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Pure But Decidedly Not Simple: The American Federation of Labor and its Quest for International Human Rights, 1939-1950

In 1947, three years after the fall of Nazi Germany, the people of the United States were just beginning to face the horror and devastation that fascist rule had wreaked on a European continent barely recovered from the last world war, not even three decades before. It was clear to the Allied nations that something had to be done to assure people everywhere some version of what these nations already took for granted as basic rights and freedoms, in order to lessen human misery and prevent another full-fledged war. So it was that early one cold January day, Tony Sender left the New York City offices of the Labor League for Human Rights for Penn Station, to catch the train to Long Island and Lake Success, New York.[1] A former member of the German Reichtstag, she appeared before the United Nations Committee on Human Rights as a representative of the American Federation of Labor, the parent organization of the Labor League. She had come to present them with an "International Bill of Human Rights" drafted by the American Federation of Labor.

Most drafts of human rights proclamations submitted to the Committee in those days came from various countries, religious groups, and peace-minded community organizations, but Sender

[1] Sender would alternately spell her name as "Tony" or "Toni" while in the U.S. I have chosen "Tony," as it is how she most often identifies herself in AFL documents.

argued that the AFL was uniquely suited to create solutions to international human rights problems.[2] How could this be? The American Federation of Labor was created as a domestic organization to assist workers in labor disputes, help negociate contracts, and generally improve American working class life, not as a group devoted to world affairs. Certainly, post-war America was seeing a burst of pent-up organizational activity, as unions, released from the wartime no-strike pledge, practically shut down industry with major strikes across the country. In fact, despite the labor unrest of the 1930s, it was in 1945 and 1946 that the most strikes in United States history occurred, ranging from General Motors sit-down strikes to strikes by steelworkers, miners, and railroad workers. As it happened, the negotiations over the international human rights protocols at Lake Success were occurring in tandem with Congressional debates over the Taft-Hartley Act, which would outlaw closed shops and severely limit the right to strike, legislation which the AFL saw as one of the biggest blows to labor in American history. So why did the AFL consider it a top priority to participate in the creation of a Declaration of Human Rights in the midst of these domestic labor and legal crises? How could it justify diverting funds, energy, and some of its best people to a long-term effort to construct world peace and international rights?

Although it was beyond their organization's initial purview, the leaders of the AFL had come to understand that human rights were linked to both political and economic rights. Through their experiences providing humanitarian aid during World War II, through the lens of their leaders' strong religious and ethical convictions, and through the reinterpretation of communism, the AFL

[2] See, for example, Tony Sender, "Short Report of Consultant's Activities at U.N. for Matthew Woll," July 14, 1948. Tony Sender Papers, box 13, folder 1. Also Tony Sender, untitled speech re: slave labor, February 20, 1948. Tony Sender Papers, box 13, folder 2. Wisconsin Historical Society.

leaders and membership began to understand that the guarantee of international human rights was indispensable. These rights were a fundamental building block both to their own goals as American workers and to building a better world for everyone.

Labor involvement in political affairs did not start with the AFL; labor unions in both Europe and the United States had a long and storied history of political involvement before the AFL was created in 1886. In Europe, unions were frequently either products of political parties or formed their own political parties.[3] On the other side of the ocean, American unions experimented with varying degrees of formal political involvement, with decidedly diverse goals. Throughout the 19th century, groups of laborers formed workingman's parties to advance their interests in politics, the syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World advocated the transformation of capitalist society through both strikes and political action, and the Knights of Labor formed alliances with the Greenback-Labor party and the People's party in order to push for improved conditions for workers.[4]

As originally envisioned by founder Samuel Gompers, the American Federation of Labor was to be unlike any labor group that had come before. It was a labor organization radically different from those formed in Europe and those that had cropped up across the U.S. and failed. Rather than creating a labor organization that would achieve its ends through partisan political participation, Gompers hoped to create a new, uniquely American-style unionism, based on collective bargaining and non-participation in the political sphere. After watching the National Labor Union self-destruct in a cloud of competing political opinions in 1872, unable to bridge the

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[3] Roy Godson, American Labor and European Politics: The AFL as a Transnational Force. (New York: Crane, 1976), 21.

[4] Ruth Horowitz, Political Ideologies of Organized Labor: The New Deal Era. (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1978), 14.

racial, religious, and ethnic divides among its members, it was clear to Gompers that the most effective way to create a better life for American workers was through a strict policy of "business-only" unionism, centered around strikes and boycotts instead of attempts to influence legislation. Ultimately, AFL members were told, the government did not have their best interests in mind, even when enacting seemingly beneficial labor laws; union building was the only activity that could be directly beneficial to the worker.[5] Thus, if members of Gompers' AFL desired to be politically active, it would be on their own terms as individuals, making their own choices about which mainstream candidates to support instead of voting a labor ticket.

However, Gompers' ideal of non-involvement, the avoidance of a labor union with broad, ideological goals and the intent to reshape the nation and the world, did not last for long. Despite the rhetoric, the AFL was never completely apolitical, and was quickly caught up in electoral politics, working to support pro-labor candidates, and allying itself with the Democratic party as early as 1908.[6] World War I especially presented a challenge to Gompers' vision of labor isolationism, as the union threw the full force of its support behind the government, doing all it could to keep workers focused on the war effort.[7] By the Depression, there was no question that the AFL had shifted from a group that disavowed political affiliation and lobbying for legislative action to an organization fully enmeshed in American political life.

As Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, and Britain and France declared war in

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[5] Ibid, 15-19.

[6] For a more nuanced treatment of the AFL's early involvement in electoral politics, see Julie Greene, Pure and Simple Politics: The American Federation of Labor and Political Activism, 1881-1917 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[7] Simeon Larson, Labor and Foreign Policy: Gompers, the AFL, and the First World War, 1914-1918. (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1975), 14.

response, most Americans watched from across the Atlantic, eager to stay out of Europe's internecine battles. Franklin Roosevelt's suggestions of friendship and attempts to offer aid to the British were met by anger and protest in many quarters. Most Americans, crawling out from under the Depression, wanted nothing more than to put their own affairs in order. In contrast, the American Federation of Labor quickly responded to requests for help from their British counterparts, forming the American Labor Committee to Aid British Labor only days after Britain declared war. The Committee provided "contributions in money and supplies from trade unions" in the U.S. for "the British working people" and offered both material and moral support to the AFL's fraternal brothers who found themselves "in the front ranks of the fights against totalitarian tyranny."[8]

Although the Committee, a subsidiary of the AFL, was officially chaired by AFL president William Green, it was actually controlled by Matthew Woll, first vice president of the AFL, and populated with various internationally-minded AFL board members ranging from secretary George Meany to vice president David Dubinsky. In early 1942, after the U.S.'s entry into the war, the Committee voted to change its name to the Labor League for Human Rights in order to better reflect the widespread nature of the conflict, citing the Committee's necessary shift of purpose from a concern for British brothers to a concern for all Allied laborers and those in occupied territories. The group also chose to change their activities from funneling funding from the U.S. to Europe to acting as consultants to aid groups and as a clearinghouse for those Americans looking to make donations.[9] The Labor League eventually partnered with the Red Cross, accepting money for office

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[8] *New York Times*, "Roosevelt Praises Aid to British Labor," page 38, May 18, 1941.

[9] Minutes of the Executive Board of the American Committee to Aid British Labor, Feb. 16, 1942. The Records of the Jewish Labor Committee (U.S.), Part I, Holocaust Era Files, Wagner 025, box 10, folder 3. Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives.

costs in exchange for suggesting to member unions that one third of their budgeted war relief donations should be given to the Red Cross.[10]

The Committee also received a significant amount of support, both administrative and financial, from the Jewish Labor Committee (JLC), an umbrella group of Jewish unions formed in response to the onset of Nazi activity in Europe. One of the Labor League's largest relief efforts grew from this collaboration, a natural one considering David Dubinsky's role as an executive board member of each organization. The JLC ran extensive rescue missions throughout the war, and although attempts were made to obtain visas for a significant number of Jews, most of the immigrants that the JLC rescued were endangered labor leaders whom the JLC and the AFL believed would be indispensable for recreating a democratic, labor-tolerant Europe at the end of the war.[11] Elaborate and expensive plans were devised to take small children out of Poland by way of Shanghai, or rescue socialist leaders from France by sending them through Portugal, quietly bringing them into the U.S. on visitor's visas.[12] There is no exact count of the individuals for whom the JLC provided funds, visas, and escape routes, but with the AFL's help, the number of people they rescued was in the thousands,[13] no small feat given the financial and bureaucratic costs of facilitating

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[10] Meeting Minutes, undated. The Isaiah Minkoff Papers, Wagner 086, box 6, folder 35. Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives.

[11] Jacob Pat, "Memorandum to Adolph Held," December 4, 1944. Jacob Pat Papers, Wagner 127, box 2, folder 19. Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives.

[12] <u>They Were Not Silent: the Jewish Labor Movement and the Holocaust</u>. Produced and Directed by Roland Millman. 30 min. Robert F. Wagner Archives, New York University, 1998, videocassette.

[13] Charles Zimmerman, untitled report, 1946. The Records of the Jewish Labor Committee (U.S.), Part I, Holocaust Era Files, Wagner 025, box 1, folder 20. Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives.

emigration. Because the leadership of the JLC was mostly European-born, they maintained connections with the European labor movements with which they had been involved during their youth. This allowed the JLC to exploit existing networks to rescue leaders, obtain information, and funnel money and supplies where they were needed. With the help of the AFL's official endorsement through the Labor League, the JLC was able to run successful public relations campaigns to get the support and funding of the American people, and gained the political clout needed to facilitate meetings with various American political leaders. The Labor League and the JLC continued their association after the war, allowing the Labor League to benefit from the JLC's European contacts. Additionally, work with the JLC, the Red Cross, and other internationally-minded groups provided the Labor League with extensive experience in foreign affairs, allowing the Labor League, as well as the AFL as a whole, to position themselves as players in the game of post-war reconstruction.

Although the AFL petitioned President Roosevelt for the opportunity to participate in the foundational meetings for the United Nations, "assuming that [their] presence would be helpful in deciding upon world institutions," the President ultimately "decided otherwise and appointed only government representatives along with a few individual citizens" to the summit at Dumbarton Oaks towards the end of 1944.[14] In the months that followed, however, the AFL did receive an invitation to join the American delegation at the United Nations Conference on International Organization in San Francisco in the summer of 1945, as consultants to the American delegates. Although the AFL protested that citizens' groups should have the right to independent representation at the conference,

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[14] AFL Report of the Executive Council, Annual Meeting, 1946, page 57. George Meany Memorial Archives.

it grudgingly accepted its advisory role. At the San Francisco convention, the AFL's demands were finally met, along with those of other citizens' groups. The U.N. created a consultancy system whereby citizens' groups from every country would have the right to petition the U.N. for the privilege of sitting on committees, distributing reports and memoranda to delegates, and generally participating in the life of the fledgling international organization. Through political wrangling, the AFL positioned itself as labor's representative in America, thereby diminishing the role of the breakaway Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in international labor affairs. Additionally, the AFL was instrumental in securing the position of the non-communist League of Nations relic, the International Labor Organization, as the official labor body of the U.N., blocking the influence of the communist-supported World Trade Union Federation (WTUF).[15]

Matthew Woll, acting as president of the Labor League for Human Rights, hired Tony Sender to serve as the AFL delegate to the meetings of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, the body that would be drawing up the Declaration of Human Rights. During the five years that portions of the U.N. were housed at Lake Success, Sender spent her time shuttling between the Labor League offices in Manhattan and Long Island monthly, if not several times a week. The most important goal for the AFL at the Lake Success meetings was the immediate approval of a declaration of human rights. Sender spoke up in the meetings to fight for the right to form trade unions, for freedom of assembly, and, perhaps most frequently, for the right to work freely, not as a forced laborer.[16] But while she, with the support and approval of Green, Woll, and Dubinsky, was

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[15] *New York Times*, "ILO Protocol Signed," page 3, December 21, 1948.

[16] See, for example, Tony Sender, "International Bill of Human Rights," April 7, 1947. Tony Sender Papers, box13, folder 1; Tony Sender, "Proposed Survey on Forced Labor and Measures for Its Abolition," November 21, 1947. Tony Sender Papers, box 13, folder 2; and

fighting for specific language in the declaration and pressing for U.N. investigations into communist labor practices, the various projects were always grouped together under the heading of "human rights."

The AFL took full advantage of the provisions that allowed consulting organizations more of a voice in U.N. proceedings. While other groups either missed out on the opportunity to affect world policy or were still struggling to define their roles in the nascent landscape of non-governmental organizations, the AFL immediately seized this opportunity. In 1947, the *New York Times* reported that the Economic and Social Council would be taking up drafts of an international bill of rights presented by "Cuba, Panama, Chile, and the American Federation of Labor" at its next meeting.[17] The AFL took its prominence at the conference seriously, never missing an opportunity to remind its members or the American people as a whole that they were the only labor organization to present a draft to the committee,[18] putting their influence on a par with that of small Caribbean and Latin American nations, which had in turn received a boost in stature from the egalitarian nature of the United Nations.

But what was the AFL attempting to achieve through its participation in the U.N.? Many historians have written about the complexities of international labor movements in the first half of the 20th century. Regarding the role of the AFL in world affairs, these scholars cynically cast the AFL's activities in Europe and at the U.N. conferences as collusion with the U.S. government to

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Tony Sender, "The A.F. of L. Fights for Freedom and Human Dignity," 1948. Tony Sender Papers, Box 13, folder 1. Wisconsin Historical Society.

[17] *New York Times*, "4 Drafts Before UNESCO," page 6, January 15, 1947.

[18] Tony Sender, "Short Report of Consultant's Activities at U.N. for Matthew Woll," July 14, 1948. Tony Sender Papers, box 13, folder 1. Wisconsin Historical Society.

create a larger market for American goods. They see the AFL's refusal of membership in the World Federation of Trade Unions in 1945 as strategic. While the AFL suggested that it did so because of Soviet involvement, explaining that "those who believe in human freedom cannot promote common objectives with those who believe in unions dominated by the state,"[19] historians accuse the AFL of a move to force the collapse of Soviet satellite economies in order to capture export markets for their own constituent unions. In fact, post-World War II, the AFL was the only major labor organization in the world without international affiliation.[20] However, from 1945 to 1949, it created the Free Trade Union Committee (FTUC), a branch of its Labor League for Human Rights, to carry out international business. Jay Lovestone, a former head of the Communist movement in the United States who had recanted his political views after being expelled from the party by Moscow in 1929, was the executive secretary of the group. It was he and AFL attache Irving Brown who worked to dismantle Communist unions in France and Italy, with the occasional unsuccessful foray behind the Iron Curtain.

Historians portray the FTUC as little more than a red-baiting organization sent overseas. Specifically, the work of historian William Appleman Williams has had a remarkable influence on the mainstream understanding of the AFL's purposes overseas. Although Williams was not specifically concerned with the American labor movement, he suggested that mid-20th century American foreign policy amounted to economic imperialism in the name of expanding the bounds

[19] William Green, "International Labor Policy," The Federationist, May, 1945: 16-17.

[20] John Windmuller, American Labor and the International Labor Movement, 1940 to 1953. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 1954), 66.

of democracy.[21] Latching on to his idea of the threat of communism as the ultimate distraction, many historians found echos of Williams' argument in the actions of the AFL's foreign agents. While some hew more closely to Williams' idea of economic imperialism, accusing the FTUC of acting as bearers of a Marshall Plan-driven shift to a consumption-based European society, others modify the theory and suggest that the FTUC was a bearer of American cultural imperialism, or even an agent of the CIA, accepting government money to achieve government ends.[22] Thus, the dominant interpretation would have it that Lovestone and Brown were merely distracting AFL members with talk of lofty goals and humanitarian aid while actually engaging in European affairs as the foot soldiers of American imperialist expansion. In this reading, Communism was the red herring, masking the scent of dirty tactics used to gain economic supremacy in vulnerable post-war Europe.

Craig Phelan, William Green's only biographer, agrees that the fight for universal human rights was merely a screen for anti-Communist activities. But he casts Green, Woll, and Dubinsky

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[21] William Appleman Williams, The Tragedy of American Diplomacy. (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1959).

[22] See Anthony Carew, Labour Under the Marshall Plan: The Politics of Productivity and the Marketing of Management Science (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987); Denis Macshane, International Labour and the Origins of the Cold War, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Philip Taft, Defending Freedom: American Labor and Foreign Affairs, (Los Angeles: Nash Publishing Corporation, 1973); and Anthony Carew,"The American Labor Movement in Fizzland: The Free Trade Union Committee and the CIA." Labor History 39.1 (February 1998): 25-43, among others. In his article, Carew offers perhaps the best evidence of FTUC backroom dealings, presenting financial documents, memos, and oral histories that leave little doubt that FTUC was accepting CIA money. However, he fails to conclusively prove that FTUC was effectively controlled by the CIA because of this funding, in fact offering several instances in which the CIA was unable to rein in the projects that Lovestone and Brown independently undertook. Ultimately, more work remains to be done on the relationship between the U.S. government and FTUC operations.

in a different light, suggesting that they themselves lost control over the use of the Communist threat as a motivator for AFL action. Green, Phelan argues, became so paranoid, and so obsessed with the Communist threat, that it blinded him to everything else that was occurring in the labor world. Instead of focusing on domestic measures that might have improved the life of the average American worker, Phelan asserts that Green focused on international conspiracy theories to such an extent that he ultimately destroyed his ability to be an effective labor leader.[23]

Of course, there was some level of self-interest in the AFL's attempts to involve itself in the post-war world; certainly, the organization was not acting against itself in promoting human rights and democracy. Naturally, union leaders were aware of the fact that if they helped the U.S. government open up European markets they would create a ready market for American-made goods, thereby boosting a post-war economy many were afraid would collapse under the immense weight of reconversion.[24] And, of course, the AFL's executive board was not immune to the fear that all Americans shared of Soviet armament and access to nuclear weapons; any effort they could make to reduce the number of communist-allied countries and unions was surely a weight off their shoulders. However, the speeches, publications, and actions of President William Green and Vice Presidents Matthew Woll and David Dubinsky, the three men most historians single out as the most powerful and devious triad on the AFL executive board, offer deeper motivations for their actions. The AFL leaders led their campaign for human rights for reasons of social justice and social welfare;

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[23] Craig Phelan, William Green: Biography of a Labor Leader (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 170.

[24] This was a widespread fear at the time, ranging from President Truman to factory owners to the average worker. The AFL was an active participant in domestic government programs to restructure the economy and smooth the transition out of war.

they sincerely believed that all functioning societies must be built upon a foundation of human rights. When reflecting on their achievements at Economic and Social Council meetings, Tony Sender addressed the question that was on the minds of many AFL members: "What has motivated our step? There is certainly no narrow political motive that has inspired it."[25]

Indeed, the motivations were expansive. The AFL identified its actions as driven by "human rights," a term which had appeared only occasionally before World War II and was used to refer somewhat generally to the "rights of man" or to "civil rights" (meaning those legal rights protected by the Bill of Rights and not race relations). By the end of World War II, the term was a familiar one to most Americans, but meant any ideals that separated the Allies from their totalitarian foes.[26]

In characteristically patriotic fashion, the AFL articulated their ideas about human rights through the lens of Franklin Roosevelt's "four freedoms," seeking some version of the freedom from want, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom from fear that FDR described in his 1941 State of the Union Address and his 1944 Second Bill of Rights Speech, which became the touchstone of the meetings to create an international Declaration of Human Rights. The AFL, siding with the American delegation, was most interested in an international bill of rights that focused on the rights and privileges granted to the citizen by the state. The communist delegations, on the other hand, demanded repeatedly that any declaration of rights include a list of obligations and responsibilities of citizens to the state. Illustrating the ultimate difference in the construction of the

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[25] Tony Sender, untitled speech re: slave labor, February 20, 1948. Tony Sender Papers, box 13, folder 2. Wisconsin Historical Society.

[26] Elizabeth Borgwardt, A New Deal For the World: American's Vision for Human Rights (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 53. See also Paul Lauren, Power and Prejudice: The Politics and Diplomacy of Racial Discrimination (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988).

two types of government, this argument continued throughout the drafting process. It was clear to the AFL that communist governance, resting as it did on the abrogation of such individual rights as religious expression and freedom of speech in favor of mass equality, could never conform to the "four freedoms" notion of human rights.

It was exactly because of its relative comfort in cooperating with communist groups that the newly-formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), a group of unions that broke away from the AFL in 1935, could not adopt the same position as the AFL. The CIO claimed to seek much the same results as the AFL through their post-war international involvement. According to Philip Murray, who became president in 1940, the CIO's goal in affiliating with the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) was to ensure "basic freedom of press, speech, assembly, religion, political association and [the right] to organize labor unions."[27] While the AFL refused to join the WFTU because the Soviet Union was a member, the CIO not only tolerated the idea of joining forces with communist countries, but decided that the best course of action to maintain international labor harmony was to "never attempt to criticize Russia or her form of government."[28] Although it is a distinct possibility that the leaders of the CIO sought to reform communist labor practices and bring about democracy from within, they knew that Rooseveltian human rights principles were incompatible with communist government.[29] Thus, the decision not to criticize Russia at all tied their hands. It is true that the CIO could not have the same effect on the international human rights

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[27] Murray in a letter to Walter Citrine, Head of the British Trade Union Congress, April 5, 1944. Quoted in MacShane, Denis, International Labour and the Origins of the Cold War. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 121.

[28] Murray to the United Steel Workers of America Executive Board, April 1, 1946. Quoted in MacShane,121.

[29] Ibid, 125.

scene as the AFL, as they were not invited to act as U.N. consultants; however, their relationship to Russia begs the question that is so often asked about the AFL, that is, whether the CIO was using the language of human rights as anything more than political rhetoric.

The AFL took the idea of human rights one step further than the CIO did and connected it with democracy. In their magazine the *Federationist*, the AFL averred that "fear and famine," representing a lack of Roosevelt's human rights, "will always be the two unmistakable signs that a country is not truly democratic."[30] Thus, the AFL saw human rights as a way to avoid communism. They were the prerequisite to democracy, an "ur-democracy" that must exist as the foundation in order to build any kind of a better world. In fact, in the view of the AFL leaders, the connections between various types of basic rights were self-evident and their attainment had to be cumulative:

> The American Federation of Labor believes that the basic issue in the world war we are fighting is personal freedom. We know that personal freedom is inseparable from political, and that economic freedom is the foundation of our political freedom. Our free trade unions are the agency through which workers realize their economic freedom and promote their economic welfare. We believe that free trade unions are indispensable to free enterprise and are an essential element in our democratic way of life.[31]

In the face of the voluntary restrictions on union activity during the war and a postwar climate that favored big businesses that had only grown bigger through war profits, the AFL reaffirmed its role in maintaining the American democratic way of life. If many observers believed, as C. Wright Mills

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[30] "Praise for the A.F.L.: American Federation of Labor and Democracy," The Federationist, May, 1947: 31. Incidentally, while this title was certainly meant to denote an article on the AFL's views on democracy, it seems unlikely that the Federationist editors "accidentally" missed a grammatical "error" that dubbed their organization the Federation of "labor and democracy."

[31] William Green, "Free Trade Unions," The Federationist, June, 1945: 18-19.

asserted in his 1948 critique of American labor leaders, that labor bureaucracies were beginning to resemble those in the corporations they theoretically had pitted themselves against, then the AFL made it clear that they were a "free" trade union, independent of government or company controls, and that they would be instrumental in creating a free world.[32] Human rights had to be the object of first concern, because, in the pyramid of democracy, the human rights of each individual supported the weight of economic freedom, bound together by the glue of political freedom. Economic freedom bore free enterprise, democracy's crowning achievement.

Ultimately, it was this connection between individual human rights, democracy, and free enterprise that allowed the AFL to fill what they identified as a growing political gap in international politics, the problem of the "liberals' dilemma." In an essay on "labor's stake in foreign policy decisions," written by Tony Sender for Matthew Woll's use, the AFL was portrayed as the "middle way" between "reactionary and conservative forces on the one hand, or revolutionary Totalitarianism on the other."[33] By adopting a liberal anti-communist stance instead of a reactionary one, the AFL leaders were able to stay true to their ideals as well as present a strong case to Americans for their support.

However, it was important to the AFL that all liberal human rights be tied to political and economic rights to create a holistic system. After a visit with Woll and Dubinsky, Eleanor Roosevelt, chairwoman of the Human Rights Commission, praised the AFL for their work, noting in her nationally syndicated column "My Day," that it was "very valuable that such groups as the

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[32] C. Wright Mills, The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948).

[33] Tony Sender, October 15, 1948. "Labor's Stake in Foreign Policy Decisions." Tony Sender Papers, box 13, folder 1. Wisconsin Historical Society.

American Federation of Labor are taking an active interest in the achievement of human rights throughout the world…and one of the things I hope will evolve from any bill of this kind is the right of people to economic as well as political freedom."[34] This distinction between human rights and political and economic rights would have puzzled the leadership of the AFL; to their way of thinking one was not achievable without first having the others.

Thus, human rights had to extend beyond just freedom of religion and freedom from fear. As early as 1941, Woll explained that the preservation of the "democratic way of life" required the right to "earn an honest livelihood as free human beings without exploiting or abusing . . . brother workers."[35] The AFL was particularly concerned about what they saw as a system of slave labor being developed in Russia. After much discussion on the topic, on November 24, 1947, the AFL submitted a request to the U.N.'s Economic and Social Council to have an item on forced labor put on the agenda for the next session. The request included both a provision to investigate the existence of slave labor internationally (with the obvious implication that "internationally" translated to the Soviet Union and her satellites), and to suggest solutions to ending the slave labor system. In its request and in subsequent discussions, the AFL mustered the full force of historical rights discourse to argue for the inclusion of the right to free labor within the basic human rights: they first cited the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man, born out of the French Revolution, and its statement of the rights to liberty and resistance to oppression, then moved on to Abraham Lincoln,

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[34] Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day," January 24,1947. Archived at http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/.

[35] Matthew Woll, statement in "In Defense of Human Rights," 1941, page 5. The Records of the Jewish Labor Committee (U.S.), Part I, Holocaust Era Files, Wagner 025, box 1, folder 7. Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives.

quoting from his "truth" that a community "could not remain half-slave and half-free." In an ingenious move, the AFL's petition concluded with a reference to Frederic Engels, one of the very architects of communism, juxtaposing his idea of the economic freedom for all men that would be the result of the proletarian revolution with the political freedom suggested by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Lincoln.[36]

After long deliberation, the Economic and Social Council granted their request, and conducted an investigation that was supplemented by pages and pages of testimony from slave labor camp survivors collected by the AFL. Although the Economic and Social Council concluded that forced labor camps did exist in Russia and in her satellite nations, it could do little other than include a resolution against such practices in the Declaration of Human Rights. In the fall of 1949, however, the AFL celebrated their consciousness-raising victory in a booklet entitled "Slave Labor in Russia." The booklet, ads for which, promising "uncensored" "raw, shocking facts," sounded more like pornography than a political tract, offered union members a printed copy of the testimony the AFL presented to the Economic and Social Council, along with the transcripts of the debates that ensued.[37] It was the hope of AFL leaders that the Russian delegate's "lengthy and arrogant" attempts to deflect criticism against his government would speak for themselves, convincing readers, who might otherwise be enticed into thinking that communism was a viable solution for American problems due to the pro-Soviet rhetoric of the CIO and the American Communist Party, of its evils. In fact, the AFL reminded its members, the communists not only engaged in forced labor practices

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[36] Untitled, March 2, 1949, International Affairs Department, Irving Brown Files, RG18-004, "American Federation Statements," box 4, folder 3. George Meany Memorial Archives.

[37] Advertisement for *Slave Labor in Russia*, The Federationist, October, 1949.

but felt no remorse for their involvement in the "degradation of human beings."[38]

While Communists pointed to American failings in civil rights and claimed to be the champions of tolerance and decency, the AFL exposed a Soviet program that violated the "dignity and sacred character of man," values which the Federation leaders had taken upon themselves to safeguard. Indeed, their project went beyond the basic dignity of man; the introduction to the "Slave Labor in Russia" booklet, written by Matthew Woll but signed by William Green, noted that it was "the function of trade unions to make effective human rights and freedom for those who work for wages." In the process of fulfilling this mission, the AFL went on to play a "decisive role in the progress of humanity toward an ever-greater realization of freedom and democracy."[39] Once again, it was only by protecting human rights that the AFL could protect democracy, and only through the promotion of democracy that the AFL could help to realize their dream of being active in the fight to guarantee basic human rights to everyone.

While Green, Woll, and Dubinsky, the architects of the AFL's international involvement and human rights campaigns, were clearly aware of the potential economic and public relations benefits the AFL might reap from their work, it seems reasonable to believe that they were involved in these activities for more than transient, self-interested reasons. The decision to help labor abroad, even as labor at home was struggling, was consistent with those decisions made by the three men immediately before and during World War II. Additionally, the three men were each deeply committed to religious and ethical world-views that led them to seek out the moral high ground in

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[38] Matthew Woll, "Introduction to *Slave Labor in Russia*," August 31, 1949. Florence Thorne Files, box 40, folder "slave labor." Wisconsin Historical Society.

[39] Ibid.

their political activities.

So it was that the decision to throw AFL money, manpower, and influence into assisting Jews in occupied Europe, European labor leaders, and British labor in general during Hitler's rise to power, and then again at the onset of war, was made early and easily at the top levels of the AFL. Because David Dubinsky was the president of the predominantly Jewish International Ladies Garment Workers Union in addition to being a vice president of the AFL, the AFL was an early participant in rallies to protest the treatment of German Jews in the early 1930s and in the mass meetings that began after the Nuremberg Laws were passed in 1935. The AFL went on to demonstrate its commitment to human rights through its affiliation with the Jewish Labor Committee, providing not only money and administrative support for the rescue of European labor leaders and Jews, but, through William Green, offering a host of contacts in the State Department, Congress, and the White House. The JLC was even able to obtain personal meetings with Roosevelt through Green's influence. Finally, Woll and the American Committee to Aid British Labor (later the Labor League for Human Rights) mustered tremendous amounts of money and influence to help masses of British workers during the war, and later hundreds of thousands of workers across the European continent, as they began the process of rebuilding. Certainly, post-war concern for human rights and freedoms was consistent with the internationalist behavior the AFL had been displaying for over a decade at the very least.

But perhaps the most compelling motivations for the three men were their own personal convictions. Matthew Woll was a devout Catholic, involved in the burgeoning Catholic labor movement that had been gathering steam since a 1903 papal encyclical reaffirmed for Catholics the importance of supporting trade unions that conformed to Christian principles (which were, at the

time, mostly concerned with preventing the spread of "anti-religious" socialism). Woll was a close friend of Father Peter Dietz, who not only singlehandedly created a Catholic labor movement in the United States, but had a significant influence on the AFL executive board.[40] Woll's later involvement with the National Catholic Welfare Council, most notably his efforts to bring them into AFL committees planning for post-war reconstruction,[41] make it likely that he had been a member of Dietz's Militia of Christ for Social Service, which later folded into the National Catholic Welfare Council.[42] Further, Woll was consistently involved in religious labor groups and frequently addressing congregations, asking for financial support for his international labor efforts after the celebration of mass.[43] His speeches regularly utilized religious metaphors, as he made it clear that his concern was for the spiritual, as well as political and economic, well-being of the world.[44]

David Dubinsky, while not a religiously observant Jew, frequently referred to the Jewish sense of social justice in his speeches and public messages. After fleeing from Tzarist Russia as a young man to escape arrest for his socialist labor activities, Dubinsky arrived in New York in 1911

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[40] In fact, Dietz was once told by Samuel Gompers that his arguments over the years had been so influential that he "held the unique distinction of having secured a reversal of decisions by the Executive Board of the AFL." Quoted in Marc Karson, "The Catholic Church and the Political Development of American Trade Unionism (1900-1918)," Industrial and Labor Relations Review 4, number 4 (July 1951): 533.

[41] For one example, see *New York Times* "Conference on Labor to Open Next Sunday," page 26, April 9, 1944.

[42] Walter Willigan, review of "Peter E. Dietz, Labor Priest" by Mary Harrita Fox, The American Catholic Sociological Review 14, number 4 (December 1953): 258.

[43] For one example, see *New York Times* "Woll Asks Catholic Aid," page 36, April 4, 1938.

[44] "Labor's Stake in Foreign Policy Decisions," October 15, 1948. Tony Sender Papers, box 13, folder 1. Wisconsin Historical Society.

and absorbed the deeply ingrained connections between Jewish expression and socialism in the Lower East Side immigrant community. In fact, socialism was present to such a large degree that it essentially became, for many Lower East Side Jews, "a secular version of Judaism."[45] Religion was often put into the service of socialism; it was common for Jewish labor leaders to expound upon the story of Moses freeing the Jewish slaves, claiming him as the first great labor leader, running the ultimate epic strike.

It was this combination of religious social justice thought and socialism that informed Dubinsky's convictions about human rights. Pushing aside his deep commitment to the ideals of socialism and accepting the AFL's commitment to free market capitalism for the sake of expediency, Dubinsky found himself to be one of the major voices calling for international cooperation to achieve universal human rights. As a doubly persecuted minority, both socialist and Jewish, Dubinsky clearly knew what was at stake.

But perhaps the labor leader most motivated by deep religious conviction was AFL president William Green. Born in the small mining town of Coshocton, Ohio in 1873 to devoutly Baptist parents, Green grew up attending family prayers at six every morning and six every evening. Harboring the dream of one day going to a Bible college in order to become a preacher, Green spent his free time reading the Bible and was a regular at Sunday school. By age 17, it was clear to him that his parents could never afford a long-term education; he began working in the coal mines alongside his father shortly thereafter. Although his parents' inability to finance his schooling ended his dream of being a religious leader, he never abandoned his faith. In fact, as he became involved

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[45] Arthur Liebman,"The Ties That Bind," in Essential Papers on Jews and the Left, edited by Ezra Mendelsohn. (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 328.

in union work as a young miner, he discovered that trade unionism presented him with the perfect opportunity to help "the men in the mines to better their lives and give new opportunities to their children." To him, this was truly "God's work."[46] Over the course of years, Green developed a concept of Christian unionism; in fact, as his biographer notes, "religion was so much a part of his life that it was impossible for him to separate his union principles from his religious beliefs."[47]

Green wrote many articles for religious magazines and frequently gave guest sermons and speeches on the topic of how his faith influenced his work. In these speeches, he often remarked that he was guided by a combination of "faith in God and faith in man." In describing the work that the AFL was doing to assist workers and, indeed, people the world over, Green asserted his belief that, no matter how difficult it seemed, he had to rest on the "faith that if [he] and others do [their] utmost there will be forces at work in the great universe . . . that work for good."[48] Men who "walked with God," Green explained, were those who "called for justice to 'roll down as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream.'" And, as Green noted from his own experience, "men devoted to such ideals" as establishing "justice and humanity in a mechanized and impersonal industrialized society" needed "the resources of religion." "The Church," Green concluded, "has a great deal to offer men and women whose lives are devoted to the cause of humanity."[49] For Green, religion and

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[46] William Green, "Address to Kenyon College," October 22, 1949. William Green Papers, George Meany Memorial Archives.

[47] Craig Phelan, William Green: Biography of a Labor Leader (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 22.

[48] William Green, "Peace Through Faith," William Green - Magazine Articles, Special Articles Folder, box 14, folder 2. Wisconsin Historical Society.

[49] William Green, "It Seems To Me," written for "Challenge," a Methodist missionary magazine at the editor's request. William Green - Magazine Articles, Special Articles Folder, box 14, folder 2. Wisconsin Historical Society.

the quest to establish international human rights were clearly and inextricably entwined.

In fact, if "human hate and suffering" were directly linked to the fact that "teachings of the Bible [were] unheeded by many," ameliorating human suffering was a religious obligation. If Green's participation in the crusade for worldwide human rights had any stronger motivation than Christian social justice, it could only have been some sort of idealistic evangelism. "The Gospel of Christ," he noted, "can be more successfully preached to those who may enjoy the material blessings of life . . . Christ upon the shore of the Galilee fed the multitude before he preached the Gospel."[50] Woll, Dubinsky, and especially Green, brought with them religious and ethical convictions that demonstrated for them that the fight for human rights was one of the most important in which they could engage.

However, in addition to formulating policies and campaigning for human rights at the UN conventions and among American politicians, Green, Woll, and Dubinsky needed a way to get their message to the rank and file of the AFL. They did so through articles and editorials in the *American Federationist*, the AFL's internal magazine, received by every union member each month. The AFL began publishing the *American Federationist* in 1894, just eight years after the union's founding. The magazine became the most consistent way for information about the Federation's activities on a national and international level to be presented to the rank and file membership. Whereas each constituent union sent delegates to the annual national convention and received reports of events there, and whereas press releases from the national office, LLHR, and FTUC kept local leaders abreast of breaking news, the magazine provided an avenue for the national board to reach out to

[50] William Green, "Labor and Religion," Sermon delivered at the First Baptist Church, Ashville, May 12, 1946. William Green Papers, box 7, folder 2. Wisconsin Historical Society.

individual members in their homes and offer them an easy-to-read guide to "labor's view" on the most important issues of the day.

By the 1940s, the magazine had been redesigned, eliminating many statistics and dry reports in favor of pictures, briefs from international organizations, and recurring columns. The AFL strove to create a magazine that bred a culture of unionism, in which members would read and discuss *Federationist* articles in their homes and at union meetings. The redesign even saw the introduction of a "junior union" column for teenagers, a serial story recounting the difficulties and successes of a group of high school students as they organized activities for their junior union club. While it is impossible to determine exactly how much of the AFL's tremendous membership was reading the monthly magazine, the authors and editors assumed that they were reaching them all, and yet speaking to each of them individually.[51] William Green's editorials, in particular, took a friendly, intimate tone, making the magazine the perfect organ for disseminating the union's message to its constituents.[52]

While international labor conferences always merited articles in the magazine, and pieces on individual foreign unions frequently appeared, the beginning of World War II saw a remarkable, if perhaps unsurprising, increase in reporting on foreign affairs. By the mid-1940s, the *Federationist*

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[51] Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, "Trade Union Publications: The Official Journals, Convention Proceedings, and Constitutions of International Unions and Federations, 1850-1941," (Ithaca: Cornell University: 2007). Available at http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1020&context=tradeunionpubs

[52] While it is always difficult to tell exactly who writes specific pieces at the top levels of any organization, Green's decision to highlight his role as editor of the magazine every time he was introduced or written about makes it likely that he took a personal interest in the editorial columns. While every word may not have been his own or original to the magazine (speeches and press releases were frequently reused with only minor changes), it is reasonable to assume that, at the very least, Green read and approved every editorial that bears his name.

devoted a multi-page article nearly every month to explaining its decisions regarding which international labor organizations to join, another to conditions on the ground for European civilians or labor leaders and what the AFL was doing to help, and another to instruct readers on the meaning of the Marshall Plan or why labor backed the Bretton Woods agreement which would lead to the creation of the World Bank. Green's editorials pleaded with the government to allow the AFL to be more involved in setting up the U.N., and explained to union members why a World Bank was in the interest of workers everywhere.

But beyond offering basic information and a generally internationalist program, the articles and editorials in the *Federationist* had a more subtle purpose: to convince readers that the AFL and America's participation in world affairs was vital not only to Americans, workers, and democracy, but that the very foundation of worldwide human rights was tied up in the actions of the AFL and the U.S. in the post-war years. Reading the *Federationist*, workers were taught a new way to understand the threats that Communism posed to America and the world: that it was not just a physical or political threat, but a threat to the moral and spiritual existence of humanity.

Outside of the labor world, the Soviet threat to the United States was commonly imagined as one of "subversion, espionage, and sabotage."[53] After World War II, Americans were taught to view the USSR as a launching pad for an attack on democracy and the "American way," and fear of a physical attack by the Communists loomed in the back of the American mind. Fear of the Soviets was self-interested fear; Americans were concerned with containment in order to reduce the chances that the Soviets could gain enough power to attack them.

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[53] Ellen Schrecker, Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 154.

While articles in the *Federationist* and William Green's editorials played on many of the fears that Americans already had about communism, they also offered their constituents a different way to understand the problems communism posed. The communism that the AFL discussed was a very personal problem, one that individually threatened every person on the planet. The struggle of democracy versus communism was not one to be decided in the national realm; it was not even necessarily a fight about national ideals or protecting the "American way of life." Instead, the communism that union members read about in the *Federationist* was a threat to "personal freedom," the rights to freedom of speech, free labor, and freedom of religion.[54]

Building on its rhetoric during World War II that taught unionists that any totalitarian discrimination, even if it was not immediately directed at them, was a threat to labor's well being,[55] the AFL explained that the post-war welfare of Americans was directly affected by the welfare of other people in the world. If slave labor existed in other nations, it devalued the labor of every person on earth. If human rights were not respected somewhere, then they were in danger everywhere. In an early lesson on the dangers that outsourcing for cheap labor presented to the American job market, AFL members watched as the Federation lobbied Congress to block all imports from countries that employed slave laborers, most notably Russia.[56] If Communist countries could flood the U.S. market with products that were made with only minimal labor costs, the

[54] William Green, "Free Trade Unions," The Federationist, June 1945: 18-19.

[55] See Rachel Feinmark, "Helping others to help ourselves": The Jewish Labor Committee at Home and Abroad, and the Attempt to Solve America's "Jewish Question," 1933-1945," unpublished master's thesis, 2007.

[56] Representative Russell Mack, a Republican from Washington State, had been communicating directly with Tony Sender to collect information for a speech about forced labor on the House floor. Russell Mack to Tony Sender, "Imports from Russia," May 9, 1950. Tony Sender papers, box 2, folder 2. Wisconsin Historical Society.

demand for American-made products, produced by union members paid fair wages, would go down. Thus, slave labor was of immediate concern to all American workers, internationally-minded or not. However, the AFL argued that laborers' interest in the well-being of mankind must extend beyond protecting themselves to protecting quintessentially American freedom.

Union members were told that they had to look beyond their own self-interest, enlightened though it may be. Readers were urged to remember that their American heritage and labor involvement provided them with the conviction that it was important to respect "the dignity of each human being and [accord] each the rights inherent in that dignity."[57] The AFL even positioned itself as the forerunner to the American campaign for worldwide human rights, claiming that ". . . the American Federation of Labor fought for the principles embodied in the Atlantic Charter for sixty years before there was an Atlantic Charter."[58] Labor, readers learned, had taken on the "long-time responsibility [for] the well-being of all men," and the "distinctive function [of] promot[ing] the well-being of workers.[59] The fight against Communism was just another battle in the ongoing war to protect the human rights of all men.

These rights could not be abrogated. They were the building blocks for all political and economic rights, laid on top of the primordial foundation of "Christian religion and . . . the first ten amendments to our Constitution."[60] Fighting for human rights was not just a convenient screen for

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[57] William Green, "Our Foreign Policy," The Federationist, March 1946: 19.

[58] George Meany, "Our Position on World Labor Unity," The Federationist, May, 1945: 28.

[59] *New York Times*, "Text of American Federation of Labor's Recommendations for the Post-War World," page 26, April 12, 1944.

[60] William Green, "To Uphold Human Rights," The Federationist, January, 1950: 23.

other activities in Europe or a way to distract union members from discrimination at home. As it was presented to AFL members, the fight for human rights for all was the means to bring about change in Europe and to deal with ethnic, religious, and to some degree racial, discrimination at home. Most importantly, the struggle for worldwide human rights was also a vital goal in and of itself.

In convincing the members of the AFL to adopt a new, expansive understanding of the definition of human rights, of who deserved them, and what their value could be, the leaders of the AFL appear to have contributed significantly to the shifting discourse about human rights in the post-war world. While government officials and private individuals involved in international affairs had been interested in creating a "human rights movement" at least since the 1941 Atlantic Charter announced the goal of basic rights for all, the ideas had to be sold to the American people. Although the fruits of this effort became obvious in the post-war years, there has been very little explanation of the actual methods by which Americans were exposed to these ideas and convinced that they should support them.[61] An examination of the role of the AFL, with its nearly fifteen million members, offers one example of how people learned about new political ideas in the post-war world, through a combination of traditional methods such as union information services, and new technologies like glossy magazines. It can also help to fill in the gap between the official government recognition of the need for international human rights and the public interest in and support of the topic.

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[61] Elizabeth Borgwardt, in A New Deal For the World, identifies a sudden shift where Americans on the ground are more receptive to "human rights" movements, but aside from suggesting that the Depression and the New Deal conditioned them for this shift, offers no explanation for exactly how this happened.

It is also possible that this focus on basic human rights as the foundation of every other freedom allowed the AFL to anticipate the "human rights revolutions" to come, most notably setting the tone for AFL-CIO involvement in the civil rights movement. Although the CIO's egalitarian communist leanings undoubtably conditioned their membership to more universal tolerance, the AFL's fight against anti-Semitism and discrimination during World War II, combined with its post-war human rights drive, might also have set the stage for its enthusiastic participation in civil rights. As the human rights struggle reshaped workers' ideas about the meanings of freedom and democracy, conditioning them to believe that they were rights that should be equally granted to all men in every nation, union members might have been more willing to back their unions as they offered financial and legal support to the civil rights movement. Sad though it is that it was easier for the AFL to get its members to care about the exploitation of Russian workers halfway across the world than to convince them to rally for African American voting rights, the fact remains that the former may well have opened the door for the latter.

But back in August of 1941, a conference was held aboard HMS *Prince of Wales* that spawned the Atlantic Charter, Britain and America's commitment to bringing the four freedoms to every citizen of the world. On Sunday morning, Winston Churchill staged a meticulously planned church service which emphasized themes of "duty, loyalty, and unstinting support to those in peril." The British and American officials on board prayed together that God should "strengthen [their] resolve, that [they] fight . . . till all enmity and oppression be done away, and the people of the world be set free to serve one another."[62] Enmity and oppression might have survived the war, but Churchill, Roosevelt, and people across the world could give thanks for the AFL's attempts to serve

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[62] Quoted in Borgwardt, A New Deal for the World, 3.

the greater good.

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