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Beyond Mythology: A Reply to Paul Garver

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Beyond Mythology: A Reply to Paul Garver

Abstract

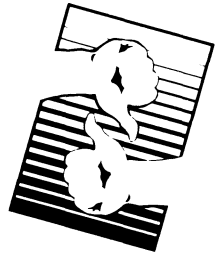
[Excerpt] Unlike many critics of the AFL-CIO's foreign policies, and especially of its International Affairs Department, Paul Garver speaks with a reasonable, almost academic voice. Only the stonehearted can fail to be moved by his call for "serious dialogue and open discussion" to replace the "sporadic swapping of charges and counter-charges" as well as "denunciations, red-baiting and innuendo." "The differences between us, at home and abroad," he says, "are not as deep as our need to stand united in the global workplace."

Amen. The foreign policy debate initiated at the AFL-CIO convention four years ago was entirely healthy. It needs to be broadened and better informed if the Federation is to act abroad with the understanding and support of its membership. Assuming Brother Garver means what he said, I decided his article deserved a response and that the resulting debate might indeed promote rational dialogue, diminish demagoguery, and dispel misinformation.

Regrettably, Brother Garver's article falls short of the standards he proclaims. He hurls charges that must provoke counter-charges, indulges in the denunciations he denounces, dispenses misinformation uncondusive to serious dialogue, and stoops to innuendos that are not helpful to open discussion.

Keywords

Paul Garver, AFL-CIO, internationalism, solidarity



Beyond Mythology

A Reply to Paul Garver

■ *Tom Kahn*

Unlike many critics of the AFL-CIO's foreign policies, and especially of its International Affairs Department, Paul Garver speaks with a reasonable, almost academic voice. Only the stone-hearted can fail to be moved by his call for "serious dialogue and open discussion" to replace the "sporadic swapping of charges and counter-charges" as well as "denunciations, red-baiting and innuendo." "The differences between us, at home and abroad," he says, "are not as deep as our need to stand united in the global workplace."

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He speaks of the DIA's "incessant and hysterical attacks on all critics of current DIA policies." Surely, these adjectives more accurately describe the stream of invective against the International Affairs Department emanating from many of our critics, who daily denounce us as CIA agents, lackeys of American imperialism, supporters of right-wing dictatorships, overthrowers of popular governments, etc. Brother Garver has read these attacks (who hasn't?) but, like too many others, does not find them "incessant and hysterical," only our too infrequent responses to them.

I do not think he proceeds from the same incorrigible malice as our fringe detractors, but I do think he is, in a sense, entrapped by it—or, more precisely, by a mythology about the AFL-CIO's international activities that has been constructed by the far Left and that has won reflexive acceptance in wider circles. Like all mythologies, it provides total and sure answers to vexing questions and commands among its most passionate adherents a faith that cannot be shaken by facts. Brother Garver accepts the premises of this mythology while trying to reconcile the facts to it. But the task is impossible, and his labors inevitably bring forth contradictions, factual distortions, and illogical conclusions.

For example, while Garver praises the "campaign of the International Metalworkers Federation to treat abuse of workers' rights as an unfair trading practice," he says nothing about—perhaps knows nothing about?—the highly effective AFL-CIO campaign along the same lines, a campaign in which the International Affairs Department has played a leading role. He says nothing about the success of the Federation in getting workers' rights provisions written into various pieces of trade legislation. Indeed, on this issue, the AFL-CIO is recognized within the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) as having been in the forefront and as having pressed other ICFTU affiliates to be more aggressive in confronting their governments.

The reason for such omissions is clear. Mr. Garver has concluded that the "DIA is often an obstacle to building real solidarity." By ignoring what we have done to build international labor solidarity, Garver buttresses his conclusion that we are an obstacle to it. Here we get a glimpse into the methodology he employs throughout his article. His conclusion is ideological—more accurately, mythological—and mere facts will be either bent to support it or disregarded altogether.

"Achieving real solidarity across national borders and around the globe is a difficult undertaking," Garver has discovered, "one

which little in our experience has prepared us for. Language barriers, differences in cultures and political traditions, very different styles of unionism—all these make simple communication, let alone real understanding of foreign workers' interests and concerns, difficult." The difficulties Garver cites are indeed considerable, and must seem all the more so for those whose interest in international labor affairs arose only in recent years. But these are problems with which the International Affairs Department has been coping for decades.

The AFL-CIO has some 100 full-time professionals working in international affairs, including Washington-based staff and representatives in nearly 40 countries. Unlike the U.S. government's foreign service, which talks mainly to their foreign diplomatic counterparts and businessmen, our representatives are to be found in the local union halls and workplaces in the countries where they serve. They have first-hand, on-the-ground experience with the "language barriers, differences in cultures and political traditions, very different styles of unionism" to which Garver refers. Many of them have been on the job for a decade or more, established roots in their regions, and acquired an expertise envied by rotating State Department officials and even by those in foreign trade union centers who may disagree with our analyses and policies in one country or another. They bring trade union experience to trade union problems. And many of them serve under conditions of risk, instability, and governmental hostility.

These facts are not to be found in Brother Garver's article because he has decided that the International Affairs Department is not very useful in promoting either the interests of American workers or international labor solidarity. For the same reason, there is no discussion of the Department's role in gathering extensive information on violations of workers' rights in countries enjoying trade privileges and pressing the government for the denial of those privileges to the most egregious offenders. He says nothing of our success in removing Paraguay, Nicaragua, Romania and in suspending Chile from the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP). He says nothing of the impact of our GSP campaign in promoting labor reforms in South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand, among other countries. He cannot bring himself to note these activities because they undercut his central task: to paint the Department with a "narrow sectarian face," engaged in a "government-financed anti-communist crusade." To make the image stick, he is compelled to overlook the actual work of the Department and its Institutes.

Garver says our independence from the U.S. government is

suspect because the Department is heavily dependent on funds from government sources. This is U.S. taxpayers' money, the bulk of which comes from working people, much of it from our members. Why aren't we entitled to claim a chunk of it to be used to advance the interests of workers at home and abroad? Elsewhere in his article Brother Garver refers favorably to the international work of various ICFTU affiliates—e.g., the Danish LO and other Scandinavian federations. He might be surprised to learn of the extent of government financing of the international activities of these unions, as well as of the Germans, the Dutch, the Italians. By what double-standard is their acceptance of government money to be approved, and their use of it applauded, while our use of taxpayers' (workers') money makes us pawns of the U.S. government?

Garver says: "Despite this overwhelming dependence on government monies, as a voluntary organization the DIA and its Institutes are not subject to Congressional oversight nor to the Freedom of Information Act. As a result, no detailed public record exists of how this money is spent."

Wrong. Records relating to our expenditures of funds from government agencies have been requested and made available under the Freedom of Information Act. And activities carried out with these funds have been reviewed by Congressional committees. In addition, all of the books of all of the Institutes were made available to members of the AFL-CIO International Affairs Committee (comprising more than half of the Federation's Executive Council). It is no doubt true, as Garver says, that most AFL-CIO union members know very little about the Department's activities. Most of our members, not being activists, know too little about most of the Federation's activities, domestic as well as international—and that is to be regretted. I can only say that the Department has undertaken a major educational campaign in the last several years—regional conferences, training institutes, new publications—aimed at informing at least our secondary trade union leadership of our international work, but it will take time to overcome the problem.

Garver decries the "polarization of the world labor movement into a Soviet-dominated World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) and a U.S./European-led ICFTU." "Both versions of 'solidarity,'" he says, "were enlisted in the Cold War, corrupting both the rhetoric and practice of solidarity in the process."

This is a curious formulation. First, it would have us understand that the split in the world trade union movement was the result of the conflict between the two superpowers—as if it had nothing

to do with trade union issues. Second, it suggests that both camps—the ICFTU and the WFTU—were guilty (equally?) of corrupting international labor solidarity.

This latter is especially puzzling in light of Garver's characterizations of the two organizations. He acknowledges that "the Soviet Union has rigidly controlled the WFTU, using it, for example, to stifle protests over the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968." While he thus criticizes the WFTU, he has only nice things to say about the ICFTU, praising its dedication to international union solidarity and urging the AFL-CIO to act multilaterally through the ICFTU and related international labor organizations. How could these two organizations, one a tool of Soviet totalitarianism that uses unions to support anti-worker policies and the other an effective instrument of multinational trade union cooperation, have been jointly responsible for "corrupting both the rhetoric and practice of solidarity"?

Or perhaps what Garver is trying to say is that neither of them was exactly responsible; perhaps the guilty party was the Cold War, that independent historical actor who swept destructively through a historical period, to the detriment of everything good in the world. Some writers tend to see the Cold War this way—as an affliction that descended upon us like a locust plague, not a result arising from real and irreconcilable differences over how political, social and economic life should be organized. I see it as the result of irreconcilable differences, including differences over the nature of trade unions, their role in society, their obligations to their members, their relationship to the state. These are not abstract questions removed from bread-and-butter unionism; they relate precisely—and pragmatically—to the material advancement of workers' interests. And while Mr. Garver may view the anti-communism of the AFL-CIO as a relic of the past, the WFTU continues to support political movements and governments that end up repressing basic worker rights.

If this is the case, why should it be a matter of indifference to us whether foreign trade union movements align themselves with the WFTU? Why does Mr. Garver speak contemptuously of the Federation's "shunning" WFTU affiliates and approvingly of those foreign labor centers that give financial or political support to those affiliates? Indeed, if "the Soviets have little to offer Third World unions materially or politically," as Garver says, why is this not precisely the time for us to appeal to them, in the strongest terms, to join the camp of the free trade union movement?

Space does not permit a detailed refutation of Brother Garver's criticisms of our Institutes' activities in Asia, Africa and Latin

America. I can only single out a few illustrative flaws in his arguments.

Brother Garver praises some ICFTU affiliates who "support federations outside the AAFLI-supported TUCP in the Philippines." The TUCP, with over a million members, is an ICFTU affiliate. The TUCP's chief rival is the KMU, whose connections with the New Peoples Army are on public record, and a majority of whose members are not trade unionists but students and social activists of various kinds. The KMU has relatively few collective bargaining agreements. But it appears to be Mr. Garver's union of choice in the Philippines. When it comes to El Salvador, his union of choice is the UNTS, because "the UNTS unions negotiate 77% of all union contracts in El Salvador." By that standard, he should switch sides in the Philippines.

According to Garver, "When UNTS unions strike for higher wages, benefits or health and safety, AIFLD claims, they are merely trying to destabilize a 'democratic' government." Not true. AIFLD draws a distinction between legitimate strikes over wages and working conditions, whether by UNTS or any other union, and political strikes that seek violent confrontation. We support the former, not the latter.

Garver is also wrong when he accuses AIFLD of turning a deaf ear to "numerous killings and 'disappearances' of union leaders, largely. . . from. . . UNTS." We have vigorously protested such atrocities, whether against UNTS or other union leaders. Hold on to your seats, but we happen to believe that even unionists we disagree with have a right not to be kidnapped, tortured or killed.

"Despite the savage repression of labor in El Salvador," says Garver, "the DIA has opposed any review of Salvador's trade preferences and has instead attacked the credibility of Americas Watch." To summarize a complex issue (readers can write to us for the full text of our interchange with Americas Watch): We differ with Americas Watch over specific cases and have questioned some of their investigative methods and sources. But we are in agreement that there has been an increase of violence against trade unionists in El Salvador. Our information indicates that the violence comes from both the Left and the Right, from the FMLN guerillas and from the Right-wing death squads. We believe that Americas Watch has played down the violence from the Left and equated the death squads with the government of Napoleon Duarte. Although we have not hesitated to criticize the Duarte government, we do not believe that it is seeking the violent repression of the trade union movement. At the same time, it has clearly failed to bring under control the death squads, which have

links to the military establishment, or to effect the sweeping judicial reforms required to bring perpetrators of violence to justice.

Whether to file a GSP case against El Salvador was a hard call to make; it was debated at length within the Department and in consultation with other departments. As we said in our response to Americas Watch, we did not rule out such a case but decided, following discussions with our Salvadoran trade union friends, that it was not yet time to make that move. Mr. Garver may find it difficult to believe that this matter was debated at all. After all, since "In El Salvador AIFLD is nothing more or less than an arm of the U.S. government," what's to debate? But AIFLD is an arm of the AFL-CIO, not the U.S. government; we did debate the matter; and we are prepared to call for a review of El Salvador's GSP status when we conclude that such action will advance the cause of workers' rights in that country.

Mr. Garver might also explain to us how this "arm of the U.S. government," which "plays a major role in supporting the U.S. counter-insurgency program in El Salvador" came to testify in Congress for a suspension of military aid to El Salvador, in opposition to the policy of the State Department.

Had I more space, I could move from continent to continent pointing out contradictions, omissions, gross simplifications, and misstatements of fact in Garver's critique of the International Affairs Department. With regard to South Africa, for example, he says: "Member unions of the COSATU black trade union federation . . . have affiliated with the appropriate ITs, while refusing involvement with AALC for fear of getting involved in Cold War politics."

The facts are: the AALC has relations with a number of COSATU affiliates; COSATU federation leaders have declined assistance not only from the AALC but from the German DGB, the British TUC, and the ICFTU itself!—on the grounds that it will accept help only from "progressive" trade union organizations. We believe that we and the other aforementioned organizations are impeccably progressive and that the COSATU leaders are mistaken, sadly so, to think otherwise. And we take them, and their struggle, seriously enough to tell them so. We don't pat them on the head and say, "There, there, we understand you're new at this game and have a lot to learn, so we'll just throw money your way until you come to think better of us." We were, in fact, urged to do just this by some Congressmen who oversee Agency for International Development funding for our work and who threatened to cut it off unless we complied. Loyal servants of the government as

we are, we told them what they could do with their money.

And that's the point: we take government money to carry out the programs we want to carry out and that we deem to be in the best interests of American workers and free trade unionism, which we do not presume to be in conflict with "U.S. interests" as we understand them.

If by "U.S. interests" Brother Garver means the interests of American society, of the American people, then we should agree that those interests are served by promoting freedom of association throughout the world, by building independent representative institutions—among them strong trade unions—that are the foundation of democratic societies. Americans need more such societies in this world if our own democratic institutions are to survive and flourish. We need stronger trade unions abroad if we are to preserve our own living standards at home. It is in our interest that workers in Third World and newly industrialized nations increase their purchasing power, expanding the domestic markets for their own production rather than depending on production for export.

All of this may not be in the interest of our multinational corporations. But do we yield to them the identification they seek of their own interests with the national interest? Ironically, many of the AFL-CIO's critics on the Left do just that. They grant that "U.S. interests" are synonymous with U.S. corporate interests and then lambast us for pursuing "U.S. interests" thus defined.

All a matter of rhetoric? Largely, yes. But rhetoric reinforces mythologies, and mythologies blind us to facts. Mythologies offer us demons and demigods, easy choices in the face of complex realities. For Brother Garver, the Department and its Institutes are the demons; he is blind to the real work we do and to the possibility that we may know what we are doing, at least most of the time. The International Trade Secretariats, the ICFTU and other international labor organizations are the demigods; he is blind to the Department's contributions to their work and the need to strengthen cooperation among all the elements of labor's "foreign service"—instead of splitting them, as he essentially proposes to do in the name of "international labor solidarity."

Brother Garver calls for "serious dialogue and open discussion" in the hope that we can "find common ground within the U.S. labor movement." I applaud his call and share his hope. But we won't get to where he says he wants to go until we shed the comforting but destructive myths that sow distrust in our ranks and breed divisive strategies for grappling with the sobering problems we face in the world as it is. ■