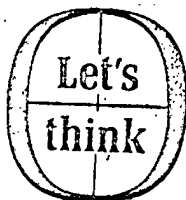


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The CIA and U.S. labor

By Erwin D. Canham ✓

Now there is another flurry of rather sensational publicity concerning the CIA and American labor unions. There is also publicity about the CIA's relations with various cultural organizations — including, of all things, the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

It is inevitable that all these things should come to light. Doubtless there will be more. But neither Americans nor other supporters of freedom around the world should draw hasty conclusions. The nations in the late 1940's and 1950's were engaged in ruthless political warfare. Communism, effectively led from Moscow, had infiltrated many national and international organizations of real importance. Trade unions were a major target.

Whereupon the United States, acting in close collaboration with likeminded peoples and governments elsewhere, began to create defenses. None of these defenses was more vital, or more effective, than in the trade-union movement. American unions, both those stemming from the AFL and the CIO, were vigorous and helpful. They contributed a good deal of their own resources to defend free trade unions in Western Europe and the Americas, primarily, and to set up Communist-free international labor groupings.

Was it wrong?

American labor could hardly have been expected to pay all the costs of these activities. Thus government, chiefly through the CIA, came into the picture. The Communists were fighting

their side of the battle in all sorts of clandestine ways, and doubtless still are. Was it wrong to use CIA funds to combat them? Was it adopting Communist tactics? When is it legitimate to "fight fire with fire"? When is it not?

Under the circumstances of the late 'forties and early 'fifties, subsidy of various anti-Communist activities was hardly to be avoided without giving up the struggle ingloriously, scarcely before it began. Now we have proceeded far beyond that point. Western Europe is strong. The free trade-union movement can look out for itself, though some unions in some countries are still infiltrated. The game is far from over.

I do not hold much with the theory of "fighting fire with fire." There is always danger of self-destructive weapons. Freedom is a powerful tool, and freedom is strongest when it is totally in the open. Secret subsidies carry dangerous seeds of corruption and dishonesty. But there are international tasks that must be financed, hopefully in the open.

Taxpayers pay

The taxpayers, after all, pay the whole costs of CIA. All the money comes from the same ultimate place — every American's pocketbook. Is there no way by which the device of the public corporation, openly financed either by tax money or contributions, can be used to pay for things that have to be done? Cannot we increase the scale of legitimate private foundation support in such areas?

Of course, such things as paying for the Boston Symphony Orchestra's Paris trip with CIA funds are plain silly. Soon it was done differently. The good musicians found themselves on the State Department's open cuff. It is now said that CIA financing may first have been used because open funding would have required security clearance and some of the musicians may have had dubious politics in their backgrounds. Could be. But how silly and how tragic, too.

Some hope

There is some hope that we have grown up. But we should not exaggerate the errors of our past. The United States, and like-minded nations and peoples, have fought a pretty good fight these years against infiltration. Communism is weaker by far within the institutions of the non-Communist nations than it was in the late 1940's. People are thinking for themselves. Though they criticize the United States vigorously and enthusiastically, they refrain from swallowing Communist dogma, too.

The CIA is being shrunk back to its essential task of intelligence work, or so it seems.

The battle within labor around the world goes on. Nowhere is it more essential than in Latin America, where very effective support of free trade unions has been carried out by an agreement between United States employers and labor leaders. These things can be done — the right way.