



## The Cold War Outbreak and the Trade Union Movement in the United States

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### ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes the policy of H. Truman in building the foreign policy foundations of the Cold War in 1945-1948, examines the stance of the United States trade union movement on this issue, explores the factors that influenced the attitude of trade unions of the United States (American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations) to the unleashing of the Cold War. It is argued that both trade union organizations were incorporated into the process of formulating and implementing foreign policy based on the principles affirmed by the country's ruling elite by 1949, which had a negative impact on the effectiveness of their activities.

## 1. Introduction

One of the central to the party-political struggle in the US after the Second World War was the question of unleashing the Cold War. The position of trade unions on this matter was of fundamental importance, as it was crucial for the effectiveness of the fight to defend and expand the liberal gains of the New Deal proclaimed by F. Roosevelt that were achieved in the 1930s. The success of trade unions in defending the interests of laborers in the post-war period was largely determined by the position of the American state, which took the path of the Cold War, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, launched a campaign of persecution of dissidents inside the country.

The study of the attitude of American trade unions towards the outbreak of the Cold War and its impact on the very nature of the labor movement in the United States is undoubtedly of high scientific relevance. On the one hand, the outbreak of the Cold War determined the course of global politics for the entire second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and on the other hand, had a strong influence on the main directions of the subsequent socio-economic and political struggle of the US trade unions for their interests.

In fact, the US transition to a Cold War policy radically changed the agenda of the US trade union movement, affecting the very nature of the struggle of labor organizations to achieve the goals pursued by employees.

Unless a close attention is given to the issues related to the specific aspects of how the foreign policy of trade unions was shaped after the end of the Second World War, it is impossible to make an objective and comprehensive assessment as to the effectiveness of their action in the political life of society and economic struggle, nor to identify the reasons behind the inability of US labor organizations to achieve their goals in later years.



## 2. Literature Review

It should be noted that the topic of the Cold War has been studied in sufficient detail. Both in Russia and abroad, an impressive body of research literature has been devoted to it. However, the topic of this paper, the Cold War Outbreak and the Trade Union Movement in the United States, has been weakly reflected in the Russian historical literature. Only a few works may be referenced where this topic was barely touched upon [1, 2, 3]. The book by G.D. Gevorgyan [1] gives a general assessment of the stance taken by the American trade unions on foreign policy issues after the end of the Second World War, but the author mostly focuses on the problem of attitude of labor organizations to the issues of Soviet-American cooperation in the 1970s. G.E. Minasyan [2] mainly reflects on the events related to the stance of trade unions on the issue of communism and creation of the third party in the United States. B.Ya. Mikhailov [3] explores only certain aspects of how the US foreign policy was developed. However, in some instances his assessments are given schematically and do not fit into the historical context.

In American historiography, issues related to the attitude of trade unions to unleashing the Cold War have been dealt with by such scholars as L. Lenberg [4], D. Oshinsky [5], S. Rosswurm [6], R. Cherny [7]. However, these authors only superficially touch upon specific aspects of how the stance of the organized labor movement of the United States evolved on the issue of the onset of the Cold War, and their works lack an in-depth analysis of this topic. An important contribution to the study of this problem was made by a British historian, A. Carew [8], but he focused on the study of events related to the attitude of trade unions to the already established institutions of the Cold War.

## 3. Research Methodological Framework

The materials used for this research were the American print media, including trade union publications, published speeches and addresses of President H. Truman, documents from the George Meany Memorial Archives presently kept at the University of Maryland Library (USA).

The guiding in this research was the principle of historicism. The comparative-historical and descriptive methods were applied to address the tasks set by the authors. The research purpose was to analyze the policy of H. Truman in building the foreign policy foundations of the Cold War in 1945-1948, examine and evaluate the stance of the US trade union movement in relation to the unleashing of the Cold War. The purpose determined the following research tasks: to analyze the ideological origins of the US trade union movement in its approach to the initiation of the Cold War; to identify the reasons that influenced the incorporation of trade unions into an anti-communist anti-Soviet camp; to consider the evolution of the stance of labor organizations on this matter; and to assess the impact of the Cold War outbreak on the efficiency of labor organizations in the United States.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. *The Origins of the Cold War*

Soon after the end of the Second World War, the US government set about developing a new approach to the role of the United States in the post-war system of international relations, taking a course to establish the global hegemony of America. The idea of the United States responsibility for the fate of Western civilization and the proclamation of the "American Century" after the war became more and more persistent in the speeches of governmental officials. The country leaders made attempts to shape the post-war world centered around the United States [9, p. 435].



The aspiration of the H. Truman's administration to assert the inseparable hegemony of the USA in the system of post-war international relations inevitably led to aggravation of relations, and then to direct confrontation with the Soviet Union. Already at the beginning of 1946, according to A. Harriman, President Truman came to the conclusion that further cooperation with the USSR was impossible [10, p. 118]. At the end of 1945 - beginning of 1946, supporters of the "hard-line" approach to the USSR achieved a substantial change of the moods in Washington in their favor. And already in early 1946, the Soviet-American relations, which became the linchpin of the post-war system of international relations, marked a turn from cooperation to the Cold War.

One of the first bricks in the foundation of the murky Cold War building was the Truman Doctrine of 12 March 1947, according to which the United States arbitrarily appropriated the "right" to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries.

The makers of US foreign policy managed to give a "liberal-humanitarian coloring" to their expansionist intentions, which was most pronounced in the initiative for economic aid to the Western Europe countries, known as the Marshall Plan. On June 5, 1947, in his speech at the Harvard University graduation ceremony, General Marshall, US Secretary of State, outlined the general ideas of the European Recovery Program.

One of the primary goals of the Marshall Plan was to upset the growing influence of the communists in European countries amid economic difficulties. The main mission for the US at that time was to preserve and strengthen private ownership in Europe. The New York Times warned that the US renunciation of its commitment to maintain these relations in Europe would be tantamount to the collapse of capitalism (25, 1947, 3 March). It was by realizing its responsibility for the fate of capitalism in the world in general, and in Europe in particular, that the US approved a plan to help Western Europe countries to rebuild their economies, while maintaining a pre-war socio-political structure, and firmly rooting the US presence. Russian historians A.S. Manykin and V.O. Pechatnov note: "It was not about a military threat from the Soviet Union, which, as was well known in Washington, was not going to attack Western Europe and, according to the American intelligence, was still unable to wage a new major war for another 10-15 years" [11, p. 316]. From the point of view of the American researcher T. Paterson, "the leading premise that Russia had intentions to conquer Western Europe never had sufficient grounds and is increasingly questioned by scientists" [12, p. 171].

At the same time, as noted by a number of reputable American historians, the post-war economic expansion of the US, which constituent part was the Marshall Plan, was conditioned, among other things, by "vital interests and needs of the American economy" [9, p. 171]. Supporters of the Marshall Plan were interested in fundamental reshaping of the international economy to allow the United States to reap the full benefit from its enormous economic power [13, p. 10]. "The question is not whether capitalism will survive, but whether it will survive in a form that best serves the business interests of the United States" [13, p. 10], as A. Carew underlines.

However, the pro-Soviet sentiments cultivated during the war to support the great coalition prevented the government from pursuing a tougher foreign policy. Anti-Soviet foreign policy demanded a more favourable psychological balance of public opinion. In order to justify its departure from political cooperation with the USSR, on the one hand, and to ensure a solid home front in the Cold War by securing massive support for the hegemonic US foreign policy, on the other hand, the Truman administration switched to inflating anti-Soviet and, consequently, anti-communist sentiments within the country. The anti-Soviet hysteria, centered on the myth of a "threat" to America from the USSR, was rolled out very quickly and effectively. Proponents of the idea to unleash the Cold War began intense



media campaign to create an enemy image of the USSR. The widely used cliches were about a need to fight back the "Soviet expansion", about "the Kremlin's desire for world domination" and the need to stand against this, about counteracting the "Soviet threat", about the distinctive "expansionist" nature of the Soviet state.

In addition, in 1946 the incitement of anti-communist hysteria inside the country began. The main target of fierce attacks was the Communist Party and the USA citizens and organizations sympathetic to its ideals and principles. Anti-communist propaganda unfolded on the pages of the largest and most popular print media. The American average man was intimidated by the "red ghost", the threat of communist conspiracy, and deliberately exaggerated powers and capabilities of the Communist Party. In 1947-1948, communism became a prism through which every social issue was refracted.

The Washington correspondent of Nation magazine reported that at the end of August 1948, the most important news in the US were the "exposés" of "spies", "spies hunting", "testimony of former communists", becoming a permanent background of the news scene, regardless of their actual importance [14, p. 279].

The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which accused people who could not have been found guilty in court of any violation of the law on espionage, intensified its activities. HUAC called on Congress to pass legislation establishing "more stringent control over subversive agents" in the United States. In late 1946, HUAC Chairman, J. Thomas stated that "our task is to completely eradicate communism in the next two years" [15].

As a result, the political atmosphere in the country changed lightning fast. The entire spectrum of US political life has shifted to the right. Anticommunist hysteria swept the country [16, p. 537].

In this distressing atmosphere of fear, tension, anti-Soviet and anti-communist hysteria, American trade unions had to defend the interests of laborers, united in two major centers: the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

#### *4.2. AFL attitude towards unleashing the Cold War*

AFL position on the outbreak of the Cold War was largely determined by the dominance of strong anticommunist sentiments in its leadership. Unlike the CIO, AFL always kept the door tightly closed for communists and all radical elements. The Communists managed to gain some influence in only a few local AFL unions, including the so-called "Hollywood unions". The American Federation of Labor also was seen as an anti-communist organization by the public. Long before the sensational allegations were made against J. McCarthy, AFL warned US citizens of the danger of communists infiltrating the government. The question of "subversive" elements infiltrating the State Department was raised already at the AFL Congress in the autumn of 1946, it was stated that the Communist Party members, while working in the State Department, stole secret government papers and sent copies thereof to Moscow [5, p. 111].

The anti-communist rhetoric of the Federation's leaders never left the pages of the trade union print media in 1946-1948, and AFL president, W. Green, and his treasurer secretary, G. Meany, have established themselves as ardent anticommunists and anti-Soviet propagandists [17, 18].

Such a tough anti-communist position of the AFL leaders dictated the traditional negative attitude of this organization towards the Soviet Union. For a long time AFL maintained a tandem with those politicians who opposed USSR recognition by the United States.

Almost immediately after the end of the Second World War, the American Federation of Labor began to openly



criticize both domestic and foreign policy of the USSR. The AFL leaders saw no "hope" for coexistence between the United States and the Soviet Union, accusing the latter of "aggressive", "expansionist foreign policy" [19].

Already in October 1945, at the AFL Executive Committee Meeting, AFL announced its support for the firm position taken by the United States government against the "attempts" of Soviet Russia to establish its "dominance" in post-war Europe and Asia [20]. AFL literally called on the US government to move to a "firm policy" towards the USSR [20].

In his Labor Day speech in September 1946, W. Green demanded that the government take "severe measures" to curb the threat from Soviet Russia to the world peace [21].

AFL enthusiastically supported both the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan as a means of combating the "red threat" [22, 23, 24].

#### 4.3. *The CIO and the Cold War outbreak*

In the CIO, the attitude towards a shift in the US policy from cooperation with the USSR to the Cold War was not as unequivocal as in the AFL. This was primarily due to the fact that the positions of the so-called left-wing trade unions were strong in the CIO, i.e. trade unions, either run by communists or organizations where the influence of communists was quite strong. In 1945, such trade unions included 20% to 30% of all CIO members [4, p. 149].

The communists were successful organizers. In the 1930s, they played an important role in the establishment of many CIO trade unions, including those of electricians, car makers, steelworkers, packers, etc. As the American researcher S. Rosswurm points out, the Communists created "excellent trade unions, as in the first place they were good "trade unionists" [6, p. 11].

Along with the trade unions, where left-wing positions were strong, the CIO included trade unions that were dominated by anti-communist sentiments, such as the largest textile and steelworkers unions.

Of course, such a situation could not but cause some inconsistency, ambiguity and uncertainty in the CIO position on the matter of unleashing the Cold War and the launch by the government of the communists persecution campaign within the country.

Naturally, after the end of the war, the CIO remained committed to the same line of cooperation among the Big Three countries in the new conditions of the global reshaping.

However, as the US government's policy towards the USSR became "tougher", the official position of the CIO on this issue was gradually shifting to the right, which ultimately led to an inevitable split within industrial unions.

While a certain balance between the left wing and the much larger and more influential right wing was still maintained within CIO in the autumn of 1946 [25, 26], the situation began to change drastically in 1947. This was related, on the one hand, to the toughening of anti-Soviet rhetoric and the serious hostile steps taken by the Truman administration against the USSR, and, on the other hand, to the split in the US liberal movement on the issue of the the Cold War outbreak and, as a consequence, on the issue of communism within the country.

The outbreak of the Cold War literally had a heavy blow for the liberal movement, causing its split. The process of liberal polarization became apparent as early as late 1946 and early 1947, when two organizations uniting liberals entered the political arena: the Progressive Citizens of America (PCA) and Americans for Democratic Action (ADA). The split within the Democrats became a fact: two liberal groups now competed for Roosevelt's legacy. Both organizations stood firmly on the same grounds of supporting the values of the New Deal and the need to continue its

pursuance, but had principal differences on the issues of Cold War and communism. PCA acted as an organization loyal to the Communists and supporting the need for constructive cooperation with the USSR, while criticizing the course of the Truman administration to tighten its policy towards the Soviet Union; whereas the ADA founders harshly criticized "communist totalitarianism" already in January 1947 [27, 28], and were guided by anticommunist ideas.

As a result, the CIO was kind of bouncing between the two rival organizations. It faced the danger of being drawn into the "political civil war" between the two liberal groups, which had been gaining momentum since 1947. This posed a real threat of disintegration and fragmentation of this trade union association, which forced the CIO leader, F. Murray, to take vigorous action to maintain the unity within the CIO. To that effect, at the CIO Executive Committee Meeting in March 1947, he suggested to revise the CIO attitude towards these organizations: the ADA and the PCA. P. Murray insisted on a resolution with recommendations to the CIO members to cease any and all cooperation with both the ADA and the PCA. He believed that trade union leaders should withdraw from both organizations and get effectively "distanced" from them [29, pp. 328-330].

The situation has been aggravated by the promulgation of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. Naturally, the right-wing trade union leaders welcomed those and the communists in the CIO condemned those [30].

A split in CIO on the foreign policy issues was inevitable.

An important step in changing the position of the organization led by Murray was the 9<sup>th</sup> CIO Congress, convened in Boston in October 1947. P. Murray told the Congress delegates that he personally "supports the idea of Marshall" [31]. As a result, at the 9<sup>th</sup> CIO Congress an unofficial support was given to the Marshall Plan, and the fragile artificial unity of the CIO immediately began to fall apart. On December 6, 1947, P. Murray made a statement at the radio station "Voice of America" about the support by American trade unions of the Marshall Plan, calling it a "humanitarian" act of assistance to the European neighbors [32]. And in November 1947, the CIO called on lawmakers to support the Marshall Plan [33].

The final shift to the right of both P. Murray and the CIO as a whole was influenced by the decision taken by the PCA in December 1947 to get transformed into a party and to nominate G. Wallace as its presidential candidate in the 1948 elections.

In the wake of these events, on January 8, 1948, P. Murray telegraphed all branches and trade unions of the CIO to refrain from public support of "any party or any candidate" until the issue was resolved at the Executive Committee meeting [34, pp. 13-14]. On January 22, 1948, P. Murray introduced a resolution on the issue of the third party to the members of the Executive Committee for review. This document stressed that it was "politically unwise" to bring a new party to the political scene in 1948, as support for the third party would weaken the possibility to get a progressive Congress elected [34, p. 24]. The resolution expressed unconditional support for the Marshall Plan [34, p. 24].

After a heated debate, the resolution was approved by 33 votes in favour with 11 votes against and 2 abstentions. Understandably, it was opposed by the leaders of the left-wing trade unions, who fundamentally disagreed with the Marshall Plan and intended to take an active part in the election campaign on the side of G. Wallace. The approval of this document formalized the final departure of P. Murray and the CIO as a whole from the position of neutrality on the issues of the Cold War and meant the trade unions chaining to the anti-Soviet, anti-communist policy of H. Truman.



## 5. Conclusion

The American Federation of Labor initially fully and unconditionally supported the US policy of toughening the line in relation to the USSR, on the one hand, and of fight against dissidents within the country, on the other hand. In contrast, the Congress of Industrial Organizations had not taken an unequivocal and clear position on the issue of the Cold War until the beginning of 1948. However, its escalation eventually involved the CIO in the process of formulating and implementing the foreign policy based on the principles affirmed by the country's ruling elite. H. Truman used all the influence he had on the leaders of trade unions in order to achieve their unconditional approval of the foreign policy of his administration.

On the one hand, the transformation of trade unions into an important component of an anti-communist consensus distracted them from their struggle for the real goals of the labor movement, drastically narrowing the ability of trade unions to advocate for the continuation and expansion of the New Deal reforms in a dedicated, comprehensive and effective manner. In addition, the sweeping anti-communist hysteria allowed the government to evade resolving real social and economic issues of concern to laborers. On the other hand, the US authorities skillfully used the international environment to combat the trade union movement within the country. The Cold War was a tool for suppressing the most radical elements that were seeking a more fair reformation of the country's economic system.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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