

Unionism and Democracy: the Experience, the Legacy, the Future

A Working Seminar
Sponsored by the Albert Shanker Institute
in cooperation with the AFT's International Affairs Department
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Washington Court Hotel
April 19-21, 2005

April 19

6:00 p.m. Reception

7:00 p.m. Dinner

Address: Edward J. McElroy, President, Albert Shanker Institute &
American Federation of Teachers
*The Future of the AFT's and Labor's Role in Promoting
Democracy*

April 20

9:00 – 9:15 a.m. Introduction and Work Plan for the Meeting

Eugenia Kemble, Executive Director, Albert Shanker Institute

9:15 – 10:45 a.m. Opening Session:

Globalization, Workers Rights, Democracy and the Labor Movement

A Panel of Leaders Will Target Selected Experiences, Past and Present

Moderator:

Toni Cortese, Executive Vice President
American Federation of Teachers

Presenters:

Barbara Shailor, Director, AFL-CIO Department of International
Affairs

Herb Magidson, Chair, AFT Committee on Political Education
(COPE)

Respondents:

John Cole, President, Texas Federation of Teachers and
Chair, AFT Democracy Committee

Explanation: This session will explore the impact of globalization on worker rights, democracy, and the trade union movement, with a special focus on China and Hong Kong. It will use case studies, vignettes and experiences to bring to life the many new challenges faced in contemporary pro-democracy union work of the AFT, AFL-CIO and others. It will touch on the special role of unions as civic educators and as a representative voice for citizens. The session will also point to instances where non-democratic governments, parties or movements have threatened the character or the existence of unions. The session will touch on the AFT's form of internal democracy and how that informs the union's international work. Hopefully, the session will elicit participant responses that relate issues raised in the discussion to what happens in their organizations. Would there be a place, for similar discussions back home, for example? What resources would make leaders comfortable in handling such discussions (i.e. the quality of the draft manual)? How would secondary leaders react to such an agenda? What might they want to do in response?

10:45 – 11:00 a.m. Break

11:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

Session II: *Tools and Strategies of U.S. and International Union Democracy*
Advocates: Points and Counterpoints

Moderator:

Eugenia Kemble, Executive Director
Albert Shanker Institute

Presenter:

Thomas R. Donahue, Vice President, National Endowment for
Democracy; member, Board of Directors, Albert Shanker
Institute; former president and secretary-treasurer, AFL-CIO

Respondents:

Michael Allen, Senior Fellow, National Endowment for
Democracy

Fred van Leeuwen, General Secretary, Education International

Explanation: Ever since the American Labor movement began using government funds to support democracy work abroad the issue has been controversial. Questions keep coming up as to whether the use of such funds “taints” labor work with government influence. Unions in other developed democracies have used government funds for years, so we will hear about the issue from an international perspective. The debate in the U.S. has most recently centered around the use of funds from the National Endowment for Democracy, but it also applies to the use of Agency for International Development funds and dates to early charges that the

American Federation of Labor (AFL) took money from the Central Intelligence Agency. We plan for a thorough discussion of this difficult issue and will be asking participants if the manual treats it adequately. We also hope to address the perception that hesitations about using government money have narrowed or tempered the pro-democracy agenda of many unions and even the AFL-CIO itself.

12:30 – 1:45 p.m. Lunch

1:45 – 3:15 p.m.

Session III: *There are “Unions” and Democratic Unions -- an Historic and Contemporary Quandary over which Labor Institutions warrant Contact and Support*

Moderator:

Jeff Fiedler, President, Food and Allied Service Trades

Presenter:

Han Dongfang, President, *China Labor Bulletin*

Respondents:

Nat LaCour, Secretary-Treasurer, American Federation of Teachers, and member, AFL-CIO International Affairs Committee

Barbara Shailor, Director, International Affairs Department, AFL-CIO

Explanation: This discussion would emphasize contemporary examples of why great care must be taken in international union work to be sure U.S. unions are dealing with legitimate, representative organizations abroad. Barbara Shailor, and to some degree Jeff Fiedler in his role as moderator, will offer context and history on the issue. Beyond China, they might touch on other countries where this has come up such as Venezuela. Han Dongfang will discuss the situation in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) with respect to the varying approaches of U.S. labor organizations to contacts with Chinese workers and the government-controlled All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). He would also touch on WalMart’s labor role in China and the threats to democracy in Hong Kong instigated by the PRC. We will try to shape the discussion so that participants relate their substance to requests they may receive to meet with foreign unions and to trips they, or those within their union, might make to visit unions abroad. It will also alert them to look for characteristics of union legitimacy when either inside or outside groups seek support for pro-union causes abroad.

3:15 – 3:30 p.m. Break

3:30 – 5: 00 p.m.

Session IV: *The Sorry State of Civic and Democracy Education in the U.S.*

Moderator:

Burnie Bond, Director of Programs, Albert Shanker Institute

Presenter:

Diane Ravitch, professor, New York University and member
Albert Shanker Institute Board of Directors; author, *The Language
Police*

Respondents:

James Parisi, Field Representative, Rhode Island Federation
of Teachers and Health Professionals

Beth Thoreson, Assistant to the President, Michigan Federation of
Teachers and School Related Personnel

Mary Bergan, President, California Federation of Teachers

Explanation: Civic education is in crisis in the U.S. and needs the AFT as an active, corrective constituency. And, in emerging democracies unions could offer major political and substantive support for the development of democracy education. The domestic debates over history standards at the state level need solid input from the AFT. This session represents an effort to familiarize our leaders with the substance of current debates and the poor quality of state standards, as well as to discuss with them some ideas about what improvements should be pressed. The three state participants are active in efforts to improve the quality of history and civics standards in their respective states. Could AFT participation in this issue in the U.S. also help us develop a group of educators to do civic education abroad?

5:00 p.m. Evening Open

April 21

8:30 – 9:00 a.m. Continental Breakfast

Review plans for the remainder of the meeting.

Develop recommendations for final session.

9:00. – 10:30 a.m.

Session V: *The Essential Role of Unions and their Leaders in Developing Civil Society and Democracy Itself*

Moderator:

David Dorn, Director, AFT Department of International Affairs

Presenters:

Thulas Nxesi, President, Education International, and General Secretary, South African Democratic Teachers Union

Walid Hamdan, Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV), International Labor Organization

Respondent:

Candice Owley, President, Wisconsin Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals

Explanation: International guests can make the place of labor in building civil society and democracy clear and compelling. The session's purpose is to engage participants in thinking about the AFT's role in assisting unions abroad that are struggling to play this role. The session will address the problems associated with: 1) teaching democratic union building – the kinds of skills new unions need: drafting a constitution, using Robert's Rules of Order, creating a representative structure, running a meeting; 2) building coalitions and political support for a democracy and education agenda; relating to political parties, religious organizations, community groups, women's organizations, etc.; 3) the supportive role of international organizations, including the Global Union Federations that work under the auspices of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU)

10:30 – 10:45 a.m. Break

10:45 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

Closing Session: *Democracy: It's Union Work*

Discussion Leaders:

Toni Cortese, Executive Vice President, AFT

Eugenia Kemble, Executive Director, Albert Shanker Institute

David Dorn, Director, AFT International Affairs Department

A structured but open discussion on follow-up methods for outreach and activism on seminar issues at all levels of the AFT.

- Should the AFT create a democracy network or some other form of regular communication on the issues we have addressed?
- What modifications are needed to the manual? What other materials and organizational resources can help educate affiliates about these issues?
- How can organizational awareness and activism on these matters be built? What structures and supports are needed to do this?

Explanation: The session would use all the exchange from previous sessions as well as the leadership's sense of how to encourage interest and enthusiasm about these issues throughout the AFT. Participants would act as a true working group in helping to shape a comprehensive organizational response.

12:30 p.m.

Adjourn