Tax-Funded Unionism II: The Facade of Culture and Democracy

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This article investigates how unions, under the guise of promoting culture, have obtained taxpayers' funds to finance union goals and activities, such as organizing. In addition, the establishment of the National Endowment for Democracy is examined to show how organized labor cooperated with the business community and the two political parties to obtain taxpayer funding purportedly to promote democracy abroad.

I. Introduction

An earlier article in this Journal (Bennett and DiLorenzo, 1986) presented evidence that labor unions have received millions of dollars each year in grants and contracts from federal, state, and local governments for a variety of purposes and that these funds were diverted (sometimes illegally) for the promotion of unionism. In that article, emphasis was given to the union use of taxpayer funds appropriated to assist the unemployed through training and job creation programs. The current study extends this work by considering two additional guises which have been used to channel taxpayers' funds to organized labor: the promotion of culture and the advancement of democracy in other countries.

Section II discusses how unionism has been cloaked in culture as a means of obtaining tax dollars to promote the goals and activities of organized labor. Section III reviews the establishment of the National Endowment for Democracy to show how unions have cooperated with the corporate community and the political parties to obtain federal funds ostensibly to promote democracy abroad. The last section contains a summary and the conclusions.

II. Federal Funding of Union Organizing: Cloaking Unionism in Culture

Although it is illegal to use federal funds to promote unionization, District 1199, National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees, in New York City developed a unique program to disguise the promotion of unionism as "culture." In January 1979, District 1199 began its "Bread and Roses" program, purportedly

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to bring culture to its members. The title of the project was adopted from a slogan used in 1912 by striking textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts, who carried banners proclaiming "We Want Bread and Roses, too." Rachel Cowan (1979) of the *Village Voice* described District 1199 and the Bread and Roses programs as follows:

District 1199 has become the darling of the endowments and a model for other trade unions. Yet the cultural vision that informs Bread and Roses is linked tightly to the politics that previously set 1199 on the radical fringe of the American labor movement and in frequent opposition to the government. Underlying both is a strong commitment to racial and economic justice (p. 1).

Having packaged Bread and Roses as culture, District 1199 initially sought and received $300,000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities, $80,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts, $28,000 from the New York State Council on the Arts, and $14,000 from the New York Council for the Humanities — all tax-funded organizations — as well as additional funds from private sources (Cowan, 1979, p. 1). With a total budget of $1.3 million, District 1199 launched a series of "cultural" events, including drama, music, and poetry readings at some 30 hospitals where union members work, art exhibitions, a Labor Day celebration, posters, concerts, and books. Without exception, these events and materials encourage unionization and support organizing activities; far more than cultural education was involved. For example, part of the funds was used to entertain and boost the morale of striking nurses. The *AFL-CIO News* for May 8, 1982, printed a picture of a musical revue with the caption:

Musical revue brought picket line relief for 2,000 members of District 1199 who had been on strike for 27 days in support of 78 registered nurses before a settlement was reached with Long Island Jewish Medical Center in New Hyde Park, N.Y. The performance was provided by the union's continuing Bread and Roses program.

The publications produced for Bread and Roses also actively advocate unionism. A collection of photographs published as part of the program using NEH grants, *1199: A Family Portrait — Photographs of Hospital Workers* by Georgeen Comerford, includes two photos of union organizers (pp. 20, 26), and a photo of "1199ers at mass rally" (p. 27), but it omits any depiction of nonunion hospital employees, such as the administrative staff, and no mention is made of physicians and surgeons. The introduction to the book reads: "At a time when funds for social services are being constricted, her [Comerford's] images [emphasizing unionization] will insure that we will no longer look upon hospital jobs as expendable budget items" (p. ii).

Another book, *One Strong Voice . . . Or an Out of Tune Chorus?*, is a pictorial history of the development of the nursing profession, with much emphasis on the importance of the "collective struggle." For example, "The private duty experience also left nurses with almost no legacy of collective struggle over working conditions nor any experiences with forming on-going alliances with other