**Should Labor Be A U.S. Foreign Policy Agent?**

The Role of the National Endowment for Democracy in International Affairs

By Martin Hittelman

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AFT Convention Resolution 43 states, in part, that “WHEREAS, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) has **served as an agent of U.S. government intelligence operations and subversive interference in the internal affairs of the labor movements of other countries..**” and ‘WHEREAS, AFL-CIO acceptance of NED funding for its solidarity work in Iraq would have the appearance, if not the effect, of interfering in the internal affairs of the Iraqi labor movement in furtherance of U.S. government foreign policy objectives: ”

AFT Convention Resolution 41 resolves, in part, that the AFT “continue to seek funding from the National Endowment for Democracy and other non-partisan foundations to support AFT assistance efforts to help Iraqi workers build the trade union, education, healthcare and other institutions that will help sustain democracy and improve the lives of ordinary men, women, and children.”

**What is the National Endowment for Democracy?**

In a letter dated April 7, 2004 to the California Federation of Teachers, AFT Executive Vice President Nat LaCour described the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) as being “created in 1983 to support the broad American foreign policy objective of **encouraging the development and expansion of democracy in the world**. ..The NED receives annual funding from the U.S. Congress. A portion of the funding is allocated to four core grantees, one of which is the AFL-CIO’s **American Center for International Labor Solidarity** (ACILS). The others are Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), the National Republican Institute for International Affairs (IRI), and the National Democratic Institute (NDI).”

The National Endowment for Democracy was created in the **Reagan Administration in 1983.** One of the authors of the enabling legislation has said that the NED was to do at least some of the work previously done by the CIA, albeit publicly. The first director of NED was **Henry Kissinger**, Richard Nixon’s point man in the **campaign against Chile’s elected president, Salvador Allende**. The current chair is **Vin Weber**. Weber is a former Republican Congressman and Vice Chair of Empower America. He is a close ally of Newt Gingrich and has close ties with the National Policy Forum. He is a lobbyist for a variety of big corporations including the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America.

The right-wing CATO Institute has charged NED with “a history of corruption and financial mismanagement” and “has paid for special interest groups to harass the duly elected governments of friendly countries , **interfere in foreign elections, and foster the corruption of democratic movements.”** Conservative movement watcher Bill Berkowitz has pointed out that “The NED .. provides money, technical support, supplies, training programs, media know-how, public relations assistance and state-of-the-art equipment to select political groups, civic organizations, labor unions, dissident movements, student groups, book publishers, newspapers, and other media. **It’s aim is to destabilize progressive movements, particularly those with a socialist or democratic socialist bent.”**

**Venezuela – A Case in Point**

Left-wing reporter Alexander Cockburn wrote, in June of 2004, that NED was involved in the **organizing against the government of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela**. Cockburn wrote that “The NED has helped fund the opposition to Chavez to the tune of more than $1 million a year. Among the recipients are organizations **whose leaders actually supported the April 2002 coup** – they signed the decree that overthrew the elected president and vice president and abolished the country’s democratic institutions, including the Constitution, Supreme Court and National Assembly. The coup was thwarted only because millions of Venezuelans rallied for Chavez.”

Rob Collier, writing in the San Francisco Chronicle, reported that “In Venezuela, the AFL-CIO has blindly supported a reactionary union establishment as it **tried repeatedly to overthrow President Hugo Chavez** – and in the process, wrecked the country’s economy.” The Union charged by Collier is the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV).

Stanley Gracek, Assistant Director of International Affairs for the AFL-CIO, in responding to Collier’s article wrote that “The CTV leaders and rank and file, who marched to Miraflores in April of 2002 to demand the Venezuelan president’s resignation, were exercising their right of assembly and free expression.” Beginning in 1981, Gracek served as special advisor on North American affairs to the Brazilian Workers Party.

An article appeared in the New York Times on April 25, 2002 written by Christopher Marquis that listed numerous grants by NED to various pro-coup groups in Venezuela, prior to the April 11 coup against the democratically – elected president, Hugo Chavez. Harry Kelber wrote in LaborTalk for March 17, 2004 that “Prior to the coup, the Solidarity Center invited CTV’s Ortega to Washington, knowing that he was one of the principle opposition leaders to Chavez. The AFL-CIO arranged for Ortega to visit with U.S. government officials, including representatives of the State Department, where opposition leaders met to discuss strategy against Chavez.” Kelber went on to write that “The opposition to Chavez hasn’t given up and neither has the Endowment, which is still handing out grants totaling more than one million dollars to organizations it feels can be of use in the anti-Chavez movement.”

**Information on the NED Venezuela program can be found at the NED website.** In part it states that “NED has increased funding over the past two years for programs in Venezuela, as in all such countries where democratic rights are threatened, has been and remains to support groups and individuals struggling to strengthen democratic processes, rights, and values, irrespective of their political or partisan affiliations. All of these groups represent the most moderate and democratic elements in what has become an extremely polarized situation.”

Basic Question: **Do we want the labor movement to be a participant in promoting U.S. foreign policy**? Accepting funds from the U.S. government to work internationally is inevitably understood to mean that Labor is an agent of U.S. governmental efforts abroad. Is that what we want?

Prepared by M. Hittelman, President of the Community College Council of the California Federation of Teachers, for the AFT Convention

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