Sheinkman, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993; David Dyson, interview, New York City, 10 May 1993; Daniel Cantor, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993.

7. On the cases of SEIU and CWA, see Dave Slaney, "Solidarity and Self-Interest," *NACLA: Report on the Americas*, May–June 1988, 30; and Sean Sweeney, "Labour Imperialism or Democratic Internationalism? U.S. Trade Unions and the Conflict in El Salvador and Nicaragua, 1981–1989" (Ph.D. diss., University of Bath, 1990), 291–92. The industrial sectors of NLC unions were determined based on data on union membership by industry group in Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Directory of National Unions and Employee Associations, 1979* (Washington, DC, 1979), Appendix A.

initially appear to be the case. NLC unions made annual contributions of up to five thousand dollars to the NLC, with smaller unions contributing less. These were small sums for unions. NLC also secured grants from a few progressive foundations, but none of the grants exceeded fifteen thousand dollars. It is probable that the NLC's annual budget was under \$150,000 during the 1980s. On the other hand, the NLC's core unions periodically gave additional money to the NLC and also provided it with substantial in-kind assistance, including staff services. The NLC's own staff was small – limited to just two people in the 1980s – but talented and dedicated. Dyson, the executive director, was the sole staff during the NLC's first three years, and performed this role while still working as director of ACTWU's Union Label Department. He nonetheless managed to devote a great deal of time and effort to the NLC, and his personal contribution to it was enormous. Beginning in 1984, the NLC added a full-time national organizer, first Daniel Cantor and later Charles Kernaghan.⁸

Just as member unions and their presidents were not required to make substantial cash or in-kind contributions to the NLC, neither were they required to devote significant time or effort to it or to compromise their personal or organizational autonomy. The NLC did not even hold regular meetings, which would have required considerable time and travel by union presidents. Further, the NLC avoided issues and alliances that were divisive within it, and member unions were free to participate or not in activities such as fact-finding missions to Central America or the 1987 Mobilization for Justice and Peace in Central America and Southern Africa. The NLC essentially operated on principles of consensus decision-making and voluntary participation. Reducing the political obligations and organizational burdens on presidents and their unions minimized the costs of membership in the NLC and facilitated recruitment and retention of members. It also left the NLC short of resources and rather insubstantial as an organization.⁹

Yet, despite organizational weaknesses, the NLC proved capable of meaningful political action. Its limited organizational resources and capacities were not a severe problem, because its own resources were not the only ones upon which it could draw. Being composed of unions that conducted and financed their own political operations, all the NLC needed to do was to coordinate these unions and their political activities. Much of its legislative lobbying, for example, was conducted and financed by its member unions separately, but after

8. The membership figure was calculated from data in Courtney D. Gifford, *Directory of U.S. Labor Organizations, 1988–89 Edition* (Washington, 1988), 42, 47, and Appendix A. David Dyson, interview, New York City, 10 May 1993; Dave Dyson and Bill Patterson, memo to Don Stillman, 16 November 1983; Jack Sheinkman to Henry Nicholas, 3 June 1986; David Dyson, memo to El Salvador Contacts, 29 June 1989; Kitty Krupat, "From War Zone to Free Trade Zone: A History of the National Labor Committee," in *No Sweat: Fashion, Free Trade, and the Rights of Garment Workers*, ed. Andrew Ross (New York, 1997), 73; Daniel Cantor, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993; Charles Kernaghan, interview, New York City, 12 May 1993.

9. Daniel Cantor, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993; Jack Sheinkman, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993.

consultation and coordination through the NLC. Moreover, the NLC utilized local labor committees, with their committed and skilled activists at the grassroots level, in its political work. Combining these other resources and capacities with its own enabled the NLC to undertake the kinds and amount of political activity required by its objectives.

Those objectives were first broached publicly in a 26 March 1982 advertisement that the NLC placed in the *New York Times*, which suggested that the NLC had political, international, and institutional objectives, though the last was only implied in the ad. As a later NLC document put it, the NLC was organized to play the three roles of "interest group," "solidarity catalyst," and "labor caucus."¹⁰

The NLC's domestic political objective was to oppose and change U.S. policy toward El Salvador. Above all, Sheinkman and his colleagues wanted to prevent direct U.S. military intervention in El Salvador, end U.S. military aid to the Salvadoran government, and redirect U.S. influence toward promoting a negotiated settlement of the conflict in that country. Once the NLC expanded its agenda to include Nicaragua, it worked throughout the decade to end U.S. aid to the Contras. The NLC's opposition to U.S. policy in Central America extended to the Cold War premises of that policy. As Sheinkman said of the Salvadoran civil war, "In my view, it was a battle that had nothing to do with the Cold War. . . . It was an indigenous revolution arising from political circumstances that had their roots long before, back in the whole economic and political structure of El Salvador." Thus, an underlying political goal of the NLC was to challenge the Cold War framework of U.S. foreign policy, and the NLC argued repeatedly that the conflicts in Central America were caused not by communist subversion or Soviet intervention but by long-standing poverty and injustice.¹¹

10. National Labor Committee in Support of Democracy and Human Rights in El Salvador and New York City Labor Committee in Support of Democracy and Human Rights in El Salvador, "And Now We Too Must Speak Out," *New York Times*, 26 March 1982; National Labor Committee, "Background on the National Labor Committee," nd, 3.

11. National Labor Committee and New York City Labor Committee, "And Now We Too Must Speak Out"; David Dyson and Daniel Cantor, "Anaheim and After: A Proposal for General Support Funding of the National Labor Committee," September 1986, 6, 9; Jack Sheinkman, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993.

An anonymous reviewer for *Diplomatic History* disagreed with my interpretation of the quote from Jack Sheinkman and with my claim that the National Labor Committee challenged the Cold War framework of U.S. foreign policy. The reviewer argued that the quote indicates only that Sheinkman disputed the relevance of the Cold War (East-West conflict) to the civil war in El Salvador, not that he rejected the Cold War (anticommunist or antiSoviet) framework or basis of U.S. foreign policy. The National Labor Committee, the reviewer believes, accepted the anti-communist or Cold War principles of U.S. foreign policy but denied that it was valid to apply those principles to the crisis in Central America.

It is surely true that Jack Sheinkman and the other union leaders in the National Labor Committee were anticommunist in the sense that they opposed the social and political system of the Soviet Union and other Communist regimes. But I believe that the anticommunism of NLC leaders in the 1980s was a residual ideological orientation that did not commit them to a Cold War foreign policy in any traditional sense. The anticommunism of NLC leaders was descended from

The NLC's international objective was to support the efforts of the Salvadoran people to secure democratic and human rights, including the rights to free and fair elections, to freedom of thought and expression, to live and work free of fear, and to organize trade unions. As the NLC's leaders believed that in El Salvador workers (including peasants), unions, and labor leaders were the principal victims of political repression, they were chiefly concerned with defending the right of Salvadoran workers to form unions and, through them, to bargain with employers, strike, and participate in political life. The NLC's leaders established the NLC to supplement the work of traditional human

the postwar CIO, which upheld – in both domestic politics and foreign policy – a tough but progressive anticommunism that was fairly close to that of contemporary European social democratic labor movements and political parties. In their foreign policy views, however, NLC leaders were much more directly the heirs of United Auto Workers President Walter Reuther in the 1960s, when his disputes with AFL-CIO President George Meany over foreign policy were a key part of his decision to lead the UAW out of the Federation. Reuther was as committed an anticommunist as the postwar CIO produced, but in the 1960s he supported detente and arms control with the Soviet Union, favored expanded economic, political, and cultural contacts and exchanges between Western and Communist nations, and opposed – if rather late in the day – the war in Vietnam. Reuther no doubt remained an anticommunist all his days, which were tragically cut short by an airplane crash in 1970, but his evolving foreign policy views served as the transition between those of the CIO in the immediate postwar years and those of NLC leaders in the 1980s.

Like the UAW, most other unions that enrolled in the NLC had opposed the war in Vietnam, though in many cases not until after President Lyndon Johnson was out of office. From that point on they also favored detente, arms control, and – even in the case of unions, like the UAW and the IAM (Machinists), that represented workers in defense industry – reduced levels of defense spending. When the NLC's opposition to the Reagan administration's policy in Central America is placed in this larger context of foreign policy positions by its constituent unions, it seems to me misleading to suggest that the NLC accepted the Cold War basis of U.S. foreign policy and only disputed the application of that policy to the conflicts in Central America. Most NLC unions were in fact strongly opposed to the revival of Cold War tensions during the first Reagan administration.

NLC leaders were still anticommunist in their basic political principles, but that alone is not always sufficient to lead to support for traditional Cold War foreign policy. A series of further judgments is necessary for that, including the judgment that the Soviet Union or communism is a serious threat to national interests, the judgment that other threats to those interests (requiring different foreign policies) do not exist or are much less serious, and the judgment that the costs of Cold War foreign policy are acceptable. CIO leaders of the immediate postwar years made or accepted all these judgments, but I do not think that NLC leaders of the 1980s did. After nearly forty years of coexistence, the level of threat that the Soviet Union was seen to pose to Western Europe and the United States was much reduced for NLC leaders compared to leaders of the postwar CIO. The great exception to this reduction of threat was, of course, the nuclear arsenal of the USSR and the balance of nuclear terror between it and the United States, but it was precisely this nightmarish reality that led many people to favor an easing of tensions with the Soviet Union. Moreover, NLC leaders saw other external threats to working class and national interests that were serious and more immediate than any posed by Communist states, including the repressive regimes in many developing countries that – propped up by U.S. military and financial assistance – maintained nonunion and low-wage labor forces with which American workers had to compete, and more broadly the development of an unregulated world market. Finally, the war in Vietnam had already convinced many NLC unions that the domestic economic and political costs, not to mention the human costs, of Cold War foreign policy were unacceptable. NLC leaders remained anticommunists, but they no longer joined the Meany/Kirkland wing of American labor in full-throated support of Cold War foreign policy.

rights groups by focusing more clearly and forcefully on worker rights, and to develop and expand the practice of international labor solidarity.¹²

The NLC's institutional objective was to promote within the labor movement a new international outlook and role different from that of the AFL-CIO. Sheinkman has emphasized that the NLC "was not organized as a direct confrontation" with the AFL-CIO, and it is true that the NLC rarely publicly criticized the Federation or its controversial arm in Central America, the AIFLD. Nonetheless, since the AFL-CIO had monopolized control of foreign affairs for three decades and remained uncompromisingly anticommunist, the very formation of the NLC was a challenge to the Federation, and that challenge only grew as the NLC fought within the Federation to alter labor's official policies on El Salvador and Nicaragua.¹³

Of these three objectives, the most urgent was to oppose and change U.S. policy toward Central America. In a series of reports on labor and politics in El Salvador and Nicaragua, the NLC criticized the Reagan administration's policy of providing military aid to the Salvadoran government and Nicaraguan Contras. It disputed the administration's Cold War justifications of that policy and presented alternative views of the sources of conflict, the character of governments and oppositions, and the status of labor and human rights in El Salvador and Nicaragua.¹⁴

The NLC argued that the civil war in El Salvador was rooted in long-standing underdevelopment, poverty, and injustice and had been precipitated by state repression of the popular protests against those conditions that exploded in the late 1970s. It further argued that President Duarte, who served from 1984 through 1989, and his centrist Christian Democratic Party held no real power in El Salvador and served mainly to continue the flow of U.S. military aid. The Salvadoran right retained effective control of the state through the influence of Roberto D'Aubuisson's National Republican Alliance (ARENA) party in the National Assembly, the predominance of rightists in the judiciary, and the continued role of the army as the arbiter of power in El Salvador. As a result, during Duarte's tenure, democratic rights (of association, expression, and personal security) continued to be denied, state repression and death squad activity were reduced but not ended, and no real progress was made toward land reform, prosecution of military officers responsible for

12. National Labor Committee and New York City Labor Committee, "And Now We Too Must Speak Out"; Jack Sheinkman, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993; David Dyson, interview, New York City, 10 May 1993; National Labor Committee, "Background on the National Labor Committee," nd.

13. Jack Sheinkman, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993; David Dyson, interview, New York City, 10 May 1993; Daniel Cantor, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993; David Dyson and Daniel Cantor, "Anaheim and After: A Proposal for General Support Funding of the National Labor Committee," September 1986, 4-5; Slaney, "Solidarity and Self-Interest," 28-36.

14. The four reports published by the National Labor Committee in Support of Democracy and Human Rights in El Salvador were: *El Salvador: Labor, Terror, and Peace* (New York, July 1983); *The Search for Peace in Central America*; *El Salvador: Critical Choices*; and *El Salvador 1990: Arena Repression Unites the Salvadoran Labor Movement* (New York, September 1990).

massive human-rights violations, or negotiated settlement of the civil war. Moreover, trade unions could not function freely in El Salvador; indeed, they had been a special target of state repression and right-wing violence in that country since 1979–80. The NLC testified to Congress in 1988 that nearly six thousand unionists had been killed in El Salvador during the 1980s. It considered the main opposition force, the FDR/FMLN, an ideologically diverse movement that represented major social forces in El Salvador.¹⁵

The NLC further argued that the Reagan administration's policy of military aid in fact undermined its stated objectives of restoring peace and democracy and strengthening the political center in El Salvador. Military aid, the NLC claimed, failed to address the underlying sources of the conflict, strengthened the military-right wing alliance, and stiffened its resistance to political negotiations, and thus prolonged the war in El Salvador. For all these reasons, the NLC opposed military aid to the Salvadoran government. It insisted that only a settlement negotiated between the government and the FDR/FMLN could achieve peace and democracy in El Salvador, and supported various plans for political negotiations, including the Contadora process and the Arias Plan.¹⁶

The NLC did not share the Reagan administration's view of the Nicaraguan government as a totalitarian regime. It did express reservations about Sandinista ideology, criticize limitations of democratic process in Nicaragua, and call on the Sandinista government to halt harassment of opposition trade unions. However, it argued that opposition unions were allowed to exist and press their demands on the government, seemed sympathetic to the view that restrictions on the right to strike were induced by the pressures of war, and insisted that in Nicaragua there was no repression of unions or murder and torture of union leaders, as there was in El Salvador. The NLC was highly critical of the Contras, arguing that they had no substantial social base or public support in Nicaragua and functioned as a proxy army for the United States in an effort to destabilize

15. National Labor Committee and New York City Labor Committee, "And Now We Too Must Speak Out"; NLC, *El Salvador: Labor, Terror, and Peace*, 3–7, 11–15; NLC, *The Search for Peace in Central America*, 7–10, 14–15, 24; NLC, *El Salvador: Critical Choices*, 4–8, 13–15; NLC, *El Salvador 1990: ARENA Repression Unites the Salvadoran Labor Movement*, 3–5; David Dyson, "Testimony of April 27, 1988" (photocopy of typed manuscript in author's possession), 1–6.

16. National Labor Committee and New York City Labor Committee, "And Now We Too Must Speak Out"; NLC, *El Salvador: Labor, Terror, and Peace*, 18–19; NLC, *The Search for Peace in Central America*, 13–16, 24, 27; NLC, *El Salvador: Critical Choices*, 12–15; NLC, *El Salvador 1990*, 1–2, 13–14; David Dyson, "Testimony of April 27, 1988," 4–6, 16. The Contadora process was initiated in 1983 by Panama, Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela to promote a regional political settlement of the conflicts in Central America, and the Arias Plan, proposed later in the decade by the Costa Rican President Oscar Arias, was likewise a framework for a region-wide negotiated settlement of Central American conflicts. Because the Contadora process and Arias Plan favored regional settlement of Central American conflicts by means of political negotiations in which the United States would have no direct role or influence, the Reagan administration was hostile toward both. The Arias Plan, for which President Arias received a Nobel Prize in 1987, led to the Esquipulas Accord of that year, which provided a framework under which the governments and oppositions of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and other Central American nations negotiated treaties that concluded their military conflicts.

the Sandinista regime. The NLC urged the U.S. government to end military aid to the Contras, stop blocking Nicaraguan access to international aid and credit, and resume bilateral talks with the Nicaraguan government. It also called for talks between the Sandinista government and opposition forces in the framework of the Contadora process, which sought a negotiated peace throughout Central America.¹⁷

In order to change U.S. policy in El Salvador and Nicaragua, the NLC engaged in four types of political activity: publication of reports on conditions in Central America based on fact-finding missions to the region, sponsorship of speaking tours of the United States by Salvadoran unionists, congressional lobbying, and mobilization of popular protest. First, between 1983 and 1990 the NLC conducted five fact-finding missions in El Salvador and Nicaragua and then published four reports on labor and political conditions in those countries. Three of the delegations that the NLC sent on these missions included members or staff of the U.S. Congress, and all of the delegations met with workers and union officers (some imprisoned), business leaders, government and military officials (including President Duarte in 1985), and religious leaders and human rights activists in both countries. Publication of the reports was often timed to influence congressional votes on military aid to the Salvadoran government or Nicaraguan Contras, and the reports were widely distributed among unions, the public, the media, and members of Congress. Patterned after the work of human-rights groups such as Americas Watch and Amnesty International, these missions and reports were the chief means by which the NLC carried out two of its most basic functions: monitoring labor rights in Central America and influencing policy debates in the United States.¹⁸

Second, between 1986 and 1990 the NLC sponsored three speaking tours of the United States by Salvadoran labor leaders. The Salvadorans delivered speeches, held press conferences, gave interviews to the media, and had meetings with American union leaders and members of Congress. The tours were intended to increase awareness in the United States of continuing abuses of labor and human rights in El Salvador and to encourage a shift of U.S. policy away from military aid and toward support for a political settlement of the Salvadoran civil war.¹⁹

17. NLC, *The Search For Peace in Central America*, 17–25.

18. NLC, *El Salvador: Labor, Terror, and Peace*, 1–2; NLC, *The Search for Peace in Central America*, 3–5; NLC, *El Salvador: Critical Choices*, 2–3; NLC, *El Salvador 1990*, “Preface”; National Labor Committee, *Labor Rights Denied, El Salvador: An On-Site Investigation by a Delegation of Labor-Legislative-Religious Leaders* (New York, December 1988), 3–4; Jack Sheinkman, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993; David Dyson, interview, New York City, 10 May 1993; Daniel Cantor, interview, New York City, May 11, 1993.

19. National Union of Salvadoran Workers (UNTS), “Proposal for Tour of the United States by a Delegation from the National Union of Salvadoran Workers (UNTS),” nd; NLC, “Freed Salvadoran Labor Leader Meets N.Y. Union Leaders,” press release, 20 June 1989; David Dyson, memo to (ACTWU) General Office Staff, 21 June 1989; NLC, *El Salvador 1990*, “Preface”; Jack Sheinkman to unnamed persons, 18 July 1988.

Third, the NLC lobbied Congress. NLC staff presented testimony at congressional hearings, and NLC union presidents wrote letters and made telephone calls to Democratic leaders and swing votes in the House of Representatives. Just as important, the NLC assisted and coordinated both Washington, DC, and grassroots (congressional-district) lobbying on Central America by its constituent unions and by allied local labor committees. NLC staff monitored relevant legislation and votes in Congress, sent out "Legislative Alerts" to notify member unions and other groups of upcoming congressional debates and votes, supplied these unions and groups with information and arguments, and worked with House Democratic leaders to target swing votes in the House for lobbying. When the NLC's ultimate objectives (terminating military aid to the Salvadoran government and Nicaraguan Contras in favor of political negotiations) were not on the congressional agenda, it lobbied for lesser but important goals like retaining human rights conditions on military aid and reducing or withholding such aid. In the effort to halt or reduce Contra aid, the NLC joined lobbying coalitions like "Countdown '87" and the "Central America Working Group."²⁰

Fourth, together with religious leaders from various churches, NLC unions cosponsored the 25 April 1987 Mobilization for Justice and Peace in Central America and Southern Africa, a protest demonstration held in both Washington, DC, and San Francisco. Dyson, a principal strategist and organizer of the mobilization, believed that dramatic protest politics was necessary to revive a stalled U.S. Central America peace movement because, as he said, "The one thing this movement hasn't had is a popular presence, or a street presence." At the same time, he wanted the mobilization to establish the mainstream character of the movement and thus favored sponsorship of it by labor and religious leaders, rather than the smaller activist and ideological groups in the movement. The mobilization drew about one hundred thousand people in Washington, DC, and about thirty thousand in San Francisco, making it the largest and most publicized event conducted by the U.S. Central America peace movement. It had been timed to influence an anticipated spring vote in Congress on Contra aid; when the postponed vote was finally taken in the fall, Congress denied the large aid package President Reagan had requested, although it is unclear what role the mobilization played in that outcome.²¹

20. David Dyson, "Testimony before House Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations," 17 May 1985 (photocopy of typed manuscript in author's possession); David Dyson, "Testimony of April 27, 1988"; Jack Sheinkman to Henry Nicholas, 3 June 1986; Jack Sheinkman to William Winpisinger, 1 October 1987; National Labor Committee, "Funding El Salvador: Debate in the U.S. Congress," March–April 1989; National Labor Committee, "Funding El Salvador: Legislative Overview," 26 April 1989; Jack Sheinkman to the Honorable Dante Fascell, 22 May 1989; David Dyson and Charles Kernaghan, memo to Labor Contacts, November 1989; David Dyson and Charles Kernaghan, memo to Labor Contacts, 25 April 1990; Charles Kernaghan, memo to National Labor Committee Contacts, 21 October 1991.

21. National Labor Committee, "An Appeal to the People of the U.S.," photocopy, nd; Jack Sheinkman, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993; David Dyson, interview, New York City, 10 May

In these efforts to change U.S. policy in Central America, the NLC followed a three-fold strategy – one of cooperation with local labor committees, coalition with nonlabor groups, and coordination with liberal Democrats in the House of Representatives – to maximize its political influence. First of all, it cooperated with many of the local labor committees that had formed to protest U.S. policy in Central America. Some twenty-seven of these cross-union committees existed nationwide, mainly in larger cities on the two coasts and in the Great Lakes states, though only fifteen or so were well organized and effective. Although the NLC had helped to organize many of these local committees, it did not charter them as chapters or branches, as it did not want to be identified with those local committees that openly embraced the FMLN and Sandinistas or that were influenced by a sectarian leftist group on the West Coast. However, the NLC worked closely with the local labor committees in the East and Midwest. It was in regular communication with them and involved them integrally in lobbying Congress, sponsoring U.S. tours by Central American labor leaders, and mobilizing unionists for the 1987 demonstration. Working with the local committees increased the resources (e.g., activists and communication networks) and strategic options (e.g., grassroots lobbying) available to the NLC.²²

A second NLC strategy was coalition politics. The NLC's founders had pledged publicly "to join with other segments of American society, such as religious, community, and human rights groups" in the effort to promote democracy and human rights in El Salvador. The most important alliance that the NLC formed was with churches. As indicated earlier, Dyson devised a "labor and religion formula" for sponsorship of the 1987 Mobilization for Justice and Peace in Central America and Southern Africa. This union-church alliance continued in a lobbying coalition called Countdown '87, organized to oppose President Reagan's bid for major new Contra aid, in a 1988 fact-finding mission to El Salvador that issued a report entitled *Labor Rights Denied: El Salvador*, and in a 1989 "Labor-Religious Dialogue for Peace in El Salvador," held in New York City and chaired by Sheinkman, that urged the Bush administration and Congress to end military aid to El Salvador and to support a regional peace process in Central America. The NLC's relationship with churches was facilitated by the fact that Dyson was an ordained Presbyterian minister who had

1993; Daniel Cantor, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993; Sweeney, "Labour Imperialism or Democratic Internationalism?", 548–52, 570–73.

22. National Labor Committee, "Cities Committees," nd; Ben Davis to David Dyson, 25 July 1988; Denys Everingham and Bruce Bodner to Labor Committee Supporters, nd; Tess Ewing to Brothers and Sisters, 1 June 1988; Tess Ewing to Dave Dyson, 26 May 1989; Scott Harding to Dave Dyson, 24 June 1988; "Interview with David Dyson," *Labor Report on Central America*, 1988 (prepublication transcription; photocopy of typed manuscript in author's possession); Slaney, "Solidarity and Self-Interest," 28–36; Labor Coalition on Central America, *Labor Action*, February 1990; Labor Coalition on Central America, *Labor Action*, April/May 1990; Jack Sheinkman, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993; David Dyson, interview, New York City, 10 May 1993; Daniel Cantor, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993.

for two decades linked the worlds of religious faith and labor activism. NLC leaders believed that its alliance with churches enhanced both the legitimacy and the effectiveness of its opposition to U.S. policy in Central America. Sheinkman explained that this alliance was

[a] very important, very helpful linkage, because you might find a “red” priest or a “red” nun but it’s not very likely, so they couldn’t label us that. There were some American church groups doing yeoman’s, and God’s, work there as far as I was concerned, working very effectively . . . so we worked very closely. . . . We helped them and they helped us.

In addition to cooperating with churches, the NLC also worked with human rights groups, particularly Americas Watch.²³

Finally, the NLC sought to augment its influence by coordinating much of its political activity with sympathetic liberal Democrats in the House of Representatives. It worked closely with Representatives Gerry Studds, David Bonior, Joseph Moakley, Michael Barnes, Edward Boland, and others to organize and conduct its speaking tours by Salvadoran unionists, its lobbying campaigns, and even its fact-finding missions to Central America. Liberal House Democrats helped to ensure that Salvadoran labor leaders were granted visas to the United States and agreed to meet with them, worked with the NLC to identify the representatives who were swing votes on Contra aid and the key unions in their districts, and sent members of their staffs on NLC fact-finding missions, or even joined an NLC delegation to Central America, as Studds did in 1989. Like other groups opposed to U.S. policy in Central America, the NLC recognized the Democratic-controlled House as the main locus of dissent to that policy within the national government – though NLC staff felt that the House had limitations as a vehicle for dissenting groups on Central America – and cooperated with like-minded representatives in order to more effectively challenge Reagan administration policy.²⁴

23. National Labor Committee and New York City Labor Committee, “And Now We Too Must Speak Out”; Jack Sheinkman to Supporters, 17 October 1984; David Dyson to Ken Blaylock, 23 December 1986; David Dyson to John DeMars, 17 November 1987; NLC, *Labor Rights Denied: El Salvador*, 3; NLC, “Funding El Salvador: Legislative Overview”; David Dyson, memo to General Office Staff, 21 June 1989; David Dyson, memo to El Salvador Contacts, 29 June 1989; David Dyson and Charles Kernaghan, memo to Labor Contacts, November 1989; National Labor Committee, “An Appeal to President Bush and Congress: Statement Agreed to at Labor-Religious Dialogue for Peace in El Salvador,” 20 December 1989; Jack Sheinkman, memo to Members of the National Labor Committee, 18 January 1990; Jack Sheinkman, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993; Sweeney, “Labour Imperialism or Democratic Internationalism?,” 578–80.

24. Jack Sheinkman to William Winpisinger, 1 October 1987; UNTS, “Proposal for Tour of the United States by a Delegation From the Union of Salvadoran Workers (UNTS),” nd; David Dyson to John DeMars, 17 November 1987; “Interview with David Dyson,” *Labor Report on Central America*; Jack Sheinkman to unknown, 18 July 1988; David Dyson, memo to General Office Staff, 21 June 1989; David Dyson, memo to El Salvador Contacts, 29 June 1989; NLC, *El Salvador: Critical Choices*, 3; David Dyson and Charles Kernaghan, memo to Labor Contacts, 25 April 1990; Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 97–99; NLC, “Funding El Salvador: Legislative Overview.”

What influence did the NLC have on U.S. policy in Central America, and how successful was it in accomplishing its objectives? To begin with, congressional and interest-group opponents of the Reagan administration's Central America policy were unable to wrest control of the policymaking agenda from the White House until the Iran-Contra scandal broke. Moreover, the administration prevailed over its opponents in crucial mid-decade legislative battles – over provision of military aid to the Salvadoran government following Duarte's inauguration in 1984, and over restoration of funding for the Nicaraguan Contras in 1985 and 1986 after Congress had let it expire – that fixed U.S. policy in Central America for several years. These were critical defeats for all opponents of Reagan's policy, including the NLC.²⁵

However, Congress shaped U.S. policy in Central America in ways that constrained the administration and were consistent with, if short of, the objectives of the U.S. Central America peace movement. It prevented the administration from acting on any plans it might have had for direct U.S. military intervention in Central America; supported Central American efforts – like the Arias peace plan – to resolve the conflicts in the region through political negotiation and cessation of external interference; and frequently reduced, often conditioned, and sometimes halted U.S. military aid to the Salvadoran government and the Nicaraguan contras. To what extent did these congressional actions result from the influence of the U.S. Central America peace movement and its various components?²⁶

Many scholars have argued that the U.S. Central America peace movement and broader public opinion were key to forming and sustaining congressional resistance – such as it was – to Reagan administration policy in the region. There is a consensus among these scholars that the most important segment of that movement was the groups based in churches or religious faith, such as Sanctuary, Pledge of Resistance, and Witness for Peace. It is likely that unions were second to churches in undergirding the influence of the movement. This was the conclusion of a central figure in the movement, Cindy Buhl, of the Central America Working Group, a lobbying coalition, who told Christian Smith that “The two strongest constituencies I worked with were the churches

25. Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 365–72; William M. LeoGrande, Douglas C. Bennett, Morris J. Blachman, and Kenneth E. Sharpe, “Grappling With Central America: From Carter to Reagan,” in *Confronting Revolution*, ed. Blachman, LeoGrande, and Sharpe, ch. 12; Cynthia Arnson, “The Reagan Administration, Congress, and Central America: The Search for Consensus,” in *Crisis in Central America*, ed. Hamilton, Frieden, Fuller, and Pastor, Jr., ch. 2; Philip Brenner and William M. LeoGrande, “Congress and Nicaragua: The Limits of Alternative Policy Making,” in *Divided Democracy: Cooperation and Conflict Between the President and Congress*, ed. James A. Thurber (Washington, 1991), ch. 11; Cynthia J. Arnson and Philip Brenner, “The Limits of Lobbying: Interest Groups, Congress, and Aid to the Contras,” in *Public Opinion in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Controversy over Contra Aid*, ed. Richard Sobel (Lanham, MD, 1993), 191–219.

26. Brenner and LeoGrande, “Congress and Nicaragua,” 243–44; Arnson, “The Reagan Administration, Congress, and Central America,” 51; Arnson and Brenner, “The Limits of Lobbying.”

and unions." The NLC was certainly the main union-based organization in the Central America peace movement at the national level.²⁷

The NLC itself claimed credit for two specific legislative victories: persuading the Senate Appropriations Committee in 1985 to withhold ten million dollars in military aid to El Salvador pending progress in the prosecution of the murderers of two American labor advisors in that country, and persuading the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee in 1989 to include labor-rights provisions among the conditions placed on aid to El Salvador. The one big legislative battle in which the NLC claimed to have played a "major role" was the final defeat of Contra aid in February of 1988, although the NLC had previously acknowledged that such aid was vulnerable due to the Iran-Contra scandals. Beyond specific policy battles, Sheinkman believes that the NLC's contribution was to make labor repression a focal point of U.S. public awareness and debate on Central America: "We tried to raise the element of trade unionists being killed, of peasants being killed. . . . Our hope was to bring the issue into a different focus to the public."²⁸

In addition to changing the policies of the Reagan administration in Central America, the NLC also sought to alter the foreign policies of the American labor movement and to assist the efforts of Salvadoran workers to achieve labor and democratic rights. The AFL-CIO – especially its president and the DIA – traditionally controlled the labor movement's foreign policies. Throughout the postwar era it maintained a strongly anticommunist international outlook and supported the Cold War foreign policies of U.S. administrations. While the Federation claimed to oppose equally regimes of the right and left that denied the right of free association, and to support all legitimate trade unions, it was in fact more inclined to oppose regimes of the left than of the right and to support moderate than leftist unions.

It is thus not surprising that the Federation's views on Central America were close to those of the Reagan administration. Like the administration, the AFL-CIO emphasized Soviet and Cuban sponsorship of the Nicaraguan revolution and the guerrilla insurgency in El Salvador, portrayed the Salvadoran government under Duarte as democratic and centrist and generally praised its record on labor and human rights, dismissed the FDR/FMLN as Marxist-Leninist, denounced the Sandinista regime as a totalitarian dictatorship, and evinced considerable sympathy for the Nicaraguan Contras. These views predisposed the AFL-CIO to support the Reagan administration's policies in Central America.²⁹

27. See the sources listed in note 23; Buhl quoted in Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 246.

28. Dan Cantor, memo to Local Committees, 25 November 1985; NLC, "Funding El Salvador: Legislative Overview"; "Interview With David Dyson," *Labor Report on Central America*, Jack Sheinkman, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993.

29. "The Kissinger Commission Report," *Free Trade Union News*, February 1984, 1-2; Lane Kirkland, "The Challenge in Latin America," *Free Trade Union News*, July-August 1984, 1, 2, 8; AFL-CIO, "Resolution No. 34 (As Amended), AFL-CIO Convention, October 1985"; AFL-CIO, *Trade Union Rights, Peace, and Democracy in Central America: Report of a Delegation of AFL-CIO Presidents*

As the NLC opposed the views and policies of the Reagan administration in Central America, then, it also came into conflict with the AFL-CIO. This conflict was waged both in the governing bodies of the Federation – especially the conventions of 1983, 1985, and 1987 – and in national policymaking arenas, mainly Congress. The issues in dispute were U.S. military aid to the Salvadoran government and Nicaraguan Contras and political negotiations between governments and oppositions in those countries.

Not only did the NLC lobby Congress for termination of military aid to the Salvadoran government, it also tried to pass resolutions favoring termination of such aid at the biennial conventions of the AFL-CIO from 1983 on. The Federation always defeated these resolutions and lobbied Congress against termination. Given the bipartisan congressional support for military aid to El Salvador from 1984 through 1989, however, the critical policy issue was whether to retain and strengthen the human rights conditions on military aid that Congress had legislated. Both the NLC and the AFL-CIO officially supported human-rights conditions on military aid. For the NLC this was a second-best position, while the AFL-CIO was constrained to support conditionality because two of its AIFLD employees had been murdered by Salvadoran soldiers in 1981 while working on the land-reform program in that country. Because the Reagan administration routinely certified human-rights improvements in El Salvador, conditionality had not halted the flow of aid. The NLC therefore lobbied Congress to impose more and stronger conditions on aid, to reject the administration's certification of human-rights progress, and to halt or substantially reduce military aid. By contrast, the AFL-CIO argued throughout the decade that the human-rights conditions on military aid had been met and that the aid should be supplied, fended off NLC Convention proposals to oppose the administration's certification of human-rights progress in El Salvador, and in 1990 advised affiliated unions not to lobby for a House bill, strongly supported by the NLC, that proposed a fifty percent reduction in military aid to El Salvador. Thus, despite formal agreement on human rights conditions, the AFL-CIO favored provision of military aid to the Salvadoran government, while the NLC opposed it.³⁰

to *Nicaragua and El Salvador*, September 1987, 1–12; AFL-CIO/American Institute for Free Labor Development, "A Critique of the Americas Watch Report on Labor Rights in El Salvador," 10 June 1988; American Institute for Free Labor Development, *Source Book: El Salvador*, November 1988, section entitled "El Salvador: Key Issues"; American Institute for Free Labor Development, *Source Book: Nicaragua*, November 1988, section entitled "Nicaragua: Key Issues"; Aaron Bernstein, "Is Big Labor Playing Global Vigilante?," *Business Week*, 4 November 1985, 92–93; David Moberg, "Teaching the AFL-CIO Some New Tricks," *In These Times*, 13–19 November 1985, 5–6; Henry Bernstein, "U.S. Unionists Split on Strategy for Central American Aid," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 May 1986.

30. Lane Kirkland to Principal Officers of State and Local Central Bodies, 24 March 1983; ACTWU, "Resolution on El Salvador, Submitted to the 1983 Convention of the AFL-CIO"; Lane Kirkland to Mr. Frank Hammer, 13 September 1984; Lane Kirkland, "The Challenge in Latin America"; ACTWU, "Resolution on El Salvador, Submitted to the 1985 Convention of the AFL-CIO"; AFL-CIO, "Resolution No. 34 (As Amended), AFL-CIO Convention, October 1985";

A related issue was that of political negotiations between the Salvadoran government and the FDR/FMLN. At the 1983 and 1985 AFL-CIO conventions, the NLC was able to win inclusion in the foreign-affairs resolutions of provisions calling for negotiations between government and opposition in El Salvador and stating that a negotiated settlement was preferable to a military solution in that country. The 1987 convention then voted unanimously to support the Arias peace plan for Central America. While the AFL-CIO, as well as the NLC, thus officially supported political negotiations, this again masked at least strategic differences and probably different goals. The AFL-CIO saw U.S. military aid and Salvadoran political negotiations as complementary, while the NLC viewed them as contradictory. The Federation accepted the Reagan administration's claim that military aid was necessary to prevent outright victory by the guerrillas and to force them to the negotiating table. The NLC believed that military aid undermined negotiations by inducing the Salvadoran military to continue the war and pursue military victory. At the least, the AFL-CIO and the NLC disagreed about what policies of the U.S. government would contribute to a negotiated settlement of the Salvadoran civil war. However, it is difficult to avoid the impression that the AFL-CIO's official support for political negotiations in El Salvador was forced upon it by the need to compromise with the NLC, for the Federation consistently promoted a view of the Salvadoran government and the FDR/FMLN that legitimated the administration's goal of military defeat of the insurgents through substantial military aid to the government.³¹

In the case of U.S. military aid to the Nicaraguan contras, the NLC clearly and consistently opposed it, while the position of the AFL-CIO was ambiguous. The Federation's hostility to the Sandinista regime nearly equaled that of the Reagan administration, and in the first half of the 1980s the AFL-CIO was already deeply involved with opponents of the regime through its support of an anti-Sandinista labor federation (the Confederation of Trade Union Unity [CUS]), the role of the Federation's Free Trade Union Institute (FTUI) in channeling National Endowment for Democracy funds to the anti-Sandinista newspaper *La Prensa*, and the involvement of several AFL-CIO unions in the pro-Contra lobbying group Prodemca (Friends of the Democratic Center in

AFL-CIO, "Our Values: An Introduction," nd; AFL-CIO Executive Council, "Resolution on Central America and the Caribbean," February 1988; AFL-CIO Executive Council, "Statement on Central America," 23 February 1989; Jack Sheinkman to Tom Donahue, 10 May 1990; Labor Coalition on Central America, *Labor Action*, July/August 1990, 10; James Ridgeway, "Lane Kirkland Snubs the Lech Walesa of El Salvador," *Village Voice*, 29 May 1984; Henry Weinstein, "AFL-CIO Supports Arias Peace Proposal," *Los Angeles Times*, 28 October 1987; Slaney, "Solidarity and Self-Interest," 30; William M. LeoGrande, "Through the Looking Glass: The Kissinger Report on Central America," *World Policy Journal* (Winter 1984): 251-84.

31. ACTWU, "Resolution on El Salvador, Submitted to the 1983 Convention of the AFL-CIO"; ACTWU, "Resolution on El Salvador, Submitted to the 1985 Convention of the AFL-CIO"; AFL-CIO, "Resolution No. 34 (As Amended), AFL-CIO Convention, October 1985"; Weinstein, "AFL-CIO Supports Arias Peace Proposal"; Slaney, "Solidarity and Self-Interest," 30.

Central America). Yet, as of the mid-1980s, the AFL-CIO had not officially endorsed military aid to the Contras, and Lane Kirkland even rebuffed administration entreaties for his explicit support. There were three reasons for this: The Nicaraguan labor federation the AFL-CIO supported did not favor U.S. military aid to the Contras even though it opposed the Sandinistas; Kirkland was miffed that the Reagan administration had ignored the Kissinger Commission's recommendation to provide funds for economic and social development in Central America; and the Federation hoped to avoid a deep and public split within the labor movement over Contra aid.³²

Such a split came anyway, in a bitter debate at the October 1985 Convention of the AFL-CIO, which eventually passed a compromise resolution that neither endorsed nor opposed military aid to the Contras, but did call for political negotiations in Nicaragua as well as in El Salvador. The AFL-CIO's neutrality permitted unions to go their own way when, in the spring of 1986, President Reagan requested \$100 million in military aid for the Contras. NLC unions lobbied against the request, several unions lobbied for it through Prodemca, and the AFL-CIO leadership took no official stand. At the 1987 Convention, the NLC achieved another compromise resolution that placed the AFL-CIO in opposition to U.S. military aid to the Contras "as well as" to Soviet and Cuban aid to the Sandinista regime. Moving the Federation from neutrality to opposition on Contra aid was a clear NLC victory, though one limited by the continuing support of some AFL-CIO unions for Contra aid.³³

The final votes on Contra aid during the Reagan administration occurred in the spring of 1988, when the House of Representatives voted down Reagan's last efforts to secure military aid. The NLC lobbied intensively against Contra aid during these votes. Though it was on record as being opposed to Contra aid, the AFL-CIO simply sat out the issue rather than lobby against the aid. While some unions still supported Contra aid, in these final votes the voice of labor was represented most clearly by the NLC. Although for the last half of the 1980s the AFL-CIO officially supported political negotiations in Nicaragua and was neutral or opposed to military aid for the Contras, it continued to espouse a

32. Faye Hansen, "The AFL-CIO and the Endowment for Democracy," *Economic Notes*, May-June 1985, 12-15; "The Kissinger Commission Report," *Free Trade Union News*, February 1984, 1-2; Jack Germond and Jules Witcover, "'Contra' Debate Shows New Foreign Policy Stance By Labor," *Baltimore Sun*, 23 March 1986; Bureau of National Affairs, *Daily Labor Report*, 9 January 1988.

33. AFL-CIO, "Floor Debate on Resolution No. 34," AFL-CIO Convention, October 1985 (transcription); AFL-CIO, "Resolution No. 34 (As Amended)," AFL-CIO Convention, October 1985; Moberg, "Teaching the AFL-CIO Some New Tricks," 5-6; Washington Area Labor Committee, *Labor Link*, Spring 1986, 1; Bernstein, "U.S. Unionists Split on Strategy for Central American Aid"; William Serrin, "Reagan Bid Stirring Longstanding Labor Debate," *New York Times*, 4 March 1986; Weinstein, "AFL-CIO Supports Arias Peace Proposal"; David Dyson and Daniel Cantor, memo to City Committees, Local Unions, Friends, and Supporters, 6 November 1987; Kenneth Crowe, "AFL-CIO Opposes Aid to Contras," *Newsday*, 28 October 1987.

view of the Sandinista regime that confirmed the Cold War arguments of the Reagan administration and legitimated its policies toward Nicaragua.³⁴

Conflict between the AFL-CIO and the NLC over Central America concerned not only U.S. government policy but also the labor movement's own role in the region. The central issue here was what kinds of unions and labor federations in Central America the U.S. labor movement would support, and therefore how the principle of international labor solidarity would be defined. The AFL-CIO and AIFLD recognized and supported only unions and federations that opposed the Sandinista regime or supported the Salvadoran government. Indeed, in El Salvador the AFL-CIO and AIFLD helped organize and finance three separate labor federations during the 1980s, but abandoned each in turn when it began to criticize the Duarte government, bringing charges that the Federation subordinated its proclaimed purpose of building trade unionism to the exigencies of U.S. foreign policy. The NLC, on the other hand, recognized and maintained contact with pro-Sandinista as well as anti-Sandinista labor organizations in Nicaragua and with leftist and opposition unions and federations, such as the National Union of Salvadoran Workers (UNTS), in El Salvador. Sheinkman explained why: "So when we took actions, we didn't care what federation – whether Christian Democrats, the so-called left wing, or a centrist organization – any trade unionist that came under attack, a kidnapping, whose life was threatened, we were out there defending. We made no distinction, because our feeling was very simple: a move against one group was a move against all." Sheinkman strongly protested the AFL-CIO's habit of describing UNTS as a "guerrilla front," the phrase used by the Salvadoran right to legitimate its repression of UNTS, and the NLC defended and aided UNTS unions when they waged strikes or suffered repression.³⁵

Disputes over which unions and federations should be supported underlay further conflicts over two key activities of the NLC: sending delegations on fact-finding missions to Central America, and sponsoring speaking tours of the United States by Central American labor leaders. It was these fact-finding missions and speaking tours that first provoked a hostile response from AFL-CIO leaders (who initially underestimated the NLC), because they challenged

34. Brenner and LeoGrande, "Congress and Nicaragua," 232; AFL-CIO Executive Council, "Resolution on Central America and the Caribbean," February 1988; David Dyson to John DeMars, 17 November 1987; "Interview with David Dyson," *Labor Report*.

35. Daniel Cantor and Juliet Schor, *Tunnel Vision: Labor, The World Economy, and Central America* (Boston, 1987), 77–78; Paul Garver, "Beyond the Cold War: New Directions for Labor Internationalism," *Labor Research Review* (Spring 1989): 61–71; AFL-CIO, *Trade Union Rights, Peace, and Democracy in Central America*, 2, 7–12; AIFLD, *Source Book: Nicaragua*, "Nicaragua: Key Issues"; NLC, *The Search for Peace in Central America*, 17–19; Lane Kirkland to Principal Officers of State and Local Central Bodies, 24 March 1983; Bernstein, "Is Big Labor Playing Global Vigilante?"; Bernstein, "U.S. Unionists Split on Strategy for Central American Aid"; Al Weinrub and William Bollinger, *The AFL-CIO in Central America* (Oakland, 1987), 21–26; Tom Barry and Deb Preusch, *AIFLD in Central America* (Albuquerque, 1986), 31–40; AFL-CIO/AIFLD, "A Critique of the Americas Watch Report," 3–15; Jack Sheinkman, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993; Jack Sheinkman to Tom Donahue, 10 May 1990.

the Federation's traditional monopoly over the conduct of labor's international operations and over information and arguments about labor and politics in Central America. Kirkland and the directors of the Federation's DIA, Irving Brown and (after 1985) Tom Kahn, were particularly upset that these missions and tours established contact with and support for Central American labor organizations that the Federation did not recognize or approve, and that they threatened to influence the state and local labor federations directly chartered by the AFL-CIO.³⁶

The AFL-CIO reacted to this challenge in two ways. On the one hand, it sought to discredit and undermine the fact-finding missions and speaking tours by red-baiting their Central American participants and (to a lesser degree) U.S. sponsors and by discouraging or prohibiting involvement with them by affiliated unions and state and local labor federations. The favored red-baiting techniques were illustrated in a letter from DIA Director Kahn to several state and local labor federations, in which he characterized Salvadoran labor leaders on a U.S. speaking tour as closely allied "with WFTU [World Federation of Trade Unions] unions as well as with the Marxist-Leninist guerilla movement in El Salvador." (The WFTU was an international labor organization dominated by unions from the Soviet bloc; the AFL-CIO was affiliated with the rival International Confederation of Free Trade Unions.) AFL-CIO leaders initially refrained from red-baiting the union presidents in the NLC, though they did not show similar restraint toward leaders of the local labor committees on Central America who cooperated with the NLC and sometimes organized their own fact-finding missions and speaking tours. However, the April 1987 Mobilization for Justice and Peace in Central America and Southern Africa ended this civility. John Joyce, president of the Bricklayers and Allied Craftsmen and a member of the AFL-CIO Executive Council, circulated a memorandum in which he asserted that "[a]nyone who knows or remembers the popular fronts put together by the communists in the 1930s will know precisely how the April Mobilization works and what it is all about. . . ." American Federation of Teachers President Albert Shanker, also a council member, spread this message to a larger audience by quoting it approvingly in one of his regular advertisements in the *New York Times*. More important than the red-baiting, though, Kirkland and Kahn pressured state and local central labor bodies to avoid any missions or tours not operated or cleared by the DIA and issued shunning orders against unions not recognized by the AFL-CIO.³⁷

36. David Dyson, interview, New York City, 10 May 1993; Jean Weisman, "U.S. Labor Leaders Help Win Release of Ten Salvadoran Trade Unionists" (photocopy; source not known); Lane Kirkland to Principal Officers of State and Local Central Bodies, 24 March 1983; Tom Kahn, memo to State Federations and Central Bodies, 22 August 1986; Slaney, "Solidarity and Self-Interest," 30-31.

37. Tom Kahn, memo to State Federations and Central Bodies, 22 August 1986; John T. Joyce to person or persons unknown, 1 April 1987; Albert Shanker, "Where We Stand," *New York Times*,

On the other hand, the Federation also sent its own fact-finding missions to El Salvador and Nicaragua, issued new reports on labor and politics in those countries and disseminated them more widely in the labor movement, held seminars and conferences for state and local labor leaders to explain AFL-CIO foreign policy, sponsored its own speaking tours of the United States by approved Central American labor leaders, and published a new DIA newsletter on foreign affairs. Both responses tried to reassert the Federation's institutional and ideological control in the domain of foreign policy, but the second one did so in ways that contributed to a healthy debate that expanded knowledge, dialogue, and participation within the labor movement in matters of foreign affairs.³⁸

The most dramatic aspect of the NLC's distinct conception of international labor solidarity was the network and campaigns it organized to defend Salvadoran unionists subjected to or threatened with imprisonment, torture, or murder by the government or death squads. This defense network developed from its first fact-finding mission to El Salvador in 1983, when the NLC delegation met with imprisoned leaders of the union of hydroelectric workers (Union of Electrical Workers of the Lempa River, or STECEL) who had been held without trial since their arrest for strike activity in 1980. The NLC organized an international campaign that won the release of the STECEL leaders from prison in 1984. However, in the face of renewed death threats against the STECEL leaders from right-wing death squads, Dyson and two other NLC activists went to El Salvador and, together with representatives of human rights groups and of the Dutch government, met the STECEL leaders as they were released from prison and provided them with a protective escort to the airport to ensure their safe passage to the Netherlands. While the AFL-CIO called for the release on bond and speedy trial of the STECEL leaders, it condemned the strike for which they were arrested and apparently refused their plea for further support.³⁹

The NLC thereafter maintained this defense network, which included its own member unions, local labor committees on Central America, the Canadian

19 April 1987; Lane Kirkland to Principal Officers of State and Local Central Bodies, 24 March 1983; Fred Soloway, interview, Washington, DC, 16 June 1993; Slaney, "Solidarity and Self-Interest," 30–32.

38. Lane Kirkland to Principal Officers of State and Local Central Bodies, 24 March 1983; Charlie Dee to Mr. Lane Kirkland, 20 April 1983; Charlie Dee to Mr. Irving Brown, 19 May 1983; Tom Kahn, memo to State Federations and Central Bodies, 22 August 1986; Eric Thiel, memo to Tom Kahn, Director of International Affairs, AFL-CIO, 27 August 1986; Bernstein, "Is Big Labor Playing Global Vigilante?"; Slaney, "Solidarity and Self-Interest," 30–32; Cantor and Schor, *Tunnel Vision*.

39. NLC, press release, 16 October 1984; Jose Arnulfo Grande, Santos Rivera Calzada, Alfredo Hernandez Represa, Hector Bernabe Recinos, Dagoberto Rodriguez Machuca, Arcadio Rauda Mejia, Jose Arturo Valencia, Jorge Hernandez, and Chedor Leomer Ascensio to National Labor Committee, 30 November 1984; Weisman, "U.S. Labor Leaders Help Win Release of Ten Salvadoran Trade Unionists"; Jack Sheinkman, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993; David Dyson, interview, New York City, 10 May 1993; Ridgeway, "Lane Kirkland Snubs the Lech Walesa of El Salvador."

and a half dozen European labor federations, and religious and human rights groups. Because of its contacts in El Salvador, the NLC learned quickly (sometimes within two hours) of the arrest or abduction of union leaders in that country, and would mobilize the network to secure their release or safety. The campaigns involved sending letters and telegrams to the Salvadoran government to demand the release or protection of the union leaders, enlisting members of Congress and of European parliaments to lend their support and intervene with the Salvadoran government, and sometimes sending people to El Salvador to assist endangered unionists. Among other campaigns, the NLC mounted particularly important ones in defense of leaders of unions representing teachers (the National Association of Salvadoran Teachers, or ANDES) and telecommunications workers (the Salvadoran Telecommunications Workers Association, or ASTTEL), unions that the AFL-CIO did not support. Given the brutality of the repression in El Salvador, at times the NLC could not defend but only try to locate the bodies of “disappeared” trade union and peasant leaders. Some of the ten trips that Dyson made to El Salvador in the 1980s had that purpose, as he painfully recalled: “In the early days when I was down there I used to go out to the dump, I did that twice, and tried to look for people that we knew. It is just [pause] I was never the same after I did that. I visited the morgue once too, looking for people.”⁴⁰ Nonetheless, perhaps as many as forty Salvadoran union leaders were saved from prison, torture, or death by this defense network. Both Sheinkman and Dyson believe that the NLC’s campaigns in defense of Salvadoran unionists were its most important contribution. Others recognized the importance of the NLC’s defense network and campaigns, as well as its broader effort to make labor rights a foundation of U.S. foreign policy. In 1989 the NLC was given the Letelier-Moffitt Human Rights Domestic Award by the Transnational Institute (affiliated with the Institute for Policy Studies) in recognition of its contributions to labor rights in El Salvador and to the human rights movement.⁴¹

The conflict between the NLC and the AFL-CIO was ultimately a conflict over Cold War foreign policy. Explaining it requires explaining both why the AFL-CIO adhered to Cold War foreign policy and why a particular group of unions dissented from it in the 1980s. What, then, were the sources of the AFL-CIO’s support for Cold War foreign policy? As the Cold War took shape between 1947 and 1950, American labor’s support for U.S. foreign policy was – as Robert Zieger, Denis MacShane, and others have argued – rooted in a principled and (especially in the case of the CIO) progressive anticommunist outlook. Leaders of both the AFL and the CIO rejected Soviet and communist

40. Labor Coalition on Central America, *Labor Action*, July/August 1990, 2, 10, 15; Sweeney, “Labour Imperialism or Democratic Internationalism?,” 310–19; David Dyson, interview, New York City, 10 May 1993.

41. Krupat, “From War Zone to Free Trade Zone,” 69; Jack Sheinkman, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993; David Dyson, interview, New York City, 10 May 1993; Isabelle Letelier to Jack Sheinkman, 26 June 1989.

ideology and practice as authoritarian and incompatible with independent trade unionism and a free society, and on this ground they opposed the expansion of Soviet and communist influence. Other influences, past and present, reinforced and intensified American labor's anticommunist outlook and support for U.S. foreign policy in the early Cold War, including the historic influence of the Catholic church on American unions, the large number of CIO members of Eastern European origin, and the strong identification and even integration of unions and labor leaders with the state as a result of the New Deal and World War II. Still, a principled opposition to communist and Soviet ideology and conduct was the wellspring of union support for the early Cold War, just as it was for most New Deal liberals, American socialists and independent radicals, and European social democratic labor movements and political parties.⁴²

Beyond the mid-1960s, however, AFL-CIO support for U.S. Cold War foreign policy cannot be explained in this way, at least not entirely. For by that time major consequences of the Cold War, unanticipated in the late 1940s, had led many liberals in the United States, social democratic labor and party leaders in Europe, and indeed some American unions – like Walter Reuther's UAW – to rethink their commitment to the Cold War. These consequences included the nuclear arms race, political and fiscal constraints on domestic social reform, the alignment of the United States with repressive anticommunist regimes throughout the Third World, and above all the war in Vietnam. Combined with the increasingly polycentric character of the communist world, these developments led many liberals and social democrats in the United States and Europe to favor détente and arms control between the superpowers, to oppose

42. Zieger, *The CIO*, ch. 9, 328–32, 374–76; MacShane, *International Labour and the Origins of the Cold War*, chs. 6–8; John Barnard, *Walter Reuther and the Rise of the Auto Workers* (Boston, 1983), ch. 7; David Plotke, *Building a Democratic Political Order: Reshaping American Liberalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (Cambridge, U.K., 1996), ch. 10; Windmuller, “The Foreign Policy Conflict in American Labor”; Sturmthal, *Left of Center*, chs. 1–4, 16. More critical analyses of American labor's Cold War commitments include Radosh, *American Labor and United States Foreign Policy*; Henry Berger, “Organized Labor and American Foreign Policy,” in *The American Working Class: Prospects for the 1980s*, ed. I. L. Horowitz, J.C. Leggett, and M. Oppenheimer (New Brunswick, NJ, 1979), ch. 7; and Cantor and Schor, *Tunnel Vision*.

The CIO contained roughly a dozen unions whose leaders were in or close to the American Communist Party, and in 1945 it joined the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) alongside Soviet and European communist unions as well as European and other noncommunist unions. This collaboration of the “mainstream” CIO with communist unions in both domestic and international politics was premised on the special conditions of the Depression and World War II and did not last beyond 1947. Divisions over the Marshall Plan and the 1948 Progressive Party presidential campaign of Henry Wallace led the CIO to expel its communist-led unions and to abandon the WFTU, but long-standing ideological and trade union differences between the noncommunist CIO unions and communist unions at home and abroad underlay these divisions and made continued cooperation after World War II unlikely. (The CIO's expulsion of communist-led or influenced unions and its exit from the WFTU remain highly charged issues among labor historians and other scholars to this day.) It should be emphasized, however, that both before and after the 1955 merger of the AFL and the CIO, the latter's Cold War foreign policy views differed from those of the former, especially in that the CIO placed less emphasis on military force and more on social development and reform as the means to prevent Soviet or communist advances.

American support for authoritarian regimes and U.S. military intervention abroad, and to propose new principles – whether peaceful coexistence, universal human rights, Third World economic and social development, or others – to guide U.S. foreign policy. This shift of attitude was based not so much on abandonment of underlying anticommunist principles as on judgments about the costs – moral and political as well as economic – of a militarized Cold War.⁴³

However, the AFL-CIO leadership was deeply resistant to this tendency among American liberals, European labor movements, and some U.S. unions. It remained committed to a particularly hawkish version of anticommunism and Cold War, exemplified by its unstinting support for the war in Vietnam, its fierce opposition to détente, its own international operations in Latin America and Asia, its inability to understand and accept the desire of the German and other European labor movements for accommodation with the Soviet Union (which strained relations between the American and European labor movements and contributed to the decision of the AFL-CIO to withdraw from the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions in 1969), and its broad sympathy for U.S. policy in Central America in the 1980s. What accounts for this persistence of militant Cold War foreign policy in the AFL-CIO right through the 1980s, even as many of its long-time allies revised or abandoned Cold War commitments?⁴⁴

The strongly anticommunist views of the AFL-CIO's only two presidents during the Cold War era, George Meany and his successor Kirkland, and the considerable authority they wielded within the Federation over foreign policy issues were certainly important to the persistence of a Cold War outlook in the AFL-CIO. However, economic, bureaucratic, and political factors powerfully reinforced and strengthened the ideological dispositions of these leaders, and helped to ensure broader (but not universal) support for Cold War foreign policy within organized labor, especially among ex-AFL craft unions in the construction and maritime trades. To begin with, Cold War military spending sustained high levels of employment in highly unionized defense industries, and it became all the more important to preserve this base of union jobs in and after the mid-1970s – when it was potentially threatened by the end of the Vietnam war, détente, and arms control – because rates of unemployment began to rise then even as rates of union density continued to fall. Further, the elaborate bureaucratic apparatus in charge of the Federation's international affairs – including the DIA and its four overseas institutes in Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa – helped to sustain a hard Cold War outlook in the AFL-CIO. This apparatus received extensive funds from the U.S. government,

43. Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York, 1984), ch. 13; Jerel A. Rosati, *The Politics of United States Foreign Policy* (Fort Worth, 1999), 2d ed., 398–405, 460–66; Sturmthal, *Left of Center*, ch. 16; Windmuller, “The Foreign Policy Conflict in American Labor.”

44. Windmuller, “The Foreign Policy Conflict in American Labor”; Cantor and Schor, *Tunnel Vision*, 34–48; Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (London, 1988), 288–96; Sturmthal, *Left of Center*, ch. 16.

amounting to nearly forty million dollars in 1985, and was led and staffed by hawkish anticommunists drawn from Social Democrats USA. The financial benefits, ideological orientation, and institutional influence of this foreign-affairs bureaucracy all contributed to maintaining a Cold War posture in the AFL-CIO. Finally, the AFL-CIO's durable commitment to hawkish Cold War policy also reflected important political alliances that the Federation had developed, and wished to maintain, with key foreign policy agencies of the United States government – including the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID), and the U.S. Information Agency – and with leaders of the Cold War wing of the Democratic Party, such as Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson of Washington.⁴⁵

What, then, explains the rise of the NLC? What developments and conditions promoted the growth of dissenting foreign policy views within segments of organized labor? Economic, institutional, and especially political influences all contributed to the formation of the NLC and the allied local labor committees on Central America. To begin with, economic developments and conditions spurred growing labor opposition to U.S. and AFL-CIO policy in Central America among certain types of unions. Many manufacturing unions became disenchanted with Cold War, interventionist foreign policies because they so often sustained authoritarian regimes of the right that repressed unions and maintained low-wage labor forces with which American workers had to compete. Public-employee unions also increasingly opposed such foreign policies because they shifted resources from domestic to defense spending. The deep recession of the U.S. economy in the early 1980s intensified such concerns. These economic factors explain the predominance of manufacturing and public employee unions in the NLC's membership.⁴⁶

The rise of the NLC and the local labor committees also had institutional roots in developments within organized labor. Most of the unions that joined the NLC had a shared history of political opposition to the top leadership of the AFL-CIO. Many NLC unions had opposed the war in Vietnam (though their opposition was slow to develop and sometimes muted), endorsed and campaigned for George McGovern in 1972, and supported the reform process in the Democratic Party during the 1970s, all in opposition to AFL-CIO policy under Meany. This suggests that the NLC was part of a larger and ongoing

45. Robert H. Zieger, “George Meany: Labor's Organization Man,” in *Labor Leaders in America*, ed. Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine (Urbana, IL, 1987), ch. 14; Walter Galenson, *The American Labor Movement, 1955–1995* (Westport, CT, 1996), ch. 14; Radosh, *American Labor and United States Foreign Policy*, ch. 14; Taylor Dark, *The Unions and the Democrats: An Enduring Alliance* (Ithaca, NY, 1999), 66, 102; Michael Massing, “From Bolshevism to Reaganism: Trotsky's Orphans,” *New Republic* (June 1987): 18–22; Jack Clark, “The ‘Ex’ Syndrome,” *NACLA: Report on the Americas* (May/June 1988): 26; Bernstein, “Is Big Labor Playing Global Vigilante?”

46. David Dyson, interview, New York City, 10 May 1993; Fred Solowey, interview, Washington, DC, 16 June 1993; National Labor Committee and New York City Labor Committee, “And Now We Too Must Speak Out”; Cantor and Schor, *Tunnel Vision*, 3–5, 12–18; Slaney, “Solidarity and Self-Interest,” 29; Hobart Spalding, “The Two Latin American Foreign Policies of the U.S. Labor Movement,” *Science and Society* (Winter 1992–93): 421–39.

conflict between rival leadership factions in American labor. Two other institutional developments may well have influenced the rise of new foreign policy views in labor. Impressionistic evidence suggests that the growing influence in organized labor of activists from the social movements (antiwar and civil rights) of the 1960s, many of whom had assumed low- and midlevel union staff positions, was a key factor in the rise of the local labor committees and an indirect influence on the formation of the NLC. Also, though relevant empirical evidence is mixed, it is possible that the rising numbers and percentages of black, Hispanic, and female unionists contributed to the development of dissident foreign policy views in labor.⁴⁷

Ultimately, various political influences, broadly construed, were decisive in the formation of the NLC. First, most of those who founded or joined the NLC acted on moral or ideological convictions opposed to U.S. military intervention in support of repressive regimes and to AFL-CIO "shunning" of leftist workers and unions abroad. Second, the formation of the NLC was deeply influenced by the political impact of the Vietnam War on organized labor. Dyson was emphatic on this point:

He [Sheinkman] had been very troubled by the silence of the American labor movement on Vietnam. You can't underestimate the effect that had on progressive trade unionists in this country. They were humiliated that they had not been able to be part of that debate from the institutions they worked for. . . . When we saw the Central America thing brewing there was this thought that we're going to have to organize fast or else we're going to get frozen out of the debate as we did in the 1960s.

Finally, labor opposition to U.S. policy in Central America was undoubtedly fueled by the fact that it was conceived and carried out by a conservative Republican administration that was strongly antiunion. As government in the Reagan era became much more adversarial toward organized labor and ceased to provide it with either legal protection or social reform, labor's incentives to support the government's foreign policies were greatly reduced, allowing dissent to those policies to mount.⁴⁸

The 1990s proved to be a decade of change for the NLC. At the beginning of the decade, the NLC shifted its focus from foreign policy to the global

47. Andrew Battista, "Political Divisions in Organized Labor, 1968–1988," *Polity* (Winter 1991): 173–197; Steve Early and Suzanne Gordon, "The Union Label: Today's Hardhats are Peaceniks," *Boston Globe*, 19 April 1987; Sean Sweeney, interview, New York City, 12 May 1993; Andrew Battista, "The Economic and Social Bases of Liberal Unionism," prepared for the 1990 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL.

48. National Labor Committee and New York City Labor Committee, "And Now We Too Must Speak Out"; Jack Sheinkman, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993; Fred Solowey, interview, Washington, DC, 16 June 1993; Slaney, "Solidarity and Self-Interest," 29; Cantor and Schor, *Tunnel Vision*, 12–13; David Dyson, interview, New York City, 10 May 1993; Daniel Cantor, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993; Graham K. Wilson, *Unions in American National Politics* (London, 1979), ch. 3; AFL-CIO, "Floor Debate on Resolution No. 34, AFL-CIO Convention, October 1985" (transcript); Sweeney, "Labour Imperialism or Democratic Internationalism?," 35–38, 636–45.

economy. Then, in the mid-1990s, the NLC was reorganized from a coalition of unions into a small independent staff organization with substantially reduced ties to organized labor. It became a very different kind of organization than it had been in the 1980s, though it maintained its earlier commitment to defense of labor rights.

The NLC shifted its focus from foreign policy to the global economy in response to two developments. One was the peace process that concluded the military conflicts in Central America. Following the Esquipulas Peace Accord of August 1987, which established a framework for political negotiations throughout Central America, peace agreements were reached between the Sandinista government and the Contras in April of 1988 and between the Salvadoran government and the FMLN in December of 1991. The second development was, in Sheinkman's words, the "increased economic integration" of the Americas, the growth of trade and investment among the nations of the Western hemisphere. While the NLC did not oppose this in principle, it feared that integration with low-wage economies and their multiplying export processing zones – industrial enclaves of cheap labor that enjoy preferential access to the U.S. market – in the southern hemisphere would exert downward pressure on employment, wages, and labor standards in the United States. As Sheinkman wrote in a 1991 NLC report,

The struggle for worker rights in El Salvador and the other countries in Central and South America has never been more important than it is now to the labor movement in the U.S. and Canada. . . . In the absence of effective worker rights in the region, increased economic integration will only exacerbate the already fierce wage competition which threatens the jobs, wages, and living standards of workers throughout the Americas.

The NLC now had to defend labor rights against threats from an unregulated global market rather than from Cold War foreign policy.⁴⁹

The NLC's reorientation toward the global economy was guided by Charles Kernaghan, who became executive director in 1990 when Dyson returned to the ministry. In 1992, Kernaghan launched the NLC on a campaign to expose and end the role of AID in financing the development of export processing zones in Central America and enticing U.S. firms to relocate to them. An effective media campaign, in which the NLC collaborated with the CBS news program "60 Minutes" to portray AID as using taxpayer money to "export jobs" from the U.S. to low-wage zones offshore, led Congress to prohibit AID from using its funds to establish export processing zones in foreign countries, induce U.S. firms

49. David Dyson, interview, New York City, 10 May 1993; Charles Kernaghan, interview, New York City, 12 May 1993; Jack Sheinkman, interview, New York City, 11 May 1993; Ron Blackwell, interview, New York City, 14 May 1993; Krupat, "From War Zone to Free Trade Zone," 71; Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 348–354; National Labor Committee, *Paying to Lose Our Jobs*, September 1992, 1–2; Jack Sheinkman, preface to National Labor Committee, *Worker Rights and the New World Order: El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala*, June 1991, 1.

to relocate offshore, or support projects that violated internationally recognized labor rights. The success of this campaign brought several additional unions, and more union money, into the NLC.⁵⁰

By 1995, however, the NLC had ceased being a coalition of unions, and by 1997 the small independent staff organization that remained had formed a new board of directors drawn from academia, churches, the media, think tanks, and a few unions. It is not clear from the available evidence why the NLC was reorganized, but two events may well have caused or contributed to this. Most important, in 1995 the ACTWU merged with the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) to form the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees (UNITE), and as Sheinkman was ready to retire, the presidency of the new union was assumed by ILGWU President Jay Mazur. Although UNITE continued to support the NLC and Mazur joined the NLC's new board in 1997 (as did Sheinkman and Dyson), they did not – and, under the pressures of merger, perhaps could not – assume the role of sponsorship and leadership that the ACTWU and Sheinkman had played. In addition, 1995 was also the year in which a major change of leadership occurred at the AFL-CIO; following the retirement of Kirkland, NLC member John Sweeney was elected to the presidency of the Federation over long-time AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Thomas Donohue. Whether this had any impact on the reorganization of the NLC is unclear, but insofar as it enabled NLC unions to pursue their international goals and strategies through the AFL-CIO it reduced their need for a vehicle like the NLC.

Since 1995, the new NLC has devoted itself to a campaign against the resurgence of sweatshops in the global apparel industry. Through exposure of the abusive labor practices of offshore clothing manufacturers under contract to major U.S. retail firms, the dominant force in the apparel industry, the NLC has sought to mobilize public pressure on these firms to accept responsibility for and improve their contractors' labor practices. More precisely, the NLC demands that large retail firms develop labor standards and agree to independent monitoring, preferably by human-rights groups, of their contractors' labor practices to ensure compliance with those standards. The main targets of this campaign have been the Gap, WalMart, and Disney, all icons of American popular culture as well as leading apparel retailers.⁵¹

50. NLC, *Paying to Lose Our Jobs*, September 1992; National Labor Committee, "Partial News Coverage as of December 11, 1992"; National Labor Committee, "Summary of 1994 Accomplishments," nd; Charles Kernaghan, interview, New York City, 12 May 1993; Barbara Briggs, "Aiding and Abetting Corporate Flight: U.S. AID in the Caribbean Basin," *Multinational Monitor* (January/February 1993): 37–41; Krupat, "From War Zone to Free Trade Zone," 71–73; Bureau of National Affairs, *Daily Labor Report*, 1 October 1992; Erin Day, "Foreign Aid's Role in Private Sector Promotion in Developing Countries: The Controversy over the U.S. Agency for International Development," Congressional Research Service, CRS Report 92–931 F, 11 December 1992.

51. National Labor Committee, "Summary of 1995 Accomplishments," nd; National Labor Committee, "The 'Authentic Gap': How Would You Like Your Daughter to Work for the Gap?," November/December 1995; Charles Kernaghan, memo to NLC Contacts, 16 December 1995; NLC, "Disney Alert," 25 July 1996; NLC, "An Open Letter to Walt Disney Co.," 29 May 1996; National

The NLC's antisweatshop campaign has enjoyed some success. It focused media and public attention on the revival of sweatshops and labor abuses in the global economy, influenced then-Labor Secretary Robert Reich and President William Clinton to convene a fashion industry "summit" and form a "White House Apparel Industry Partnership" to recommend voluntary labor standards that would end sweatshops, and pressured the Gap and WalMart to agree to independent monitoring of contractors. It appears, however, that these achievements effected only limited or formal changes in the labor practices of the global apparel industry, and some have questioned whether the NLC's emphasis on corporate labor codes and independent monitoring ignores or even obstructs more effective solutions to the proliferation of sweatshops, such as unionization and collective bargaining, government regulation, and labor standards in trade agreements. Undaunted, in the late 1990s the NLC expanded its antisweatshop campaign to include Asia (as well as Central America and the Caribbean) and the demand that large U.S. retailers disclose the names and locations of all their offshore contractors.⁵²

In conclusion, the NLC, and the local labor committees informally allied to it, represented the most forthright break by a major section of the union movement with the Cold War foreign policy of both the U.S. government and the AFL-CIO since the onset of the Cold War. Since the AFL-CIO had served as one of the strongest and most reliable supporters of Cold War foreign policy among major American institutions, this break was an important development, all the more so because it occurred at a time of intensification of the Cold War and involved unions representing a majority of the unionized workforce. More specifically, the significance of the NLC for contemporary labor and political history lies in four areas.

First, the NLC was a key component of one of the major social movements of the 1980s, the U.S. Central America peace movement, which played an important role in the most divisive foreign policy issue of that decade. The few extant studies of this movement have rightly emphasized its origins and base in the religious community, evident in organizations such as Sanctuary, Witness for Peace, and Pledge of Resistance. The NLC and the local labor committees on Central America suggest, however, that trade unionism was another important social base of this movement. Indeed, based on evidence presented above, I would suggest that a political alliance of churches and unions was at the core of the U.S. Central America peace movement and provided it with the combination of

Labor Committee, *The U.S. in Haiti: How to Get Rich on Eleven Cents an Hour*, January/February 1996; Barry Bearak, "Kathie Lee and the Sweatshop Crusade," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 June 1996; Krupat, "From War Zone to Free Trade Zone," 51-63; Don Stillman, "Charles Kernaghan: The Labor Activist Who Made Kathie Lee Cry," *WorkingUSA* (July/August 1998): 30-41, 75-79.

52. For varied assessments of the NLC's approach to the problem of sweatshops, see the contributions by Ross, Cavanagh, Krupat, Piore, and Howard in *No Sweat*, ed. Ross; Stillman, "Charles Kernaghan"; and David Moberg, "Lessons From the Victory at Phillips Van Heusen," *WorkingUSA* (May-June 1998): 39-49.

moral authority and political influence that allowed it to shape public opinion and congressional action on Central America.⁵³

Second, the NLC contributed to debates over U.S. and AFL-CIO foreign policy. Its distinctive contribution to criticism of Cold War foreign policy was its emphasis on the deleterious impact of that policy on labor rights in developing countries. For the NLC, denial of labor rights by U.S.-supported regimes helped to generate the central problem of the world economy: gross disparities among nations in wage levels and in labor and social standards, which threatened the gains that workers and unions had struggled to achieve in the United States and other advanced countries. Without denying that many NLC unions sought trade protection for their members, it is important to emphasize that the NLC did not respond to the problem of global labor competition with aggressive demands to wall off the U.S. market. The NLC's solution to this problem was to raise wages and labor and social standards in the developing world through establishment of effective labor rights and labor movements. Thus, it advocated that promoting respect for labor rights abroad should be a basic objective of U.S. foreign policy and that support for trade unions overseas should be the cornerstone of organized labor's international role.

Third, the NLC helped to overcome a substantial obstacle in the way of rebuilding a strong labor-liberal coalition in American national politics. A major reason for the NLC's break with Cold War foreign policy was the corrosive impact of that policy on labor's domestic political alliances. Ever since the New Deal, labor's political power had rested on an alliance with (nonlabor) liberals, the so-called labor-liberal coalition. The AFL-CIO's firm support for the war in Vietnam badly damaged this coalition, and thereafter Cold War foreign policy divided organized labor from the liberal left. Beginning in the second half of the 1970s, progressive labor leaders attempted in a variety of ways to restore the labor-liberal coalition. The NLC was a part of this effort, and expressed the liberal labor leadership's view that a new labor foreign policy was necessary to rebuild the labor-liberal alliance.

Finally, the NLC was part of a larger and ongoing conflict between liberal and conservative wings of the labor leadership that lay behind the dramatic 1995 leadership change in the AFL-CIO. These leadership factions divided in the 1970s over the Vietnam War, the McGovern nomination, the reform process in the Democratic party, and labor's relationship to new social movements. In the 1980s, Kirkland's succession of Meany as president of the AFL-CIO and mounting corporate and political attacks on unions created incentives and pressures for labor unity. However, the dispute over Central America was sufficiently deep that it could not be ignored or finessed, and the factional division persisted into the 1990s. This history contributed to the hotly contested election of AFL-CIO officers in 1995 and to the victory of a reform slate, though

53. The major study of the U.S. Central America peace movement is Smith, *Resisting Reagan*; see also Arnson and Brenner, "The Limits of Lobbying."

the immediate causes of these developments lay in the continued decline of unionism and especially in the Republican capture of Congress in 1994. The new president of the AFL-CIO, Sweeney, was a member of the NLC, and the NLC's emphasis on supporting labor rights and trade unions overseas influenced the international orientation of the new Federation leadership. Like the NLC, the 1995 leadership change at the AFL-CIO was an attempt to revive a labor movement in decline.