

Challenging "labor imperialism" AFT-style

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It's encouraging that US unions are acknowledging the deep crisis facing labor and even the need for union democracy, as Labor Notes contributor Mark Brenner observes in his March 2015 column about the conference organized and hosted by the Albert Shanker Institute, an arm of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). At the same time, the project to destroy unions is global, and to push back successfully our movement needs to learn with and from workers in other countries. Part of that process is our challenging the Shanker Institute's public, close ties with the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Though the Shanker Institute makes no secret of its relationship with NED, what it doesn't explain is how the NED works as a junior partner with the US government to suppress independent workers' movements throughout the world. The AFT itself sponsors projects that undercut militant, independent unions, as two researchers noted using "teacher training as labor imperialism."

Workers elsewhere pay dearly for the AFT's and U.S. labor's support for U.S. foreign policies that sabotage popular movements challenging control of wealthy elites. A 2014 World Bank report about educational reform in Latin America and the Caribbean (stay tuned for a response Mary Compton and I are writing) urges governments to destroy the power of teachers unions. This report provides a rationale for the repression of the unions, as is currently underway in Mexico and shows the urgency of our making waves about the Shanker Institute hosting a conference about building the labor movement at home while allowing its suppression abroad.

Efforts to win gains for U.S. workers at the expense of workers in other countries are doomed for the same reasons it has been suicidal for U.S. unions to cast U.S. workers' self-interest as being separate from and even at odds with non-union social justice issues at home. A strong, mobilized labor movement at home has to be rooted in ideals of democracy, social justice and equality that we understand and act on as universal.

A shorter version of this letter appears in the forthcoming print edition of Labor Notes. The print publication contains lots that's valuable that does not appear elsewhere. I subscribe. I hope you do too.

You can follow me on Twitter and Facebook. Still in the works: a critical analysis of that World Bank report about teachers in Latin America and the Caribbean.