

# Labor Activists Launch New Organization to Challenge AFL-CIO Foreign Policy

By [Prof. Kim Scipes](#)

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*Labor activists from across the country, members of a number of unions, publicly announced the creation of LEPAIO, the Labor Education Project on the AFL-CIO International Operations, over the weekend of April 8-9. They held a press conference outside AFL-CIO headquarters on 16<sup>th</sup> Street in Washington, D.C., on April 8<sup>th</sup>, and followed with a four-hour educational conference at the University of the District of Columbia the following day.*

This is the first project to focus on AFL-CIO operations around the globe since efforts to pass the “Build Unity and Trust Among Workers World-wide” resolution at the AFL-CIO’s 2005 National Convention in Chicago.

This new project, LEPAIO, is hoping to build support leading to the AFL-CIO’s 2022 National Convention in Philadelphia on June 12-15.

Speakers at the educational conference spoke on a number of issues, noting that the education conference on April 9<sup>th</sup> came on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attempted (but failed) coup against democratically elected President of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez.

Speakers Margaret Flowers, William Camacaro, and James Patrick Jordan spoke of the ongoing U.S. attacks on Venezuela that continue today, particularly through economic sanctions supported by the AFL-CIO.

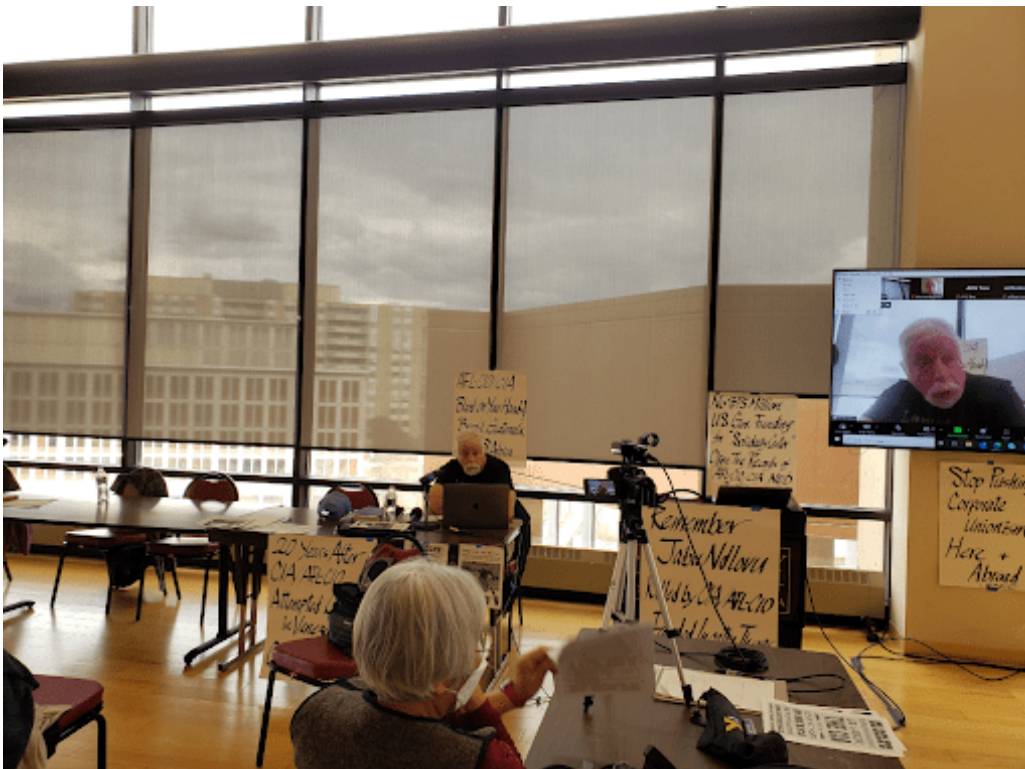
This writer later noted the similarities between the 2002 attempted coup in Venezuela and the 1973 Chilean coup that overthrew democratically elected Salvador Allende, about which the AFL-CIO’s involvement in the latter through its American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD) had been revealed by the late Fred Hirsch of Plumbers and Pipefitters #393 in San Jose, California, in 1974.

These talks were followed by a heart-felt talk by David Hemson about how the progressive

non-racial unions of South Africa were created, beginning with the mass strikes in Durban in 1973. Hemson had been one of the original organizers there.

Hemson spoke about how the AFL-CIO had supported the apartheid regime, especially through the on-going support of Zulu Chief Gatscha Buthelezi. Buthelezi and his people had physically attacked COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) members and affiliated unions in an internal war in the early 1990s in the province of Kwa-Zulu/Natal. The AFL-CIO, ironically, had given Buthelezi the George Meany-Lane Kirkland Award for Human Rights in 1982.

Lou Wolf of *CovertAction Magazine* talked about the CIA's operations around the world, and AFL-CIO involvement in their operations. (For example, see Rob McKenzie's new book, *El Golpe: US Labor, the CIA and the Coup at Ford in Mexico*, recently published by Pluto Press.)



Lou Wolf speaking via Zoom. [Photo courtesy of Thomas O'Rourke]

This author followed, talking briefly about the AFL-CIO operations in Chile, the Philippines and Venezuela. However, most of my talk was about current events, with the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center serving as one of the four core "institutes" of the Reagan administration-created National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

Prior to the development of the NED, the U.S. would intervene in *response* to social crises in countries it deemed important to its global empire; this was the case in Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Brazil (1964) and Chile (1973)—all of which first the AFL and then the AFL-CIO participated in other than Iran—and in each case, overthrew the respective democratically elected government.

However, exposures of these operations during the 1970s resulted in the development of the NED and a shift toward intervention *before-hand*, where they developed and/or found organizations that would support U.S. operations before a crisis would develop. (This

happened after their work in El Salvador in the early 1980s, where they definitely intervened in response to the revolutionary upsurge.) NED has supported these organizations with considerable amounts of money so as to give them considerable sway in the future direction of their country.

There are four “core institutes” of the NED: the international wing of the Democratic Party, the international wing of the Republican Party, the international wing of the US Chamber of Commerce, and the Solidarity Center of the AFL-CIO. These are the organizations at the heart of the NED and its operations. And whatever one thinks about either the Democrats or the Republicans, labor collaboration with the US Chamber of Commerce is despicable.

That does not mean that the Solidarity Center’s particular operations are necessarily evil, as was true of predecessor “institutes” in Africa, Asia and Latin America; there have been some projects where they have been helpful or at least “not evil.” However, the fact is that the AFL-CIO is complicit in the NED, which is designed to maintain the dominance of the U.S. Empire and its capitalist infrastructure.

Frank Hammer then discussed the assassination of his brother, Michael, along with two associates, in El Salvador while working on “land reform” for AIFLD in 1981. The U.S.-funded land reforms combined with right-wing military repression in the countryside were designed to defeat the revolutionary upsurge by the peasantry. Hammer noted that it was the oligarchs, that AIFLD was trying to protect, who were responsible for the assassination.

Following Hammer, Carol Lang spoke about the Histadrut, a long-time colonialist project in Israel, designed to maintain Palestinian and Arab worker subjugation, and which has long been supported by the AFL-CIO, particularly by getting member unions to purchase Israel Bonds that support the apartheid state.

And finally, Steve Zeltzer spoke on Solidarity Center ties to right-wing labor in Ukraine. Zeltzer again called for the AFL-CIO to “open its books” on their foreign operations.

In short, what was presented was a vehement condemnation of the AFL-CIO’s international operations from a global perspective, and an argument that we cannot have a labor movement promoting popular democracy at home while supporting fascism elsewhere. We must unite directly with workers around the world and must do so if growing crises, like climate change, war, suppression of labor rights, etc., are to be challenged.

In response, conference attendees (in person and via Zoom) passed a strong resolution that is now on the LEPAIO website: <https://aflcio-int.education/>.

The Educational Conference in Philly will take place on Saturday, June 11, from 1:00-5:00 pm at The Ethical Society, 1906 Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, PA 19103.

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the peer-reviewed journal *Class, Race and Corporate Power* (Political Science Department of Florida International University in Miami): <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol8/iss2/5>. He is also a member of the National Writers' Union, AFL-CIO. Details on McKenzie's book: London: Pluto Press, 2022 ISBN: 978 0 7453 4562 8 (paper). Kim can be reached at [kimscipes@earthlink.net](mailto:kimscipes@earthlink.net).

Featured image: Educational conference on April 9th which was part of an ongoing effort to expose AFL-CIO connection to U.S. imperialism in South America. [Source: Photo courtesy of Thomas O'Rourke]

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