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In this novel and refreshing article, Jeff Schuhrke traces the background of the January 1981 murder in El Salvador of three rural labor organizers at the hands of figures tied to the country's dictatorship. What made this event so explosive was not the act itself, as the Junta's allies were in the process of murdering hundreds of rural workers and organizers under the smokescreen of a U.S.-backed land reform program that had been passed a year earlier. In case this, however, the three victims were employees, indirectly, of the U.S. government. Michael Hammer and Mark David Pearlman were labor organizers for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), a hemispheric outfit that had trained tens of thousands of Latin American labor leaders since its creation in 1962 under the joint purview of the White House Special Group on Counterinsurgency and the American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO).¹ The third victim, who had also been a frequent recipient of U.S. government stipends via a nongovernmental pass-through, was the dictatorship's own agrarian reform chief, José Rodolfo Viera, whose U.S.-funded rural worker organization had heretofore been spared the worst aspects of government repression suffered by leftist trade unionists and peasant workers.

AIFLD's role in El Salvador fit a pattern of U.S.-backed labor organizing throughout Cold War Latin America and beyond, in which the U.S. government sponsored AIFLD's efforts in order to replace left labor organizations with so-called "moderate," anti-leftist trade unions. A few of the region's dictatorships reluctantly agreed to permit such organizing, convinced by local U.S. Embassy officials that it was an effective strategy to thwart revolutionary pressures from the labor left. Not all Salvadoran elites agreed, however, as some of the dictatorship's allies worried that the country's conservative peasantry was passing rapidly from AIFLD liberalism to Sandinista radicalism. The U.S. Embassy and its local allies were dupes, these renegade government supporters warned. AIFLD had to be stopped.

There is a great deal to praise in this article. Schuhrke's archival work in the records of AIFLD and its Salvadoran allies is excellent, and striking in its novelty, especially given the lack of previous literature on AIFLD's rural organizing efforts. Schuhrke also places the article within the context of Washington's Cold War efforts to supposedly inoculate the Global South from worker-peasant revolution by implementing a yeoman-farmer version of land reform, which was particularly successful in the U.S.-occupied zones of East Asia in the aftermath of World War II. Obstacles mounted, however, when the 1959 Cuban revolution provoked Cold War anxieties in Latin America, a region where landed oligarchies had little taste for rural labor organizing, and even less for agrarian reform. The case study is also well chosen, given Central America's position as ground zero for the U.S. government's post-1959 efforts to modernize capitalist relations in the countryside and hopefully avoid another Cuba.

¹ For more on AIFLD's origins, see Thomas C. Field Jr., "Transnationalism Meets Empire: The AFL-CIO, Development, and the Private Origins of Kennedy's Latin American Labor Program," *Diplomatic History* 42:2 (2018): 305-334.

From the beginning of the 1963 launch of AIFLD labor organizing in El Salvador, rural trade unionization was considered too dangerous to the country's social fabric and was thus not permitted under the government's contract with USAID. Believing that it knew what was best for the dictatorship, the U.S. government sidestepped this parameter by channeling AIFLD's rural work through USAID Community Development programs. This made possible the creation of a rural "association" by the late 1960s, which soon adopted the friendly (North) American nomenclature of "union" ("*Unión Comunal Salvadoreña*"), rather than the more recognizable Spanish word for a trade union: "*sindicato*." The Salvadoran dictatorship continued to set strict limits on USAID organizing (landless peasants were not allowed to join, for example), but a few reform-minded elites were reluctantly willing to go along with Washington's rural gambit: to channel peasant activism toward pliant 'yellow' unions that were openly beholden to their paymasters at the U.S. Embassy. Continuing to play along, the Salvadoran government acceded to U.S. Embassy pressure by calling the 1970 Agrarian Reform Congress, which the dictatorship converted into sham meeting dominated by businessmen and large landowners. For example, representatives of the U.S.-funded peasant *Unión* were forced to sit in the back, and government-backed paramilitaries later kidnapped and beat one of the few attendees (a priest) who spoke unequivocally in favor of redistribution of land to the peasants.

Like many recent histories of U.S. labor organizing during the Cold War, Schuhrke's intriguing article places U.S. labor organizers in the middle of a fierce battle between El Salvador's rightist dictatorship and its growing cadre of leftist rebels, now in their second decade of a rural guerrilla insurgency.² The latter are barely mentioned, however, perhaps because the article draws largely on the records U.S. Embassy officials and their AIFLD contractors, none of whom shared the left's desire to overturn the dictatorship. On the contrary, the goal of the U.S.-funded organizers was to help the dictatorship help itself, by convincing it to implement moderate reforms while collaborating with (and benefiting from) the government's repression of the left. From El Salvador and Honduras to Bolivia and Brazil, AIFLD's goal was to defeat the left within existing trade unions, or to create parallel anti-left trade unions, often with the support of selective repression by the region's rightist dictatorships. This article omits the intra-labor struggles between leftist peasants and AIFLD's allies in the rural *Unión*, dynamics which could be covered in a monograph on the topic. To put it bluntly, USAID's peasant organizing efforts must have seemed like a collaborationist charade to those leftist organizers being murdered in large numbers during this period. Some might even have described the U.S.-backed peasant *Unión* as a USAID-funded, CIA-backed yellow union created to stop the Salvadoran left at all costs and therefore destined to fail because the quality of peasant life was a distant priority for the union's financiers in Washington.

We do not hear these views. (For what it is worth, we do not hear much from rightist Salvadorans either.) Instead, we read sanguine rhetoric from the records of the U.S. Embassy and the AFL-CIO, who claimed that unnamed members of the Salvadoran dictatorship – aside from Viera? – sincerely "wished to see genuine agrarian reform" (537). Meanwhile, the U.S.-funded peasant *Unión* is described as genuinely wanting "to address rural inequities without upending existing power structures" (537). Apparently, aside from those being paid by the U.S. government, few Salvadorans agreed.

Incorporation of Salvadoran voices, both left and right, would have also facilitated alternative readings of AIFLD's expulsion in 1973, which coincided with the eruption of left-right anti-imperialist alliances for national dignity and liberation, such as occurred briefly in the guise of nationalist military governments from Panama to the Southern Cone. It must have been humiliating, for example, when El Salvador's rulers expelled USAID-funded labor organizers only to learn that the U.S.

² Field, "Transnationalism Meets Empire," Thomas C. Field Jr., "Union Busting as Development: Transnationalism, Empire, and Kennedy's Secret Labour Programme for Bolivia," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 52:1 (2020): 27-51; Larissa Rosa Corrêa, *Disseram que Voltei Americanizado* (Campinas, Brazil: Editora Unicamp, 2017); Patrick Iber, "Who Will Impose Democracy? Sacha Volman and the Contradictions of CIA Support for the Anticommunist Left in Latin America," *Diplomatic History* 37 (2013): 995-1028; Robert Anthony Waters Jr. and Geert Van Goethem, eds., *American Labor's Global Ambassadors: The International History of the AFL-CIO during the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Renato P. Colistete, "Trade Unions and the ICFTU in the Age of Developmentalism in Brazil, 1953-1962," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 92:4 (2012): 669-701; and Magaly Rodríguez García, *Liberal Workers of the World Unite? The ICFTU and the Defense of Labour Liberalism in Europe and Latin America (1949-1969)* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010).

government left behind a \$400,000 slush fund for its chosen peasant “moderates,” who soon grew so corrupt that Washington froze the *Unión*’s accounts pending the election of new leadership. Enter José Rodolfo Viera, who helped the US Embassy convince the dictatorship to permit the return of USAID’s AIFLD in 1978 (539-543).

If the White House launched AIFLD to counteract the threat posed by leftist labor organizing in Latin America, it was this same threat that convinced local elites to tolerate AIFLD’s extremely moderate version of rural trade unionism. In El Salvador, an ongoing rural insurgency convinced the dictatorship in 1975 to begin a limited land reform program, whose announcement was carefully stage-managed to make it look like it was a sop to the U.S.-backed moderates in the *Unión*. Similarly, it was the leftist Nicaraguan revolution (not the hapless, U.S.-funded *Unión* leaders) that provoked the Salvadoran dictatorship to go even further in 1980, when they passed a thoroughgoing, though administratively botched, land reform, coupled with an escalation of anti-left repression through the declaration of martial law in the countryside. Despite the brutality of the dictatorship’s so-called land reform, San Salvador continued to receive the backing of the US Embassy and its allies in the AFL-CIO. Even after renegade friends of the Salvadoran government broke ranks in 1981 and murdered Hammer, Pearlman, and Viera, the U.S. Embassy continued to back the dictatorship. San Salvador largely ignored Washington’s demand that the assassins be brought to justice.

To close, this article is an excellent example of the kind of transnational literature called for in new diplomatic history, not to mention an important contribution to the very promising overlap between the fields of labor and international relations. Schuhrke’s article compliments rather than revises previous narratives of U.S.-funded labor organizing in Cold War Latin America, which reveals a pattern of creating ineffectual yellow unions that found themselves caught between the needs of the workers and the agendas set by their financiers in Washington. Despite claims by AFL-CIO organizers that they were organizing democratic and autonomous trade unions, Schuhrke’s work supports previous findings on British Guiana, Brazil, and Bolivia, in which AIFLD financed labor splits whenever pro-capitalist workers failed to achieve majorities, a tactic often followed by collaboration with dictatorships who gave preferential treatment to workers’ organizations endorsed by the U.S. Embassy.³ Considered from the perspective of the White House National Security Council, rather than that of AFL-CIO organizers, the Salvadoran *Unión* operation was not a “total failure” (552). For three decades, USAID’s rural organizing efforts provided crucial cover to a series of brutal dictatorships, the January 1981 blowback notwithstanding. Meanwhile, AIFLD’s *Unión* succeeded in dividing rural workers and handicapping the revolution.

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³ Field, “Union Busting as Development; Corrêa, *Disseram que Voltei Americanizado*; Iber, “Who Will Impose Democracy?” Colistete, “Trade Unions and the ICFTU;” Stephen G. Rabe, *US Intervention in British Guiana: A Cold War Story* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); and Robert Waters and Gordon Daniels, “The World’s Longest General Strike: The AFL-CIO, the CIA, and British Guiana,” *Diplomatic History* 29:2 (2005): 279-307.