

that concepts such as domination/manipulation/co-optation should be replaced by the more dynamic idea of an alliance of workers and populists whose terms shift over time. Daniel James (Yale University) also remarked that one must distinguish clearly between a populist discourse and political project developed from a position of state power, like Perón's, and the case of APRA, which never achieved such a position of power.

In " 'Father of the Poor' or 'Mother of the Rich'?: Work Identities and Politics in the Estate Novo," Joel Wolfe (Williams College) argued that the negative impact of the Vargas regime's corporatist politics of co-optation and repression were most strongly felt by the industrial working class. As linchpins of this repressive structure, Wolfe argued, trade unions were turned into "de facto instruments of the state," consciously rejected by industrial workers who relied instead on informal grass-roots organization and direct appeals to Vargas. Analyzing workers' letters to Vargas, he found a "complex interplay between official rhetoric and those it was aimed at" that demonstrated that "neither rural origins nor regime propaganda had obscured the consciousness of these workers."

Welcoming Wolfe's paper as part of a growing body of work on getulista populism, Daniel James was particularly struck by Wolfe's use of the letters individual workers wrote to the government. Yet James remained unconvinced by Wolfe's portrayal of a continuity of working-class militancy, activism, and class consciousness dating back to the First Republic. The rhetoric and phraseology of the letters, James pointed out, could equally well be used "to paint an opposite picture of an atomized working class, a co-opted, manipulated mass putting its trust in the paternalistic dictator." Wolfe, he suggested, should pay greater attention to the complexity and ambiguity of working-class responses to Vargas and to the emergence of a new culture and consciousness of rights among workers in the 1940s. "An awareness of the continued harshness of conditions," he went on, "could go hand in hand with a genuine belief in Vargas, and a view of the state as a sphere where social justice and equality could be realized."

American Unionists Meet with the French Confédération Générale du Travail

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In December 1947, in the midst of a powerful strike wave in France, a group of leaders of the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) left the organization to form an anti-communist labor federation, Force Ouvrière (FO). The new group was assisted by AFL and CIO representatives in Europe. The American labor

movement soon recognized the FO and cut ties with the CGT. A similar pattern unfolded in other countries as the Cold War divided the world, and organized labor, into two hostile blocs. For nearly half a century there has been little contact between the CGT and American labor unions.

Today, the situation is beginning to change. The end of the Cold War and the rise of the global economy requires a reconceptualization of international labor relations. This "new thinking" was the starting point for an interesting and historic meeting that took place in Paris in April and May 1991 between American unionists and the French CGT. The idea was for a group of about twenty American labor leaders and educators to meet with CGT officials and staff to learn about the situation in France and to share ideas about what might be done to create better lines of communication between American and French trade unions. The meeting was mainly educational and informal. It was solely an exchange of ideas and members of the American group made no attempt to speak for the national AFL-CIO. The American group, put together on short notice by Frank Goldsmith, former Dean of the Labor Studies Program at Empire State College in New York City, included several local union presidents, editors of union publications, and labor educators. Three of the American participants were labor historians.

We were housed in the Benoit Frachon Educational Center, located in a beautiful country setting about thirty-five miles south of Paris. Lectures, discussions, and debates focused on such topics as labor economics and history, the structure of the French labor movement, the European Economic Community, the welfare state system, and collective bargaining. Translators and earphones allowed for bilingual discussions and a good deal of time was reserved for questions and comments. Wide-ranging debates were encouraged and everyone had a chance to speak.

Members of the American group were struck by the similarities and differences between the two labor movements. Organized labor in both countries has been on the defensive for the last fifteen years. According to a recent study, the rate of unionization fell in the U.S. from 22.8 percent in 1970 to 16.8 percent in 1990. In France, the rate dropped from 22.3 percent to 12 percent during the same period.

The Americans found it difficult to understand the French system of "proportionate union representation" in which several competing labor groups may represent employees at the bargaining table. This is a big difference from the American system, where only a single union may be recognized as the "exclusive bargaining agent" for a unit of employees. The French system may be democratic and it certainly allows for a lot of voices to be heard. But it also means that interunion conflicts are institutionalized at the plant level and in the bargaining process. This inevitably leads to fragmentation and the weakening of an already divided union movement.

Other features of the French labor-relations system foster union instability. Lacking exclusive bargaining rights, maintenance of membership agreements and dues check-off, French unions must scramble to maintain their membership in

competition with other unions. There are no “agency shops” in France where everyone must belong or pay dues to a certain union. Union leaders must go around and collect the dues from those workers who want to be members of that particular union. (In some cases, workers who wish to be union members can have their dues deducted from their check and sent directly to a bank account). Union delegate elections are held annually and the results determine how many representatives from each organization will be seated at the negotiation table. Because several unions may represent workers in the same unit, the bargaining system can become very complex. But CGT staffers pointed out the French system requires union leaders to be close to the rank and file. And while the bargaining process may be cumbersome, it allows the workers to visualize the differences among the various unions.

Trade policies merited a good deal of discussion. A discussion about how French labor is confronting the challenge of the single-market European economy in 1992 interested Americans partly because of its contrast with America’s proposed free-trade agreement with Mexico. In the case of Europe, several years of discussion have resulted in the formulation of a Social Charter aimed at establishing labor standards and workers’ rights. The aim of the Social Charter is largely to prevent a full-scale shift of capital from high-wage countries such as Sweden and Germany to lower-wage countries such as Spain and Portugal. Although the CGT is not wholly pleased with the Social Charter, it seems that labor’s concerns are being addressed to some degree. Contrast that with the situation in the U.S. On the Mexican free-trade proposal, the whole debate revolved not around the effects on workers in America and Mexico, but rather on the narrow, legalistic issue of whether or not Congress should be able to amend the President’s proposal. Moving the free-trade bill off the “fast track” might have allowed American labor to address some of the same concerns that led Europeans to develop their Social Charter. That was precisely what George Bush and the multinational corporations sought to prevent.

One of the values of this exchange between French and American unionists was the way it helped destroy paralyzing stereotypes that can obstruct meaningful dialogue. American tourists often complain that the French are cold, cultural chauvinists who hate America. That certainly wasn’t our experience. French union leaders have their own stereotypes about American labor. They have an image of union members as white males who draw bloated salaries while masses of minority workers are prohibited from joining unions. While there are elements of truth in this depiction, it is a gross oversimplification. Even union workers have trouble making ends meet, especially in the last fifteen years. Moreover, non-white workers belong to unions at higher percentages than their white counterparts. A black unionist from the American group explained that because minority workers have considerable seniority in many areas of the economy, seniority may be less of a barrier to their progress and more of a protection against discrimination than is usually recognized. The French also view the national AFL-CIO as a powerful,

monolithic, central command for all the unions. The reality is quite different, with independent, autonomous international unions and a relatively weak national center. And within and among American unions, a wide range of political and economic views exist. Also, old leaders, their vision shaped by World War II, the Cold War, and the economic “good times” of the 1950s and 1960s, are being replaced by newer leaders, shaped by the civil rights and anti-war movements, Watergate, and the Reagan era. This surprised CGT leaders.

Members of the American group also met with French workers employed in similar sectors. For example, American and French health-care workers met. I met with CGT members at the Case-Poclair plant, a firm that manufactures excavating equipment and is owned by the Tenneco Corporation. They have been hurt by the recession: 241 of the eight hundred workers had recently been laid off. It was unclear whether anyone would be called back to work. We discussed seniority clauses and how hard it was for laid-off workers to find well-paid jobs. The discussions were warm and comradely. Following the meeting, the CGT union at Case-Poclair issued a statement of solidarity with American workers, calling on workers to unite across borders to defend themselves against multinationals.

A meeting with CGT Secretary-General Henri Krasucki focused on ways to develop lines of communication between French and American workers. One suggestion was to develop union-to-union contacts. Another was for labor-studies programs to promote communication with the CGT *within the context of* “solidarity across borders” and the global economy. A related approach might be to identify American and French firms owned by the same multinational corporations and to foster communication between both unions to promote a united front against global whip-sawing. Finally, it was suggested that the CGT communicate with the newly appointed AFL-CIO representative to Europe.

The Cold War is ending and the global economy growing. There is a pressing need for unions to build new lines of communication across borders. The meeting with the CGT was a small, first step in that direction.

Seventeenth Annual Southwest Labor Studies Conference: Labor in the Era of World War II

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The Southwest Labor Studies Association met for its seventeenth annual meeting on March 22 and 23, 1991 in Stockton, California at the University of the Pacific, where the organization was founded in 1975. Some one hundred academics, labor and community activists, retirees, students and a few unemployed persons attended.