

Rodríguez García, Magaly: *Liberal Workers of the World, Unite? The ICFTU and the Defence of Labour Liberalism in Europe and Latin America (1949–1969)*. Bern: Peter Lang/Bern 2010. ISBN: 978-3-0343-0112-1; XVI, 338 S.

Rezensiert von: Kim Scipes, Purdue University North Central

This study is an innovative effort to understand the international functions of free trade (read Western) unions in the post-World War II years (defined by the author as 1949 to 69) through examining two regional affiliates of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the European Regional Organization (ERO) and ORIT (the *Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores*) in Latin America.

Rodríguez García clearly is trying to develop a new approach to understanding the trade unionism of the ICFTU and its affiliates. She defines this as „labour liberalism“, although a „precise definition of ‘liberalism’ does not exist. Nonetheless, those we tend to call ‘liberal’ share certain characteristics that could be considered typical of liberals: the defence of ‘individual freedom, political participation, private property, and equality of opportunity.’ My argument is that free trade unionists strongly defended these principles but added one very important aspect that differentiated them from *laissez-faire*, radical and social liberals, namely a call for organized labor’s active and well-defined participation in the planning and execution of projects aimed at the defence of liberal democracy and socio-economic development at home and abroad.“ (p. 9)

To do this, Rodríguez García provides a detailed historical-comparative study of how these regional but international organizations worked within the parameters of the post-World War „system“ developed by the West. Although initially interested in what and how things were done (descriptive analysis), her study has been expanded to try to understand why these labour leaders acted in the ways that they did (explanatory analysis).

This is a sophisticated effort that rejects monocausal theoretical explanations, and is much more than a limited look at just US or

British unions. The author includes them, but she also includes the Belgian, Mexican, Swedish unions „because of their active participation within their respective regional organizations; and the Ecuadorian, French, Italian, Spanish and Venezuelan unions, because of their political and organizational interest in the free trade union movement“ (p. 11). She combines research among the papers of the ICFTU and each regional organization with correspondence between the ICFTU’s affiliated members, which is especially necessary when studying ORIT, whose archival material is „very scanty“ (p. 16). She joins this with material from US libraries and archives, most importantly including the papers of Serafino Romualdi at Cornell University, the files of the AFL-CIO’s International Affairs Department at the George Meany Memorial Archives, and files from the (US) Labor Diplomacy Oral History Project. It is a thorough project.

Yet this detailed analysis of the ICFTU and its two regional organizations must be clearly seen as a political project rather than a disinterested scholarly one, which she implies (p. 53, note 35). Rodríguez García notes that, „scholars often conclude that the ICFTU ‘acted as an adjunct to Western governments in their Cold War struggles’“ (p. 52). Then she states, „Indeed, one of this study’s objectives is to demonstrate that one of the greatest achievements of the international free labour movement was its consensus on the defence of the Western liberal political order and its economic system“ (p. 53).

However, while there is some excellent material presented with often-times solid analysis, Rodríguez García’s theoretical approach does not satisfy this reviewer. Her political project undermines her empirical findings. The biggest problem is that the comparison simply does not work. She compares activities and positions of sets of unions in more economically developed countries with those in less economically developed ones. She treats these unions as though they are equivalents, when they really are dealing with radically different levels of economic and political development and related power. This, of course, should interject the concept of imperialism – whether the Marxist concept or the more sophisticated understanding advanced

by Jan Nederveen Pieterse – where not only do stronger social orders dominate weaker ones, but the stronger work to maintain the subordination of the weaker over time.¹ However, her not addressing imperialism, a fatal flaw, allows her to argue for her concept of „labour liberalism.“ In short, she had to ignore the concept of imperialism so as to make her concept seem plausible.

This is most obvious in her treatment of the relationship between ORIT, its Latin American affiliates and the American Federation of Labor (after 1955, when the AFL joined with the Congress of Industrial Organizations, it became the AFL-CIO), its largest, richest and most powerful member. Nowhere does she address the fact that the AFL-CIO is located in the nation-state at the center of the US Empire, which unquestionably emerged after World War II. Further, the AFL's foreign policy leaders believed that the US *should* dominate the globe.² She tries to side-step this issue by recognizing the massive US financial assistance to Western Europe (via the Marshall Plan), which she says was not matched in Latin America, but she says nothing about the fact that ORIT itself was initially a project of the AFL – founded in 1948 as the *Confederación Inter-Americana de Trabajadores* – and given „lock, stock and barrel“ into what became known as ORIT.³ This is even more important when one recognizes that the AFL was one of the founders of the ICFTU itself in 1949.

More important than pedigree, however, she mentions nowhere that the AFL was practicing „labor imperialism.“⁴ It and ORIT were involved in the overthrow of the democratically elected government in Guatemala in 1954. She does not address the development of the American Institute for Free Labour Development (AIFLD) in 1960–62 by the AFL-CIO, through which it could control Latin American labor more effectively than working through ORIT, to carry out its foreign policy objectives in Latin America. AIFLD was involved in overthrowing democratically-elected governments in Brazil (1964) and Chile (1973). It was also the labor arm of the US Government's „Alliance for Progress,“ initiated in 1962, which was intended to suggest to the impoverished Latin American masses a developmental model less

transgressive than that proposed by Fidel Castro's revolutionary one. Whether acting on its own, or allowing its efforts to be subordinated to those of the US Government, the AFL/AFL-CIO's efforts in Latin America were forms of labour imperialism, not labour liberalism.

In short, despite an innovative study with an in-depth analysis, Magaly Rodríguez García's theoretical approach cannot provide the explanatory power she claims. Not only must specific activities be vigorously examined, but the larger socio-cultural-political-economic context in which they take place must also be understood. Adding that undermines her center-most claim.

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¹Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Empire and Emancipation. Power and Liberation on a Global Scale*, New York 1989.

²Kim Scipes, *AFL-CIO's Secret War against Developing Country Workers. Solidarity or Sabotage?*, Lanham, MD 2010.

³Serafino Romualdi, *Presidents and Peons. Memories of a Labor Ambassador*, New York 1967, p. 95.

⁴Kim Scipes, *Why Labor Imperialism? AFL-CIO's Foreign Policy Leaders and the Developing World in Working USA 13 (2010) 4*, pp. 465–479.