

## “No More Pressing Task than Organization in Southeast Asia”: The AFL–CIO Approaches the Vietnam War, 1947–64

EDMUND F. WEHRLE\*

The Vietnam War stands as the most controversial episode in the AFL–CIO’s four decades of existence. The federation’s support for the war divided its membership and drove a wedge between organized labor and its liberal allies. By the early 1970s, the AFL–CIO was a weakened and divided force, ill-prepared for a decade of economic decline. Few, however, recognize the complex roots of the federation’s Vietnam policy. American organized labor, in fact, was involved deeply in Vietnam well before the American intervention in 1965. In Southeast Asia, it pursued its own separate agenda, centered on support for a substantial South Vietnamese trade union movement under the leadership of nationalist Tran Quoc Buu.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, as proved to be the case for labor throughout the post-World War II period, its plans for South Vietnam remained very much contingent on its relationship with the U.S. state. This often strained but necessary partnership circumscribed and ultimately crippled the federation’s independent plans for Vietnamese labor. Trade unionists in South Vietnam found themselves in a similar, although more fatal, bind, seeking to act independently, yet bound to the Americans and a repressive South Vietnamese state.

Scholars today often portray post-war American organized labor as a partner (usually a compliant junior partner) in an accord or corporate arrangement with other “functional groups” including the state and business.<sup>2</sup> While there is undeniable truth

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\*The author wishes to thank Robert Brigham, Gary Hess, David Sicilia, Lee Sayrs, and Jacqueline Johnson. The article is dedicated to the late Stuart Kaufman.

<sup>1</sup>The AFL–CIO’s interaction with the Vietnamese Confederation of Labor has received no prior treatment from historians. Philip Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Vietnamese War* (New York, 1989) treats domestic opposition to the war among American unionists. Peter Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s* (Champaign, IL, 1994), takes up the general issue of labor and social movements in the 1960s. What scholarly work has been done on labor and foreign policy generally attacks American labor’s international work as merely an extension of official American policy. In this regard see Ronald Radosh, *American Labor and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York, 1969), and more recently Beth Sims, *Workers of the World Undermined* (Boston, MA, 1992), and Elizabeth McKillen, *Chicago Workers and the Quest for a Democratic Diplomacy, 1914–1924* (Ithaca, NY, 1995). A limited work that provides a more positive appraisal is Philip Taft, *Defending Freedom: American Labor and Foreign Affairs* (Los Angeles, CA, 1973).

<sup>2</sup>For works that negatively evaluate American labor’s close relationship with the state in the post-war period see: Christopher Tomlins, *The State and the Unions: Labor Relations, Law, and the Organized Labor Movement in America* (New York, 1986); Patrick Renshaw, *American Labor and Consensus Capitalism, 1935–1990* (Jackson, MS, 1994), xix; Michael Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economics in the History of the U.S. Working Class* (London, 1986); David Brody, “The Breakdown of Labor’s Social Contract,” *Dissent*, 39 (Winter, 1992), 32; David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America; Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle* (New York, 1980), 173–214; as well as works by legal scholars Karl Klare, Katherine Stone, and James Atleson. Melvyn Dubofsky, *The State and Labor in Modern America* (Chapel Hill, 1994) offers a more sanguine view. For a sense of the general corporate environment in which

to these portrayals, the very idea of “corporatism” was anathema to post-war American labor leaders, especially those in the AFL.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the leadership of the AFL loudly trumpeted its determination to maintain a principled distance and independence from the state.<sup>4</sup> Such autonomy was central to American labor’s harsh critique of what it insisted was a world-wide Communist conspiracy. Unions in Communist countries were hardly unions at all, according to this critique, but merely extensions of the state. American unions—by contrast—were “free trade unions,” operating independently and in the best interests of workers.

Yet remaining free of state influence proved difficult for American labor, especially in the era of the expanding state. While the AFL and later the AFL–CIO would have preferred to carry out its Vietnam program through its own auspices or those of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), an international federation of anti-Communist labor movements founded in 1949, lack of adequate resources hindered these options. As the situation in Vietnam neared a crisis point in the early 1960s, the AFL–CIO came to realize that its program for South Vietnamese labor could only be realized with substantial help from the U.S. government. In Vietnam, Buu and his fledgling labor movement suffered a similar struggle to retain an air of autonomy and legitimacy in a post-colonial environment that exulted the ideal of independence, yet in reality necessitated a painful dependence on outside forces. Neither labor movement ever fully managed to master the balancing act required of modern free trade unions.

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By the beginning of World War II, a group of dedicated internationalists with strong anti-Communist leanings had assembled at the AFL headquarters in Washington, DC. Included in the group were David Dubinsky, George Meany, Jay Lovestone, and Mathew Woll.<sup>5</sup> Lovestone, an early leader of the American Communist Party, who

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organized labor operated see Michael Hogan, *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain, and the Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1947–1952* (New York, 1987), 13–17.

<sup>3</sup>George Meany, speech to Commonwealth Club, June 28, 1946, 7/6, Meany Secretary Treasurer Papers, George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Spring, MD (henceforth GMAA). Perhaps an outgrowth of tense labor relations during wartime, AFL Secretary Treasurer George Meany was particularly vehement that labor should keep a principled distance from government in the post-war period. Meany linked his opposition to government controls to his anti-Communism in a speech in San Francisco in the summer of 1946: “government interference in business leads to more and more bureaucratic control and eventually to state socialism, whether under the name of communism or fascism.” On the general revival of collective bargaining and rejection of corporatism in the immediate post-war years also see Nelson Lichtenstein, “From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining: Organized Labor and the Eclipse of Social Democracy in the Post-War Era,” in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (eds.), *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980* (Princeton, NJ, 1985), 122–152; and Lichtenstein, *Labor’s War at Home: the CIO in World War II* (New York, 1982), 16; Stephen Fraser, *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor* (New York, 1991), 213–214.

<sup>4</sup>The persistence well after the 1930s of a strand of vocal anti-statism within the AFL and to a lesser extent the CIO has received little treatment from historians. Two historians who have examined the phenomenon to some extent are Christopher Tomlins, *The State and the Unions: Labor Relations, Law, and the Organized Labor Movement in America* (New York, 1986), and Theodore C. Liazos, “Big Labor: George Meany and the Making of the AFL-CIO, 1894–1955” (unpublished PhD diss, Yale Univ., 1998), 9–12.

<sup>5</sup>The formative experience for several members of the group was the intense battle between Communists and Socialists for the control of the garment industry unions of New York City in the 1920s. In this regard see Fraser, *Labor Will Rule*, 170, 183, 233–234; David Dubinsky, *A Life with Labor* (New York, 1979),

turned sharply against Stalin after 1929, became the intellectual leader of this group. Early advocates of intervention against the Nazis, the AFL internationalists remained intensely anti-Communist even during the war and insisted—even as the U.S. was allied with the USSR—that Communism and Fascism were but two sides of the same totalitarian coin.

After the war, the AFL internationalists devoted themselves to challenging the advancing threat of Communist unions in Western Europe. With limited resources and facing determined Communist opposition, the initial struggle proved challenging for the AFL internationalists. But massive intervention by the American state in the form of the Marshall Plan—which helped fund labor’s anti-Communist war—tipped the scales against Communist-controlled unions in Western Europe.<sup>6</sup> This pattern of American organized labor attempting to act autonomously with mixed results, followed by a decisive intervention by the American state, repeated itself in Vietnam.

It was in the midst of their battle for European labor unions that the AFL first encountered the Indochinese issue. Beginning in 1946, French determination to reassert colonial control over Vietnam sparked a bitter war between the French, with their superior firepower, and the Viet Minh, using guerilla tactics. While initially silent on the issue, in 1947 the French Communist Party declared its opposition to the war in Indochina. To further support this position, French Communists inaugurated a program of sabotage and strikes to halt shipments of materials to the war.<sup>7</sup> AFL European representative Irving Brown and legendary French waterfront labor leader Pierre Ferri-Pisani organized anti-Communist unionists to break the strikes and counter the sabotage.<sup>8</sup>

Given the French Communist campaign against the war, the AFL quickly came to view the Indochinese war as part of an international Communist conspiracy rather than a national struggle against colonialism. In AFL circles—as was increasingly the case in the U.S. government—it became a concrete article of faith that the Soviets controlled the Viet Minh. “Clearly, the invasion of Indochina,” explained an AFL pamphlet on

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84–117. While not directly involved in the garment trade upheavals, George Meany, whose wife had been a member of the ILGWU, kept a close watch on events and helped repel Communist efforts to infiltrate his plumbers local. See Gus Tyler, *George Meany: Making of a Freedom Fighter* (New York, 1971), 3. Archie Robinson, *George Meany and his Times* (New York, 1981), 124–125, recounts Meany’s part in repelling Communist infiltration of his plumbers local in the 1920s. AFL Vice President George Harrison and Robert Watt, AFL international representative, should also be included among the AFL internationalists.

<sup>6</sup>Tony Carew, *Labor under the Marshall Plan* (Detroit, MI, 1987), 80–83, 101–102; Peter Weiler, *British Labour and the Cold War* (Stanford, 1988), 90–128. Disagreeing with Weiler and Carew, Denis MacShane, *International Labour and the Origins of the Cold War* (Oxford, 1992), 2, argues that long-term existing divisions within European labor—and not the AFL or Marshall Plan—resulted in the defeat of Communists in Western European unions. On the AFL’s early embrace of the Marshall Plan see Meany speech, “The Marshall Plan and American Labor,” Dec. 5, 1947, AFL Secretary Treasurer Papers, GMMA.

<sup>7</sup>Val Lorwin, *The French Labor Movement* (Boston, MA, 1954), 117; Philip Williams, *Politics in Post-War France: Parties and the Constitution in the Fourth Republic* (London, 1953), 56, 174; Francois Fejto, *The French Communist Party and the Crisis of International Communism* (Boston, MA, 1967), 34; George Ross, *Workers and Communists in France* (Los Angeles, CA, 1982), 60–63. Communist leader Maurice Thorez personally pressed the “peace initiative” against the war in Indochina, demanding to know: “Will the people of France accept the unloading and transshipment of these death machines?”

<sup>8</sup>P. Ferri-Pisani to George Meany, Jan. 10, 1955, 49/2, Jay Lovestone Papers, GMMA. Irving Brown, “speech,” May 1947, 10/8, Brown Papers, GMMA. In 1947, Irving Brown complained especially bitterly of the Communist attacks on the war effort in Indochina.

Soviet infiltration of Asia, “is being openly planned by the Soviet Union.”<sup>9</sup> The *Free Trade Union News*, the AFL’s foreign policy mouthpiece, ran a series of articles by Indian trade unionist S. R. Mohan Das on Ho Chi Minh, insisting that Ho was “completely and totally subservient to Moscow.”<sup>10</sup>

During the first several years of the Indochinese war, the AFL—normally very vocal about all international issues—avoided any public or private utterances of concern, despite the federation’s long history of strong opposition to colonialism, dating back to its call for Cuban independence in 1896. By 1950, however, with the Cold War situation in Europe somewhat settled, the AFL finally began expressing open criticism of French colonialism. In January 1950, after his return from a trip to India, Irving Brown lamented that “unless we break with the past in Indonesia, in Indo-China, in South Africa ... there will be no hope for maintaining what is left of Asia.”<sup>11</sup> A year later, the AFL moved to back up Brown by calling for national independence and full rights for Indochina as a French commonwealth nation.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, the AFL prepared to counter what it believed to be Soviet infiltration of Southeast Asia. This campaign, the AFL hoped, could be waged by the newly created anti-Communist ICFTU, into which the AFL was sinking substantial money. The AFL desperately hoped that the ICFTU might operate as an activist force throughout the world, promoting anti-Communist trade unions. In 1950, at an ICFTU planning session, Irving Brown asserted that he could “think of no more pressing task than organization in Southeast Asia.”<sup>13</sup> An ICFTU delegation, which included both AFL and CIO representatives, swept through Southeast Asia later that year, briefly visiting Vietnam. There, it found evidence of a nascent labor movement in the French-controlled regions of southern Vietnam.<sup>14</sup>

The movement was the creation of the French Confederation of Christian Workers (CFTC) in the late 1940s. The early organization attracted many of the Vietnamese nationalists, increasingly alienated by Viet Minh tactics and ties to the USSR. In particular, Tran Quoc Buu, a well-connected nationalist, born in 1912 in the northern

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<sup>9</sup>Free Trade Union Committee (FTUC), *Soviet Imperialism Plunders Asia*, March 1951; Brown to Oldenbroek, Dec. 30, 1949, 10/5, Brown Papers, GMMA. Evidence of Soviet designs on Asian unions also concerned the AFL. In 1949, Irving Brown warned the ICFTU that the Soviet trade unions had assigned a Mr. F. G. Jakovlev to direct the infiltration of the emerging labor movements of Southeast Asia from his station in Siam.

<sup>10</sup>S. R. Mohan Das, “Ho Chi Minh—Vietnamese Nationalist or Soviet Agent,” *Free Trade Union News*, Jan. 1951.

<sup>11</sup>*Free Trade Union News*, Sept. 1950.

<sup>12</sup>FTUC, *Soviet Imperialism Plunders Asia*; “Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Council of the AFL,” Jan. 22–Feb. 5, 1952, Pamphlet Collection, GMMA; *AFL News Reporter*, Feb. 6, 1952, Mar. 1951. Also see “CIO Press Releases, Addresses by James B. Carey, Thirteenth Annual National Farm Institute, Des Moines, Iowa, Feb. 17, 1951.” The CIO, through Vice President James Carey, echoed the AFL’s increasing calls for Indochinese independence. Noting the Communist threat and important raw materials located in the region, Carey also called for the “immediate creation of an ECA [Economic Cooperation Administration] for the nations of Southeast Asia.” By early 1952, the AFL’s Executive Council weighed in with a harshly worded statement: “Resistance to Communist aggression in Indo-China should be made more effective by stripping it of every appearance of a nineteenth century colonial campaign.”

<sup>13</sup>“Report on Emergency Committee Meeting,” Mar. 16, 18, 1950, 50/19, Meany Papers, GMMA.

<sup>14</sup>*Free Trade Union News*, Dec. 1950; John Brophy, *A Miner’s Life* (Madison, WI, 1964), 298; Irving Brown, “The Role of Labor in International Relations,” Sept., 29, 1950, 10/5, Brown Papers, GMMA. In a speech in 1950, Brown commented enthusiastically on the recent ICFTU mission to Asia. On the early history of the Vietnamese labor movement see John Loss, “The Rise of the Labor Movement in South Vietnam” (unpublished MA essay, Univ. of Texas, (1975), 3–10.

portion of Vietnam, was drawn to the nascent movement. Already Buu was a veteran nationalist. His father had expelled him from the family home at the age of 14 for taking part in anti-French demonstrations. In 1940, French authorities sentenced him to 10 years' hard labor on Paulo Condore Island, the Devil's Island of Indochina. In prison, Buu came into contact with key members of the Viet Minh, a Communist-led umbrella organization of nationalist groups begun in 1941. His prison contacts included Pham Van Dong, a prominent Viet Minh leader and future Prime Minister of the Democratic republic of Vietnam.<sup>15</sup>

Although the details remain cloudy, it appears that the Japanese arranged for Buu's release from prison in 1945 and then trained him, along with members of the religious sect Cao Dai, to overthrow the French Vichy government. Buu and the Cao Dai were among the leaders and groups that rallied to support the Viet Minh's assertion of independence in the name of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and to resist subsequent French efforts to reimpose colonial rule.<sup>16</sup>

Yet both Buu and the Cao Dai gradually began to question their alliance with the Communists, whose nationalism they considered tainted by its ties to outside forces. Meanwhile, a French customs officer named Gilbert Jouan, working through the CFTC, had begun a campaign to organize native workers. Jouan persuaded Buu to take a lead in the project, and personally trained the young nationalist in the principles of Christian trade union thought.<sup>17</sup>

With Jouan's help, Buu put together a preliminary organization of workers that illegally began to unionize both rural and urban workers and later launched several aggressive strikes. In 1952, when Emperor Bao Dai revised the labor codes to allow for unions of native workers, Buu named his organization the Vietnamese Confederation of Christian Workers (CVTC).<sup>18</sup> Although affiliated with the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions (IFCTU), or Christian International as it was known, the CVTC strove to incorporate a diverse membership. Buu himself was a Buddhist.

Buu's organization was just the sort of Third World development that the AFL hoped to harness to thwart the attraction of Communism and promote the benefits of free trade unionism. It hoped that the ICFTU would move quickly to extend further

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<sup>15</sup>"Bio Data, Tran Quoc Buu," n.d., 31/3, International Affairs Department, Country Files, GMMA. Trinh-Quang-Quy, *Phong Trao Lao Dong Vietnam* (Saigon, 1970), 30–41.

<sup>16</sup>Edward Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia* (New York, 1972), 152–153; Charles Finch to State, Aug. 15, 1969, Box 1226, RG 59, Central Policy Files, 1967–69, Economic, Labor and Manpower, 06–10 Viet S, National Archives, College Park, MD (henceforth NA). Nearly 25 years later, Buu was greeted enthusiastically by Cao Dai members in their Holy See in Tay Ninh. Buu recalled for those assembled his early work with the Cao Dai.

<sup>17</sup>Joseph Zisman, "Labor in Indochina," Oct. 1952, Box 4, RG 469, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, 1948–61, Office of Labor Affairs, Far East Country Files, NA. Following Catholic teaching on labor issues, Jouan advocated the creation of "chambres de métier" or trade associations, through which representatives of labor and capital would regulate the conduct of business. On Catholic teaching on labor during this era see Gary Gerstle, "Catholic Corporatism, French Canadian Workers, and Industrial Unionism in Rhode Island," 213–215, in Robert Asher and Charles Stephenson (eds.), *Labor Divided: Race, Ethnicity, in U.S. Labor Struggles, 1935–1960* (Albany, NY, 1990); also see the papal encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), and Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931); Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston, MA, 1976), 286–287. Buu, according to Woodside, later advocated policies based on a "triangular principle" in which business, labor, and government representatives would gather to resolve problems. The "triangular principle" may well have evolved from Jouan's advocacy of "chambres de métier."

<sup>18</sup>Trinh-Quang-Quy, *Phong Trao Lao Dong Vietnam* (Saigon, 1970), 30–38; "Bio Data, Tran Quoc Buu," n.d., 31/3, International Affairs Department, Country Files, GMMA.

support to Indochina's nascent unionists. Yet in spite of a follow-up mission to Vietnam in 1953, the ICFTU failed to affiliate or establish a system of support for the CVTC.<sup>19</sup> The ICFTU's reluctance to act appeared to derive from longstanding competition with Christian International. European Socialists dominated the ICFTU and looked with suspicion upon the IFCTU, which they considered to be a more conservative organization, bound to the Roman Catholic Church. To the Americans, such longstanding European rivalries were infuriating, especially when they obstructed progress in the battle against Communism. Watching the ICFTU spin its wheels while tensions heated up in Vietnam, Lovestone angrily wrote Meany that "On Indo-China ... we have missed out on a psychological moment."<sup>20</sup>

The AFL had better luck using its U.S. government contacts to obtain aid for the CVTC. Nelson Cruickshank, Head of the AFL Social Security Department and on temporary assignment as the Director of the European Labor Division of the Mutual Security Agency, arranged to have labor expert Dr. Joseph Zisman visit Indochina to evaluate the nascent labor movement. Zisman emerged impressed by the CVTC and reported that the "existence of young and inexperienced trade unions at this time present both a challenge and opportunity. Properly directed trade unions are among the strongest bulwarks for democracy."<sup>21</sup>

Zisman's recommendations, however, were the source of controversy among those involved in the nascent American aid program in Vietnam. The mission's education officer noted "considerable variation in comments made by different members of the Mission in regard to what actions the Mission should take toward a labor and labor ministry program."<sup>22</sup> There should be no surprise that a country with very ambivalent attitudes toward organized labor should resist actively cultivating an organized labor movement overseas. The AFL's often tense, always awkward, relationship with the state suggests that even American organized labor shared some of this ambivalence.

With the arrival of the more budget-conscious Eisenhower administration, however, foreign aid for programs for the Third World dried up.<sup>23</sup> More seriously, the AFL worried that Eisenhower's emphasis on "massive retaliation" over direct activism would compromise the anti-Communist cause in Southeast Asia.<sup>24</sup> As the crisis in Indochina worsened in early 1954, the AFL feared that the international community and the U.S. government intended to abandon large portions of Indochina to the Communists. The major powers had gathered in Geneva, Switzerland, to discuss the future of Vietnam just as the French military position weakened with the Viet Minh siege at Dien Bien Phu. In late April, 1954, the AFL Executive Council issued a statement calling for an immediate end to French colonial rule to be followed by a massive program of military and economic aid to Vietnam.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>19</sup>ICFTU Regional Fund Committee, Seventh Meeting, "Summary of Report of the Mission to Vietnam (June 20–July 24, 1953)," 51/4, Meany Papers, GMMMA.

<sup>20</sup>Lovestone to Meany, Nov. 29, 1954, 56/4, Meany Papers, GMMMA.

<sup>21</sup>Joseph Zisman, "Labor in Indochina," Oct. 1952, Box 4, RG 469, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, 1948–61, Office of Labor Affairs, Far East Country Files, NA.

<sup>22</sup>Malcolm Gaar, Acting Education Officer to John Tobler, "Subject: Labor and Labor Ministry Trainee Program," April 28, 1952, Box 1, RG 469, Records of U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, 1948–61, Mission to Vietnam, Agricultural and Natural Resources Divisions, Classified Files, NA.

<sup>23</sup>Carew, 183. David Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953–1961* (New York, 1991), 70–75, 133–134. The Eisenhower administration was reluctant to fund aid projects in Vietnam. Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson led the battle to limit aid to South Vietnam.

<sup>24</sup>On Eisenhower's diplomacy see John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (New York, 1992), 131–150.

<sup>25</sup>*AFL News Reporter*, May 28, 1954. Michael Ross to Jacob Potofsky, April 29, 1954, 214/8, ACWA

Determined to influence events, Meany dispatched an agent to the 1954 Geneva conference with instructions to press the AFL agenda. The agent, veteran trade unionist Harry Goldberg, set up what he called his “OSS Operations” in Geneva, which centered around the distribution of AFL documents to delegates. The AFL materials aimed to dissuade delegates from partitioning Vietnam and convince them that nationalist forces—freed from French domination—could defeat the Viet Minh.<sup>26</sup> Should the delegates show interest, the AFL planned to contact sympathetic U.S. Senators Paul Douglas or Michael Mansfield to introduce legislation to direct massive aid to an independent Vietnam.<sup>27</sup> After several weeks of lobbying, however, Goldberg realized that with the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu and Eisenhower’s vacillations little could be accomplished at Geneva.<sup>28</sup>

When George Meany learned of the final results of the Geneva conference, he angrily assailed the division of Vietnam as appeasement on “a world scale which would make Munich pale into insignificance.” The *AFL News Reporter* added that “twelve million more persons, including three and a half million Roman Catholics were added to the Red world as half of Vietnam was abandoned.”<sup>29</sup>

The AFL’s lament came at a time of great crisis for the CVTC. With the partition of Vietnam, thousands of CVTC members living above the 17th parallel attempted to escape south. An unnerved Buu wrote a supporter that the CVTC was “living through a real nightmare.” Two of the CVTC’s most important unions, totaling around 50,000 members, were headquartered in the north. The CVTC hoped to evacuate those “energetically opposed to the communist regime,” but had few resources available for the undertaking.<sup>30</sup> Inevitably, some were left behind. Any illusions that the Viet Minh might show mercy to members of a nationalist workers’ movement were shattered when officials of the new North Vietnamese government arrested two members of the CVTC who had voluntarily stayed in the north under the promise that they would be protected by the International Control Commission. Reports reaching Buu indicated that North Vietnamese authorities had arrested the two and sentenced them to forced labor on the Chinese border.<sup>31</sup> The swarm of unionists who fled south from the Viet Minh along with the memory of those left in the north cemented the anti-Communist leanings already present in the ranks of the CVTC.

The AFL did what it could to help Buu’s organization, but with limited resources and with neither the ICF TU nor the U.S. government actively involved, American labor could offer little real comfort. Buu, therefore, sought out other alliances to anchor the CVTC in the dangerously changing times. He quickly found a wealthy and

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(Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America) Papers, Kheel Center for Labor Documentation, Cornell University (henceforth Kheel). Similar concerns were expressed by the CIO. While touring India in the spring of 1954, Michael Ross, the head of the CIO’s Department of International Affairs, wrote to Jacob Potofsky, a CIO Vice President, that “if Indochina falls the effect down here will be bad.”

<sup>26</sup>Goldberg to Lovestone, May 8, 1954, 37/11, Lovestone Papers, GMMA.

<sup>27</sup>Goldberg to Lovestone, May 5, 1954, 37/11, Lovestone Papers, GMMA.

<sup>28</sup>Goldberg to Lovestone, May 17, 1954, 37/11, Lovestone Papers, GMMA; *AFL News Reporter*, May 14, 1954.

<sup>29</sup>*AFL News Reporter*, July 13, 1954. Robert Zieger, *The CIO, 1935–1955* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1995), 330–331. The CIO echoed Meany’s attacks at its 1954 convention, which assailed the administration’s “impressive record for vacillating and contradictory policies” and complained of “the loss of at least half of Indochina to the communists.”

<sup>30</sup>Buu to Lucien Tronchet, July 22, 1954, 31/3 Country Files, International Affairs Department Papers, GMMA.

<sup>31</sup>“Labor Report,” Feb. 5, 1955, Box 15, RG 469, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, 1948–61, Office of Labor Affairs, Labor Programs Division, Far East, Country Files, NA.

potentially powerful (and dangerous) ally in Ngo Dinh Nhu, the political operative whose brother, Ngo Dinh Diem, was a strongly anti-Communist nationalist whom Bao Dai named as Premier in June 1954. Nhu carefully cultivated the CVTC and may have provided it with much-needed funds for the resettlement of the refugees and other projects.<sup>32</sup> In return, Buu joined Nhu in forming the Can Lao Party to support Diem's political aspirations.<sup>33</sup>

Buu's collaboration with Nhu in the controversial Can Lao Party offered the CVTC an invaluable shield during the volatile early days following the partition of Vietnam. As President of South Vietnam, Diem's vigorous attacks on the Binh Xuyen sect of gangsters controlling the ports of Saigon opened the harbors to CVTC organizing.<sup>34</sup> The CVTC rapidly grew in the first 2 years following the Geneva conference. The Tenant Farmers' Union, in particular, expanded dramatically with the personal support of Nhu.<sup>35</sup> By late 1955, the CVTC publicly claimed to have 500,000 members, although it privately admitted to having only around 350,000.<sup>36</sup>

Alongside successful organizing campaigns, the CVTC also grew increasingly militant. In 1956, it launched strikes that shut down both the port of Saigon and later the city's major electrical plant. In the countryside, 13,000 members of the CVTC's plantation workers' affiliate struck for better pay and working conditions at four of South Vietnam's major rubber plantations.<sup>37</sup> At the end of June, 1956, the CVTC even threatened a general strike to protest remaining resistance to unionization.<sup>38</sup> The organization also commenced campaigns to bring electricity to working class neighborhoods, improve education, establish medical clinics, and rebuild areas of Saigon destroyed in the upheavals of 1955.<sup>39</sup> All this occurred with Diem's explicit support. On May Day, 1956, Diem issued a statement to the workers of his country, assuring them that their government "placed labor above capital" and recognized the right of workers and unions to participate in the "direction and progress of the country."<sup>40</sup>

Delighted with the CVTC's progress under the Diem regime, the AFL enthusiastically embraced the new South Vietnamese government. *The AFL News Reporter* praised

<sup>32</sup>Heath to State Department, Jan. 5, 1954 and Mar. 19, 1954, Box 3, RG 469, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, 1948-61, Office of Labor Affairs, Labor Programs Division, Far East, Country Files, NA.

<sup>33</sup>Central Intelligence Agency, "Current Intelligence Memorandum, Subject: Cast of Characters South Vietnam," Aug. 28, 1963, Box 128a, President's Office Files, Vietnam General, John F. Kennedy Library, Columbia Point, MA (henceforth JFK).

<sup>34</sup>On Binh Xuyen see Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York, 1991), 48-49; George Herring, *America's Longest War* (New York, 1986), 52-54; Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution* (New York, 1966), 103, 119-120.

<sup>35</sup>Shaplen, 146-147.

<sup>36</sup>Dubrow to State Department, Mar. 2, 1959, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960*, 1:145-148 (hereafter *FRUS*, with year and volume number). Jodie Eggers to State, Dec. 12, 1955, Box 14, RG 469, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, 1948-61, Office of Labor Affairs, Labor Programs Division, Far East, Country Files, NA.

<sup>37</sup>Reinhardt to State Department, May 26, 1956, Box 15, Reinhardt to State Department, Mar. 31, 1956, Box 14, RG 469, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, 1948-61, Office of Labor Affairs, Labor Programs Division, Far East, Country Files, NA.

<sup>38</sup>Eggers to Golda Stander, June 29, 1956, Box 14, RG 469, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, 1948-61, Office of Labor Affairs, Labor Programs Division, Far East Country Files, NA.

<sup>39</sup>Eggers to Barrows, June 29, 1955, Box 28, RG 469, Records of U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, 1948-61, Mission to Vietnam, Office of the Director, Subject Files, NA.

<sup>40</sup>"President Diem's May Day Message to Vietnamese Workers," May 1, 1956, Box 15, RG 469, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, 1948-61, Office of Labor Affairs, Labor Programs Division, Far East, Country Files, NA.

Diem as a “progressive” and a “reformist,” willing to fight landlords and “feudal forces.” Under Diem, the AFL proclaimed, a “far-reaching step was taken to stimulate the democratic process in strife-torn, divided, yet strategically vital Vietnam.”<sup>41</sup>

But while Buu’s membership in Can Lao had brought great gains, he worried about Nhu’s and Diem’s volatility and his own independence. In a post-colonial culture that placed exaggerated value on independence and autonomy, Buu’s alliance with the Nhus had a definite downside. Expressing a persistent preoccupation for Buu (and Vietnamese in general)—fear of undue outside influences—the CVTC President told the American Embassy that he “was reluctant to become over-obligated” to the government by “accepting outright grants from it or any of the political parties.”<sup>42</sup> Nor was Buu shy about expressing his concerns to Diem. In a meeting with the President in February 1956, Buu explained that “his idea of democracy was not [Diem’s] hand-picked assembly.”<sup>43</sup> Buu followed up by refusing to give a blanket endorsement to the Can Lao slate running for the assembly. He also amplified his attacks on local officials who mistreated CVTC members and officials. None of this pleased the imperious Diem. The final straw between Buu and Diem, according to American Embassy observers, came with the failure of the CVTC to pass a resolution pledging support to Diem’s government.<sup>44</sup>

By October, 1956, a concerned American Embassy reported to the State Department that Diem’s attitude toward labor had completely changed. Government officials openly condemned the CVTC and reimposed colonial-era prohibitions against large meetings without prior government approval.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, Nhu turned viciously on the Tenant Farmers’ Union. Fearing that the union’s initial success might lead to real agrarian reform, Nhu turned over to large landlords control of a network of Farmers’ Associations, designed to provide affordable credit to tenants. The landlords quickly transformed the associations into instruments designed to manipulate and control tenants. A reign of terror descended upon the Tenant Farmers’ Union. Several union leaders were thrown into jail and some languished in prison for years. The entire affair only fueled further anti-Diem sentiments in rural areas.<sup>46</sup>

In the midst of the troubles, Buu walked a difficult tightrope. Privately, he lambasted the government, but in public he avoided criticism, fearing that he would be jailed and that his movement would collapse.<sup>47</sup> He had other problems as well. While a wholesale campaign of subversion had yet to begin, Buu was aware that Communists with revolutionary designs had infiltrated his movement. As veterans of the Viet Minh campaign, CVTC leaders knew these tactics well and claimed to know the identity of

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<sup>41</sup>*AFL News Reporter*, May 27, 1955.

<sup>42</sup>Eggers to State Department, Dec. 12, 1955, Box 14, RG 469, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, 1948–61, Office of Labor Affairs, Labor Programs Division, Far East, Country Files, NA.

<sup>43</sup>Eggers to Eland Barrows, Feb. 14, 1956, Box 14, RG 469, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, 1948–61, Office of Labor Affairs, Labor Programs Division, Far East, Country Files, NA; “Record of Conversation: Present Situation in the CVTC,” July 11, 1956, Box 15, Jay Krane Papers, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University (henceforth Reuther Library). Bui Luong, the general secretary of the CVTC, expressed similar concerns to ICFTU representative Jay Krane. Luong explained that he “was personally careful not to compromise his standing with the workers by having too close contact with the government.”

<sup>44</sup>Eggers to Barrows, Oct. 15, 1956, Box 15, RG 469, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, 1948–61, Office of Labor Affairs, Labor Programs Division, Far East, Country Files, NA.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup>Shaplen, 146–147.

<sup>47</sup>“Confidential-BR, Singapore,” Jan. 16, 1958; “Confidential-BR, Singapore,” Mar. 22, 1958, Box 15, Jay Krane Papers, Reuther Library.

the spies in their ranks, often choosing to allow them to operate under the belief that an enemy should be kept close. But in 1957, a Viet Minh agent operating in the ranks of the CVTC was arrested and jailed when authorities found incriminating documents in her residence.<sup>48</sup> The incident put Buu's movement under a cloud.

As the situation appeared to be slipping out of control in Vietnam, the AFL-CIO had few remedies at its disposal. The ICFTU continued to prove ineffective in Vietnam. Having shelved efforts to affiliate the CVTC, the ICFTU affiliated the Worker's Union of Vietnam (UOV), the smallest by far of the three rival labor federations in South Vietnam. The UOV affiliation further alienated the CVTC from the ICFTU.<sup>49</sup> AFL-CIO Asian agent Richard Deverall bitterly complained to Meany and Lovestone that the Indians who operated much of the ICFTU machinery in Asia were not only "hopelessly inefficient" but also resented in the rest of Asia.<sup>50</sup> Deverall's vehemently expressed concerns convinced Lovestone of the "tragedy and stupidity of the ICFTU operations in the Far East."<sup>51</sup>

As the ICFTU floundered, the U.S. government enjoyed a bit more success in responding to the needs of Vietnamese workers. Although U.S. Operations Mission (USOM) in South Vietnam originally had budgeted no money for labor programs, USOM staffer Jodie Eggers, formerly of the CIO-Woodworkers, lobbied energetically for funds that might help the CVTC.<sup>52</sup> Within a year, Eggers had launched several "labor schools" to train CVTC unionists.<sup>53</sup> So complete was Eggers's dedication that he labored on his weekends with CVTC members constructing housing for resettled workers.<sup>54</sup> Eggers's programs expanded in 1957 to include training courses to be given across the country by a team of 20 full-time teachers, funded by a \$200,000 grant from the U.S.<sup>55</sup>

Instead of embracing these developments, ICFTU General Secretary J. H. Oldenbroek complained bitterly that the International Cooperation Administration (the coordinating body for U.S. aid programs), with its plans to extend its training programs in Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia, was "interfering with the programs and plans of the ICFTU."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Eggers to Leland Barrows, April 9, 1957, "Monthly Report," Box 18, RG 469, Records of U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, 1948-61, Mission to Vietnam, Office of the Director, Subject Files, 1954-57.

<sup>49</sup>Deverall to Meany, Sept. 14, 1960, 57/12, Meany Papers, GMMA. ICFTU, "International Solidarity Fund Committee," June 1964, Box 482, Jay Lovestone Papers, Hoover Institute on War, Revolution, and Peace, Stanford, CA (henceforth Hoover). In 1964, the ICFTU disaffiliated the UOV after discovering that the Vietnamese federation essentially had lied about its membership numbers and activities in order to obtain a grant from the International Labor Organization.

<sup>50</sup>Deverall to Meany, Mar. 7, 1960, 57/15, Meany Papers, GMMA.

<sup>51</sup>Lovestone to Meany, June 9, 1952, Box 8, Meany Papers, GMMA.

<sup>52</sup>Jodie Eggers to Golda Stander, June 9, 1955, Box 14, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, 1948-61, Office of Labor Affairs, Labor Programs Division, Far East, Country Files, NA.

<sup>53</sup>Eggers to Golda Stander, June 29, 1956, Box 14, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, 1948-61, Office of Labor Affairs, Labor Programs Division, Far East, Country Files, NA.

<sup>54</sup>Rudolph Marginot to George Brown, Aug. 29, 1957, 31/3, International Affairs Department, Country Files, GMMA. Eggers's monthly reports on labor activities in South Vietnam offer a detailed depiction of a movement struggling with the vestiges of colonialism and striving to come to grips with a rapidly changing world. Among the problems facing Vietnamese labor in 1957, the CVTC dealt with the case of a woman beaten to death by her French overseer on a rubber plantation, while it simultaneously planned a strike at a large hydro-electricity plant.

<sup>55</sup>"FY 1957 Operational Program Vietnam," 43, Box 15, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, 1948-61, Office of Labor Affairs, Labor Programs Division, Far East, Country Files, NA.

<sup>56</sup>Irving Brown memo, June 26, 1959, 11/15, Irving Brown Papers, GMMA.

But the nascent U.S. government program quickly ran into other problems. In 1958, with the reassignment of Eggers to Pakistan, the USOM's relationship with the CVTC began to deteriorate. Again reflecting his concerns over his organization's autonomy, Buu refused demands for an audit of his organization's use of American money. The USOM responded by ending both the subsidy and the labor aid program. Humiliated, the CVTC seethed with "anti-American sentiment."<sup>57</sup> Despite its own desires to avoid a partnership with the U.S. government, the AFL-CIO increasingly became convinced that, if it could play a greater mediating role, such misunderstandings could be avoided in the future.

Given its frustrations with the ICFTU and its developing hopes that the U.S. government might more actively and delicately intervene to help the CVTC, the AFL-CIO welcomed the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960. In particular, Kennedy's bold assertion of "we can do better" appeared to offer an exciting opportunity to reverse the nation's reactive pose in foreign policy.

Especially attractive to labor was Kennedy's recognition that social, political, and economic developments were integral to the battle against Communism in the Third World.<sup>58</sup> In Latin America, Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, with its emphasis on both social and military efforts, offered an opportunity for such cooperation. AFL-CIO leaders quickly convinced themselves that they could accept funding and work closely with government officials while still maintaining an essential autonomy. The federation embraced the Alliance for Progress and volunteered to aid in the labor side of the administration of the program.<sup>59</sup> Together, government and labor jointly founded and funded the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), which established training programs for union leaders from Latin America, brought young labor leaders to the U.S. for classes, and generally promoted the cause of free trade unionism in the region. In late 1963, the Kennedy administration expanded its partnership with organized labor, creating a permanent labor advisory committee to the Agency for International Development (AID), the agency created in 1961 to replace the International Cooperation Administration and Development Loan Fund.<sup>60</sup> In contrast to his growing involvement with AID, Meany moved to distance himself from the ineffectual ICFTU by withholding AFL-CIO dues payments and stepping up his public criticism of the organization.<sup>61</sup>

Supported by AID money and inspired by Kennedy's call to action, the AFL-CIO aggressively moved to cement and repair relations with the nascent labor movements of

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<sup>57</sup>Bowers to Krane, Feb. 13, 1958; "Confidential-BR, Singapore," Box 15, Jay Krane Papers, Reuther Library.

<sup>58</sup>Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 201–205. Gaddis suggests that Kennedy's Cold War strategy must be viewed in terms of a "universalism" that assumed that the U.S. had both the means and the moral imperative to challenge the possible expansion of Communism anywhere in the world. The AFL-CIO, in its idealistic approach to foreign policy, clearly exhibited a universalistic approach to foreign policy.

<sup>59</sup>Stanley Rutenberg, "For a Free World: Alliance for Progress," *Free Trade Union News*, June, 1962; Meany to Potofsky, Jan. 2, 1964, 27/313, ACWA Papers (5619), Kheel. Kennedy also created an *ad hoc* labor advisory committee attached to the Alliance for Progress.

<sup>60</sup>Alongside the AIFLD, the AFL-CIO and AID formed the African-American Labor College to train and advise African trade unionists, Meany to Kenneth Kelly, April 2, 1962, Office of the President, Micro 81, GMMA. Key AFL-CIO officials also went to work for AID. For instance, Kenneth Kelly, Secretary Treasurer of the Massachusetts State Labor Council, became the Director of Labor Affairs in AID's Office of Education and Social Development.

<sup>61</sup>*Washington Post*, Jan. 10, 1961; Meany to Omer Becu, Mar. 9, 1961, 3/13, Lovestone Papers, Kheel. Meany to Becu, Sept. 5, 1963, Office of the President, Micro 81, GMMA.

the Third World threatened by Communism, such as the CVTC. Without question, the AFL–CIO’s most effective overseas agent was Irving Brown. His reputation, by the 1950s, had spread across the world. Communists viewed him as a dangerous *agent provocateur*, a ruthless covert operator with strong Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) ties, dedicated to thwarting Communist influence on international labor. Although he remained focused on European affairs, the perceived ineffectiveness of the ICFTU forced the AFL–CIO to rely on Brown’s unique abilities world-wide.

In 1961, Communist gains in Laos, Diem’s ever growing repression, and rumors that Buu would soon be arrested, placed the labor situation in Southeast Asia on Irving Brown’s agenda.<sup>62</sup> Brown arranged for a short trip to South Vietnam.<sup>63</sup> Arriving in Saigon on November 15, 1961, Brown quickly moved to size up the Vietnamese labor movement. He immediately recognized a country in disarray, haunted by the “poverty and misery of the masses.” He traveled through the slums of Saigon, where the vast gap between rich and poor drew his attention. The Viet Cong, Brown quickly recognized, successfully had managed to “identify itself with the thinking and actions of the masses and the reality of daily existence,” while Diem’s government remained mired in corruption, ineffectiveness, and repression. “Unless there is a cleansing of the Augean stables and an introduction of new, hopeful political elements into the regime,” insisted Brown in his official report, “the masses, especially the peasants—will not defend the regime.”

Brown, however, did find some hope in South Vietnam’s maturing labor movement and the leader of the CVTC, Tran Quoc Buu. Only the CVTC, under Buu, “constitute a moral or social side of what must be a total fight against a total enemy.” Buu and Brown conferred closely. Buu told the AFL–CIO representative that he had lost faith in Diem, and complained of Diem’s persecution of the labor movement. He described his hopes for the CVTC and impressed Brown with his commitment to anti-Communism.

As he left Vietnam, Brown was “so impressed with Buu that I believe he should be considered in terms of any possible reshuffling of the political control of the government.” Perhaps more importantly, Brown had come to view the CVTC not only as a political and social force, but also as “a possible para-military” force.<sup>64</sup> According to Buu, Diem briefly had enlisted the CVTC for paramilitary purposes, as had Emperor Bao Dai before him, but, in both cases, Diem and Bao Dai had turned against the plan for fear of creating an armed political opposition.<sup>65</sup>

Following Brown’s warnings about Diem in 1961, the AFL–CIO grew increasingly concerned as Diem remained intransigent, refusing to adopt reform measures. After returning to Paris, Brown made contact with elements in the Vietnamese exile community in France. These contacts urged him to use his influence against the South Vietnamese state and in support of the “real” nationalists operating against Diem in

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<sup>62</sup>Shaplen, 146–147.

<sup>63</sup>Michael Ross to Lew Johnson, Nov. 8, 1961, 31/3, International Affairs Department, Country Files, GMMA. The cover for Brown’s mission was to be the distribution of relief to victims of a recent flood along the Mekong River.

<sup>64</sup>Irving Brown, “Report on Vietnam Trip,” Nov. 17–21, 1961, 31/3, International Affairs Department, Country Files, GMMA.

<sup>65</sup>Ernest Lee to Meany, May 15, 1964, 31/3, International Affairs Department, Country Files, GMMA.

South Vietnam.<sup>66</sup> In 1962, as repression mounted in Saigon, Meany interceded with Kennedy and Rusk asking them to protect Buu in his increasingly precarious position.<sup>67</sup>

In September, 1963, as the situation in Saigon was nearing the unraveling point with the growing Buddhist protest movement, Harry Goldberg met (at the suggestion of Buu) with a group of Vietnamese exiles representing the Democratic League of Vietnam. The group, led by Dr. Nguyen Ton Hoan, told Goldberg that Buu had recently journeyed to Paris secretly to build support for a coup against Diem. Hoan—who along with Buu had formed the nationalist Dai Viet political party in 1948—urged Goldberg and the AFL-CIO to intensify anti-Diem lobbying in Washington. He claimed to have earned the sympathies of Michael Forrestal, an aide to McGeorge Bundy, and proposed to replace Diem's regime with a "broad-democratic, anti-communist coalition."<sup>68</sup>

Along with his secret lobbying, Buu began to take a more public posture of opposition to Diem. In the fall of 1963, he sharply criticized Diem in testimony to a United Nations committee investigating Vietnam.<sup>69</sup> Seeking Buu's counsel, the AFL-CIO invited him to attend its 1963 convention scheduled for mid-November. President Kennedy also was to attend, and the occasion would give the two a chance to meet and an occasion for Buu to put Vietnamese labor on Kennedy's agenda. In the end, however, a covert American-sponsored coup of Vietnamese Army generals overthrew Diem, ending his repressive regime. In the aftermath of the November coup, Buu chose to stay in Vietnam to try to influence events.<sup>70</sup> He missed his opportunity to meet with Kennedy, whose speech to the AFL-CIO convention was one of his last.

Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson (LBJ), had done little to impress labor during his tenure in Congress but, as Vice President, LBJ aimed to broaden his political base. He rallied all his energies and considerable powers of persuasion to transform success-

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<sup>66</sup>Ho-Thong-Minh to Brown, April 4, 1962, 8/17, Papers of Irving Brown, GMMA. "Free Democratic Party of Vietnam Overseas Organization: Background Features, Information and Analysis," n.d. 8/4, Irving Brown Papers, GMMA; Pham-Huy-Co to Lovestone, April 2, 1962, 14/5, Lovestone Papers, GMMA. Both Brown and Lovestone were in contact with exiled nationalist leader Dr. Pham-Huy-Co, who urged Lovestone to lobby Averell Harriman, the Assistant Secretary of State for Far East affairs, against the oppressive Diem regime. "CIA Current Intelligence Memorandum, Subject: Cast of Characters in SVN", Aug. 28, 1963, Box 128a, President's Office Files, JFK. A CIA profile described Co as an exile in Paris since 1954, with ties to Dr. Dan's democratization movement. Co apparently had contacts in South Vietnam and was responsible for several leaflet campaigns in Saigon. The CIA described him as "relatively capable but not forceful and somewhat arrogant."

<sup>67</sup>"Minutes of Labor Advisory Committee on Foreign Assistance," Jan. 7, 1969, 11/11, Joseph Keenan Papers, Catholic Univ. of America Archives, Washington, DC.

<sup>68</sup>Harry Goldberg, "Meeting with Vietnam Exile Leaders," Sept. 16, 1963, 31/3, International Affairs Department, Country Files, GMMA. Huyeh Sanh Thong, a member of the Democratic League of Vietnam and a lecturer at Yale, attended the meeting with Brown. Thong later joined with 70 other exiles in signing a general appeal to Kennedy not to interfere with any coups against Diem. Their appeal was published in *The New York Times*. Following the coup in early 1964 that brought General Khanh to power, Hoan became the Vice Premier of South Vietnam. Krulak, "Memorandum for the Record, Subject: Meeting with Mr. Ho Thuong Minh," Oct. 15, 1963, Box 1, RG 218, Records of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Records of the JFK Collection, Vietnam Documents, JCS Central File, 1963, NA. At the urging of Irving Brown, General Krulak met with Ho Thuong Minh, the former Vietnamese Defense Minister who had been fired for resisting Diem's "program of violent liquidation of the sects." Minh urged that the U.S. seek to depose Diem and then seek negotiations. Krulak reported a positive impression of Minh.

<sup>69</sup>Jose Maria Aguirre to Ernest Lee, Dec. 13, 1963, 31/3, International Affairs Department, Country Files, GMMA.

<sup>70</sup>Rusk to Saigon Embassy, Nov. 3, 1963, Saigon Embassy to State Department, Nov. 4, 1963, *FRUS*,

fully the relationship between himself and labor.<sup>71</sup> Johnson carefully studied labor's agenda and was well aware of its particular interest in foreign affairs. When he toured Asia in the spring of 1961, Johnson met with union leaders and carefully included references to the Asian labor scene in his official report. In South Vietnam, he recommended industrial aid, public education, and that local government "enforce existing labor laws and work toward social reforms."<sup>72</sup>

As President, even more so than Kennedy, Johnson seemed to embrace labor's long-held vision of aggressive full-employment economics and social spending at home coupled with activist anti-Communism abroad.<sup>73</sup> This, combined with LBJ's charm offensive, compromised whatever was left of the AFL-CIO's vaunted independence from the state. The federation quickly developed a relationship of unprecedented closeness with Johnson. This partnership set the stage for the events of 1964, which would draw the AFL-CIO and the CVTC further together.

Following the coup against Diem, the AFL-CIO and the CVTC hoped for a liberalization of South Vietnamese labor policies. Yet many of the same, Diem-era officials continued to harass the peasantry, local farmers, and labor organizers.<sup>74</sup> When a second coup occurred in January, 1964, Buu—fearing arrest—went into hiding. In the power vacuum that followed the coup, Buu's name surfaced at the State Department as a possible candidate for the South Vietnamese premiership.<sup>75</sup> General Nguyen Khanh, however, emerged to take control, although his hold on power remained tenuous. Seeking to eliminate possible threats, the general ordered Buu's arrest on charges of favoring neutrality. Concerned about Buu's safety and the threat his arrest might have on perceptions regarding South Vietnamese democracy, the American Embassy facilitated a meeting between Buu and Khanh in early February. There the two managed to work out a preliminary plan for coexistence.<sup>76</sup>

Given these tumultuous events, the AFL-CIO realized that, in order for the CVTC to survive, it needed more in its favor than the federation alone could provide. With the

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*January–August, 1963, Vietnam, 1961–1963*, 4:550–551, 560–561. Tran Van Don, *Our Endless War: Inside Vietnam* (San Rafael, CA, 1978), 110. In the immediate aftermath of the coup, Buu actually disappeared. Meany and others suspected that he had been arrested and pressed the State Department to intervene. When pressed, Generals Don and Minh, the coup leaders, insisted that Buu had been kidnapped by unknown sources. In his autobiography, however, General Don seems to admit that the new government had arrested Buu and then released the labor leader at the request of American Ambassador Lodge.

<sup>71</sup>Jack Conway Oral History, 16, Merger Oral Histories, GMMA; George Meany Oral History, 4–6, Lyndon Johnson Library, Austin, TX (henceforth LBJ). Author's interview with Walt Whitman Rostow, June 2, 1997.

<sup>72</sup>Johnson to Kennedy, "Observations on Labor and Working Conditions in Southeast Asia," May 21, 1961, Box 57, RG 174, General Records of the Department of Labor, Office of Secretary, Arthur Goldberg, NA. For Johnson's general report from Vietnam see "Paper Prepared by the Vice President," n.d., *FRUS, Vietnam, 1961–63*, 1:149–151; and Lloyd Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the War for Vietnam* (Chicago, IL, 1994), 52–54.

<sup>73</sup>Nelson Lichtenstein, *Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York, 1995), 391; Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism* (Ithaca, NY, 1995).

<sup>74</sup>Lodge to State Department, Jan. 9, 1964, Box 1340, General Records of the Department of State, Central Policy Files, Labor and Manpower, NA.

<sup>75</sup>"Telegram from State Department to Embassy Vietnam," Feb. 1, 1964, *FRUS, 1964–1968, Vietnam*, 1964, 1:53.

<sup>76</sup>Lodge to State Department, Feb. 6, 1964, Box 1340, General Records of the Department of State, Central Policy Files, Labor and Manpower, NA.

U.S. government prepared to make an unprecedented effort to shore up the South Vietnamese economy, the AFL-CIO moved to make sure that officials considered Vietnamese organized labor in the plans. The AFL-CIO President, recognizing Buu's vulnerabilities, aggressively began to lobby on behalf of the CVTC. Meany personally invited Buu to address the May AFL-CIO Executive Council meeting.<sup>77</sup> He also arranged a personal meeting between Buu and President Johnson. At their May 20 meeting, Johnson assured Buu that to him the conflict in Vietnam was as much a political as a military battle and that he recognized the importance of trade unions to both battles.<sup>78</sup> Buu, in turn, also emphasized the centrality of free trade unions and urged the President to work for further democratization in South Vietnam. The "missing link in the present Vietnamese chain of events," Buu explained to Johnson, was a free labor movement which could "accomplish the double objective of alleviating their [Vietnamese workers'] daily hardships and creating an almost para-military type of civilian organization."<sup>79</sup> A few short months following their meeting, Johnson used a supposed attack on an American destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin to press through Congress legislation that essentially gave him war powers in Vietnam.

During his Washington visit, Buu made a "tremendous impression" on both government officials and union leaders. In his meetings with AFL-CIO officials, he agreed to accept help in establishing training programs for cadres assigned to areas "controlled" by the Viet Cong, as well as funding for the construction of new welfare centers and propaganda programs. But, as in his earlier conflict with the USOM, Buu's neo-colonial fears for his organization's autonomy quickly surfaced. He insisted that AFL-CIO financial aid be modest. Again, in spite of his great need, he wished to avoid either dependence on the Americans or the perception of dependence. Like the AFL-CIO in its relations with the U.S. state, the CVTC pragmatically sought the help it felt it needed, but still strove to retain a facade of independence.<sup>80</sup>

Despite Buu's preoccupation with his organization's autonomy, his meeting with the American President clearly provided him and the CVTC with a new aura of power and influence in Vietnam. General Khanh responded by easing restrictions on

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<sup>77</sup>Meany to Buu, Mar. 9, 1964, 31/3, Department of International Affairs, Country Files, GMMA.

<sup>78</sup>"Memorandum for President," May 19, 1964, Box 1340, General Records of the Department of State, Central Foreign Policy Files, Labor and Manpower, NA. Michael Forrestal memo, April 16, 1964, Box 12, Confidential Files, CO 301, LBJ. White House Staff Assistant Michael Forrestal saw the meeting as an opportunity to counter "the image of a U.S. which all too often is believed to be preoccupied in Vietnam solely with military solutions." In addition, Forrestal saw Buu's visit to the White House as "helpful in getting across to the American public that the Khanh government is not a military dictatorship." Dean Rusk to Johnson, "Subject: Your Meeting with Tran Quoc Buu," May 19, 1964, Box 12, Confidential Files, CO 301, LBJ; "Memorandum for President," May 19, 1964, Box 1340, RG 59, General Records of the Department of State, Central Foreign Policy Files, Labor and Manpower, NA.

<sup>79</sup>Buu to President Johnson, May 20, 1964, 39/7, Irving Brown Papers, GMMA.

<sup>80</sup>Irving Brown to Meany, June 1, 1964, 1/27, Jay Lovestone Papers, 5780, Kheel; Herring, "'A People Quite Apart': Americans, South Vietnamese, and the War for Vietnam," *Diplomatic History*, 4 (Winter, 1990), 2-3. Due to its long history of colonialism, strong anti-white, anti-Western currents always existed in Vietnamese society. Leaders in South Vietnam performed a near-impossible balancing act requiring an appearance of autonomy and yet necessary cooperation with outside forces. While Buu desperately needed American help, he could not afford to be seen as too closely associated with the U.S. George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How the US Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York, 1986), 206. General Khanh shared a similar concern that he might appear too much under the influence of the Americans.

labor. In the liberated atmosphere, a flurry of new organization took place. The plantation and tenant farmers' unions—which had been virtually decimated by Nhu—rebounded as tens of thousands of Vietnamese farmers and workers joined CVT-affiliated unions.<sup>81</sup>

Encouraged by the gains made by the CVT, Lovestone asked Arnold Beichman, a journalist closely associated with the AFL–CIO, to tour Vietnam as a means of assessing Buu and the re-emerging labor movement. Beichman found the CVT a vibrant organization. Buu particularly impressed him. Yet Beichman also recognized the federation's vulnerability. Buu was the "target" of the military, political parties, and rival unions. The CVT had no real blueprint or plans for the future. It also continued to find itself subject to the whims of local officials. By providing basic guidance and political support, Beichman argued, American labor could be the CVT's lifeline.<sup>82</sup>

In early August, Irving Brown returned to Vietnam to further cement the relationship between the CVT and the AFL–CIO. Brown began by setting up a meeting between himself, Buu, and General Khanh. There, Brown pressed Khanh to involve the CVT in every aspect of governance. Khanh signaled a general acceptance. But Brown pushed further, asking "what about the implementation in the villages? In the districts? In the provinces?" Khanh assured Brown that he would use his influence to ensure that the CVT was incorporated into decision-making at all levels. Brown also met with AID administrator James Killian, whose support would be needed to help finance the AFL–CIO's developing plans for a program to help the CVT. Killian "indicated a great willingness to work directly with us," and, to Brown's relief, seemed to offer the AFL–CIO relative autonomy in terms of how funds were to be spent.<sup>83</sup>

In his final report on his mission, Brown again raised the possibility of using the CVT as a "para-military" organization in which members might have "contact with the village military guards and with the local authorities in order to have the arms—mostly defensive—necessary to protect the organization."<sup>84</sup>

With his leadership already under fire from all segments of South Vietnam in the summer of 1964, General Khanh launched a crackdown on dissent. He declared a state of emergency, severely limiting public meetings. The CVT—determined never again to show the weaknesses it had with Diem—decided to react forcibly. This time, it would have a much more engaged AFL–CIO and U.S. government in its corner. To harness support for a several-weeks-old strike against a textile plant and to protest General Khanh's actions, Buu announced a general strike in the fall of 1964.<sup>85</sup> With Saigon increasingly collapsing into chaos as different groups competed for power, Buu hoped the strike would assert the CVT as a viable social, economic, and political force. A general strike—even one the Viet Cong might use to their advantage—would demon-

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<sup>81</sup>Saigon Embassy to State Department, May 5, 1964, Box 1340, "General Records of the Dept. of State, Central Files, 1964–66, NA"; Jay Lovestone to AFL–CIO Executive Council, May 13, 1964, Box 429, Lovestone Papers, Hoover. Mid-way through 1964, the CVTC dropped the word Christian from their organization's name.

<sup>82</sup>Arnold Beichman, "Report on Vietnam," July 26, 1964, 5/27, Jay Lovestone Papers, Kheel.

<sup>83</sup>Labor News Conference, Program 22, Series 4 (transcript from Mutual Radio Program), Sept. 20, 1964.

<sup>84</sup>Irving Brown to Lovestone, Aug. 4, 1964, 1/28, Jay Lovestone Papers, Kheel.

<sup>85</sup>Lovestone to Dr. Dan, Oct. 8, 1964, Box 707, Lovestone Papers, Hoover; John Condon to State Department, Oct. 10, 1964, Box 1340, General Records of Department of State, Central Files, 1964–66, NA; Lacouture, *Vietnam between Two Truces* (New York, 1966), 196; *New York Times*, Sept. 21, 1964. The specific purpose for the strike was to protest a state of emergency declaration issued by General Khanh on Aug. 19, which limited public meetings.

strate the independence and potency of the CVT to all of Vietnam.<sup>86</sup> Veteran French journalist Jean Lacouture saw the strike as having a definite “political aspect, in fact a clearly revolutionary one.”<sup>87</sup>

On September 21, the CVT launched its general strike. Buu telegraphed the AFL-CIO requesting support that might influence the government not to crack down on the strikers. Meany immediately telegraphed back, proclaiming “our all-out unstinting support to the free and independent workers organized in the CVT under your great leadership.”<sup>88</sup> The U.S. State Department, however, shared little of Meany’s enthusiasm and worried that the strike was yet “another example of national indiscipline.”<sup>89</sup>

With the city’s electrical workers on strike, Saigon sat in darkness, without water, electricity, phone service, or bus transportation, for a full day. A total of 60,000 CVT members joined in the strike. Buu led a group of several thousand strikers through Saigon to Khanh’s offices, where they presented their demands. The general was conveniently out of town, but his aides negotiated with the strike leaders.<sup>90</sup> By the end of the day, the CVT and Khanh’s deputies reached a tentative agreement easing labor restrictions and allowing for an end to the day-old general strike. Lacouture viewed the general strike as an unqualified success: “for the first time a force arose that could be either a possible replacement for the present regime or a link to the enemy regime or the first pillar of a regime to come.”<sup>91</sup>

But in directing its actions against the government, the CVT had upset the delicate balance of labor-state relations in South Vietnam. Its insistence that the strike concerned only labor issues fooled no one. While dramatically asserting itself, the CVT created new enemies and infuriated older ones. Khanh now had every reason to try to neutralize this latest threat.<sup>92</sup> On October 10, authorities included Buu’s name on a list of 13 military officers and seven civilians to be arrested on charges of conspiring against Khanh in a failed September 13 coup.<sup>93</sup>

Upon receiving his summons on the coup charges, Buu turned immediately to his

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<sup>86</sup>Lacouture, 196–198; Tang, 91. The Viet Cong, like the CVT, were mobilizing to take advantage of the weakness of the Khanh government.

<sup>87</sup>Lacouture, 196.

<sup>88</sup>Buu to Lovestone, Sept. 22, 1964; George Meany to Buu, Sept. 23, 1964, 31/3, International Affairs Department, Country Files, GMMA. In his telegram of support to Buu, Meany also vowed to “continue our efforts to persuade American and Vietnamese governments to support this democratic policy in interest of victory, Vietnamese national freedom and social and economic progress.”

<sup>89</sup>Telegram from Embassy in Vietnam to State Department, Sept. 24, 1964, *FRUS, 1964–1966, Vietnam, 1964*, 1:787.

<sup>90</sup>*New York Times*, Sept. 21, 1964.

<sup>91</sup>Lacouture, 196.

<sup>92</sup>Condon to State Department, Oct. 3, 1964, Box 1340, General Records of the Department of State, Central Foreign Policy Files, Labor and Manpower, 1964–66, RG 59, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964–66, Economic, General Records of the Department of State, NA. Buu clearly could see the forces conspiring against him, both from his enemies within the labor movement and from within the army and government. In early October, John Condon, the American Embassy’s Labor Attaché, gave Buu about even odds of survival. When an American friend told Buu that he hoped to see him soon in America, Buu replied, “Yes, as a refugee.” Chester Bain, *Vietnam: The Roots of the Conflict* (New York, 1967), 133. General Khanh aggressively purged Diem’s Can Lao Party in 1964 from South Vietnam. The perception of Buu’s continuing association, however unfair, with the Can Lao Party could not have helped him in Khanh’s eyes.

<sup>93</sup>*New York Times*, Oct. 10, 1964. The accusations centered around a meeting between Buu and the conspiring coup leaders, who sought Buu’s help in facilitating a meeting with American Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson after the uprising had turned sour.

strongest supporter, the AFL–CIO, which he hoped could muster the support to counterbalance the South Vietnamese state.<sup>94</sup> Infuriated at the arrest, George Meany drafted a caustic statement denouncing the government of South Vietnam for its “inhuman and destructive action in trumping up treason charges against Buu,” and insisting that whatever actions Buu took were “with full knowledge and agreement of the U.S. government.” Secretary of State Rusk, fearing that Meany’s statement was too “harsh” and might exacerbate circumstances, eventually managed to get his friend Meany to remove some of the blunt language. The AFL–CIO president, however, insisted on making a statement that Rusk admitted was “as mild as we could expect.”<sup>95</sup>

The dynamics of the particularly strong labor–state relations of the mid-1960s now were set in motion. Helping Buu became a priority for the Americans. In Saigon, the American Embassy prepared a letter “summarizing in agreed form” the events of the day. Buu, however, always cognizant of not appearing beholden to the Americans, refused to use the letter in his trial.<sup>96</sup> Yet few could have missed where the U.S. government stood on the issue. The South Vietnamese government could ill afford the specter of convicting a labor leader who, only months before, had met and established an informal understanding with the American president. To the absolute relief of all parties, a military court found Buu innocent of all charges on October 22.<sup>97</sup> Buu immediately cabled Meany to offer his thanks.<sup>98</sup>

In December, George Baldanzi, president of the Textile Workers’ Union, visited Vietnam on behalf of the AFL–CIO. Despite the gains made by the CVT in 1964, Baldanzi still found a desperate situation in which the disciplined Viet Cong had developed “clear-cut programs around which peasants could be rallied.” Urban workers—although not aligned with the Communists—were largely neutral in the struggle. “The Vietnamese labor movement,” Baldanzi concluded, “is without any hope today.” Dues-paying membership was falling, and Buu remained in a politically perilous position. The AFL–CIO, Baldanzi concluded, would have to make a much more fundamental commitment to the CVT and South Vietnam. This would require a permanent AFL–CIO liaison in South Vietnam and the funding for CVT projects.<sup>99</sup>

The events of 1964 revealed both the potency and the continuing vulnerabilities of the CVT in South Vietnam. On the eve of American intervention, as Baldanzi’s report indicated, the CVT remained at the mercy of its government and the general tumults of life in the war-torn country. The South Vietnamese labor organization desperately needed the help of the AFL–CIO and the American government. Ties to the Americans were, in fact, the CVT’s only leverage against an oppressive state—its lifeline. Yet a

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<sup>94</sup>Dept. of Labor Memorandum on the Buu arrest, 1964, Box 734, Lovestone Papers, Hoover.

<sup>95</sup>Rusk to Saigon Embassy, Oct. 13, 1964, Box 1340, General Records of the Department of State, Central Foreign Files, 1964–66, Labor and Manpower, NA; “Statement by George Meany, President of the AFL–CIO on Vietnam,” Oct. 13, 1964, 31/3, International Affairs Department, Country Files, GMMA.

<sup>96</sup>Maxwell Taylor to Lovestone, Oct. 19, 1964, 31/3, International Affairs, Country Files, GMMA.

<sup>97</sup>*New York Times*, Oct. 23, 1964.

<sup>98</sup>Buu to George Meany, Oct. 26, 1964, 31/3, International Affairs Department, Country Files, GMMA; Meany to Buu, Oct. 28, 1964, Micro 81, Office of the President, GMMA. Meany responded with elation to Buu’s acquittal. He cabled Buu that the decision of the court “can be considered a triumph for justice in your country. While we do not view this verdict as the end of the problems you face we do feel that it should serve as an inspiration for greater efforts to build a strong, free trade union movement which will be the best guarantee to social and economic progress for the workers of Vietnam, as well as of eventual victory against the aggressive forces of international communism.”

<sup>99</sup>Baldanzi to Meany, Dec. 23, 1964, Box 514, Jay Lovestone Papers, Hoover.

closer working relationship with the Americans would leave it vulnerable to charges of being a pawn of foreign interests in a country obsessed with post-colonial concerns about dependence and independence.

Likewise, by the end of 1964, the AFL-CIO found itself in a similar paradox regarding Vietnam. Impressed by Buu and the CVT's potential as a rallying force against the Viet Cong and as a vehicle for domestic reform, the AFL-CIO hoped to establish a strong mentoring relationship with the emerging labor organization. Yet alone, the AFL-CIO lacked the resources for such an endeavor. Nor could the federation expect any aid from its international labor connections, which had proven either uninterested in or incapable of aiding the CVT. If there was to be any hope of furthering its agenda in South Vietnam, it required the AFL-CIO to expand its cooperative relationship with the U.S. government. Such were the circumscribed choices faced by both labor organizations.

As early as 1965 the tragic pattern had already been set: the survival of South Vietnamese labor required both labor movements to enter into uncomfortable partnerships—alliances with each other and with their respective governments that, while offering a necessary lifeline, also brought the fatal taint of dependence and subservience to these free labor movements. In time both the CVT and the AFL-CIO made the necessary accommodations. Even so the hour was already too late in Vietnam. Many opportunities already had come and gone, and meanwhile support for the Viet Cong had grown stronger.<sup>100</sup> With events rapidly unfolding, there could be little hope of reversing an irreparable course.

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<sup>100</sup>On the future relationship between the AFL-CIO and the CVT see Edmund Wehrle, "‘Reprehensible Repercussions’: The AFL-CIO, Free Trade Unionism, and the Vietnam War, 1947–1975" (unpublished PhD diss., Univ. of Maryland at College Park, 1998). With the American intervention in Vietnam, the AFL-CIO became a prime supporter of Johnson's policies and continued its active support of Buu and the CVT. In 1968, with generous funding from AID, the AFL-CIO established the Asian-American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI) to create a permanent presence in South Vietnam in order to aid the CVT. Yet both the AFL-CIO's support for the war and the creation of the AAFLI proved controversial. In particular, the AFL-CIO's close relationship with AID (which provided 90% of the AAFLI's budget) opened questions as to the autonomy of the labor organization. In 1969, Senator William Fulbright attacked AID sponsorship of the AFL-CIO's international labor institutions, demanding to know whether the funding "represented the price we paid for Mr. Meany's support in Vietnam." Following the fall of Saigon, the AFL-CIO helped sponsor the relocation of hundreds of members of the CVT, including Mr. Buu.