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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5x99r3jx>

ISBN

978-1-138-10699-4

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Publication Date

2018

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Who Challenges the Power Elite? Labor factions in 20th Century America

Daniel Schneider and Judith Stepan-Norris

G. William Domhoff's contributions to power structure research have evolved over time and increasingly provide a compelling perspective on corporate dominance, political outcomes, and social inequality. A major component of his understanding of ruling class influence over political outcomes is the idea that class factions matter. Northern business interests have historically conflicted with those of Southern planters and with local growth coalitions. Understanding the waxing and waning of their coalitions and rivalries is crucial in explaining major political outcomes.

The ruling class's legitimacy and its command of economic resources is not automatic; they must be established and re-established. The labor movement has been its biggest and most continuous challenger. The U.S. labor movement for much of its history has, like the ruling class, been divided into factions. These factions also matter. Not only do they matter to the workers they represent, but their relative strength impacts capitalist factions' decisions, strategies and ability to accomplish their agendas. Labor and capital necessarily challenge each other, but neither is monolithic. Hence their struggles are factional. Both labor and capital tend to divide between more moderate and radical factions (as a result of material

and ideological differences); interclass conflict is subsumed by the interplay of these factions. The prominence of one labor or capital faction may reflect or be the results of intra-class conflicts and struggles as well as outcomes of conflict with factions across the class divide. For instance, moderate labor factions have at various historical moments leveraged the success of radical factions to win concessions from ruling class factions. We turn to the labor struggles of the 20th Century United States, to demonstrate the intricacies and importance of factional divisions in labor and the ruling class and their effects on strategies, tactics and outcomes.

Domhoff's Model

One of the most important insights in *Who Rules America?* is that while political power in the United States is concentrated in the ranks of the economic elite, the latter is not monolithic. Indeed, the history of US politics is not only (or perhaps not mainly) a history of class conflict, but also a history of intra-class conflict. This insight is represented in his discussion of conflicts between moderate and ultra-conservative wings of the policy-planning network and in ongoing discussions of the shifting coalitions and factional interests represented in the Democratic and Republican Parties.

Both Democratic and Republican parties and politicians are significantly financed by the power elite and, importantly, produce and support policies which reflect this reality. Yet the interests of various sectors of capital are diverse. These diverse interests coalesced into two rival factions in 20th Century US politics – “the spending coalition” housed in the Democratic Party and representing agri-business in the South and Southwest and urban real estate and development interests (local growth) across the country; and the “conservative coalition” based on the shared interests of Northern and Southern employers and housed primarily (and entirely by 1990) in the Republican Party. Legislative competition between these coalitions focused primarily on conflict on spending and taxation.

In Domhoff’s view, the liberal-labor coalition, though sometimes aligned with the spending coalition, presents the most significant counterweight to the pro-capital policies of both corporate coalitions. The liberal-labor coalition consists of “union leaders, locally based environmental organizations, most minority-group communities, liberal churches and liberal university communities” (Domhoff 2006; xiv) and is represented in the liberal (and marginal) wing of the Democratic Party. We are focused here on how labor’s factions (both ideological and sectoral) interacted with capital’s factions and the state to impact economic and political outcomes.

Early Labor History – The AFL and its Radical Rivals

The American Federation of Labor (AFL) emerged in 1886 as the Knights' of Labor (KoL) rapidly declined in the wake of failure and violence associated with the railroad and general strikes of 1886. Though the early years of the AFL included major defeats in manufacturing, it made significant headway in other less centralized industries in which worker replacement costs¹ were higher (Kimeldorf 2013). Following years of violence and moderate success, the AFL received a brief reprieve as corporations rose in power and a moderate corporate faction emerged in the aftermath of the Panic of 1893 and ensuing depression (Roy 1997). The AFL grew to over 500,000 by 1900 (Wolman 1924). Though the AFL was the only major national union organization in 1900, over the next 30 years several competitors arose, most notably the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL), and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Though all had the goal of organizing industrial workers, they had distinct organizational structures, ideologies, and strategies.

The AFL, in many ways, was a significantly more conservative organization than the union organizations that preceded it and that it preceded. Its conservatism was rooted in its selective membership and had significant impacts on its strategies

¹ The costs of replacing a worker. As Kimeldorf (2013) explains the more training needed, the more geographically isolated, and the more time sensitive the work, the more cost is associated with replacing the worker and therefore the more organizing leverage they have.

and interaction with capital. The AFL's unions, unlike the KoL before it or the CIO and others that came after, organized predominantly skilled workers by craft occupations. Though long dogged by its seemingly class conscious 1901 constitution which described the "struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed of all countries, a struggle between the capitalist and the laborer," the AFL was more accurately described by its philosophy of "pure and simple unionism." For the most part, it fought for better wages, better working conditions, and fewer hours and did not adopt a coherent class-based strategy.

As such, it avoided political movements, and many of its member unions limited or prohibited Marxists', communists', and anarchists' membership. In reaction to management tactics to replace striking workers with cheaper immigrant labor, the AFL also adopted a strong nativist streak (Mink 1986). Still its tactics (coordinated, targeted strikes and boycotts) and demands against employers were confrontational. However, the rise of industrial corporations at the end of the 19th Century (a response to the Sherman Antitrust Act, the depression, and pressures from striking workers) had convinced many within the AFL that work stoppages and boycotts were inadequate in the face of these new corporate powers (Brody 1980).

In response, they began bargaining with burgeoning employer associations like the National Civic Federation (NCF). These new corporate moderates were willing to bargain (to a point) with the narrowly defined skilled craftspeople represented by AFL unions to stabilize competitive industries (while also continuing to deskill labor whenever possible) (Swenson 2002; Domhoff 2013 online). The NCF represented a moderate corporate faction that accepted the conservative unionism of the AFL (AFL President Samuel Gompers was the first vice president of the NCF) as a means of rationalizing the emergent corporate order and preventing the expansion of socialist organizing (Griffin, Wallace and Rubin 1986). Between 1900 and 1905 the AFL almost tripled its membership (a gain of approximately a million members) (Galenson and Smith 1978). Accommodation by capital (in the form of bargaining) represents a capitulation to the real power of AFL unions. What was the source of AFL union power?

The craft unions derived their primary power from monopolies of knowledge (Montgomery 1979). Through union apprenticeship programs, union workers developed and maintained crucial production knowledge outside employer purviews. Apprenticeship programs also vetted potential new members and fostered their loyalty to the union and solidarity with other union members. Highly developed apprenticeship programs then made it very difficult to replace unionized

craft workers and made strikes especially effective (providing an incentive for employers to avoid and settle them when possible).

The International Typographical Union (ITU) provides an informative example of this dynamic.² With its origins in 19th Century printing guilds, the ITU maintained three to six-year apprenticeship for printers. The apprenticeship weeded out the disloyal, socialized new printers into the fraternity, and kept knowledge of a complex production process in union hands (King 1897). So, if a newspaper for example needed a typesetter, it had little choice but to hire a union worker. Even when the linotype machine was introduced in 1882, skills necessary to work the machine were maintained within the union. By the 1890s, in some cities, unionized journeymen had almost complete monopoly on printing with over 90% unionization (Zerker 1982). Newspapers and publishers had no choice but to draw from a unionized labor pool.

One testament to the ITU's strength was the willingness of employers to engage in bargaining at all. As the president of the Printing Pressmen's union, a subordinate of ITU, reported at the 1899 ITU conference: "Formerly, employer and employe [sic] got together with a club; now they meet in a friendly and

² The ITU is an important example of AFL craft strategy, but also differs from other AFL unions in several significant ways. More political than most other craft unions, ITU leadership embraced liberal/left causes, like suffrage, public welfare provision, civil rights (though the union, through its apprenticeship program excluded Black workers and initially women as well). Later they would leave the AFL for the CIO.

businesslike way” (Tracy 1913; pg. 565). Perhaps the most powerful demonstration of its strength was the massive 1906 national strike for the 8-hour working day, with two years of preparation and over four million dollars the ITU resisted court injunctions, replacement by country printers and European immigrants to establish a national eight-hour day for ITU printers (Tracy 1913). Though many AFL unions would see their progress halted or reversed in the coming decades, the Typographers and Printers held strong. Other notable exceptions included: mining (United Mine Workers (UMW)), steam railroad unions (railroad brotherhoods, locomotive engineers, locomotive firemen, railroad conductors and trainmen) transportation and building trades (United Carpenters and Brotherhood of Electrical Workers)), (Wolman 1924) craft unions that mainly confronted non-manufacturing capital and local growth coalitions.

As AFL unions made progress in the early 1900s several major employers, such as U.S. Steel, began to reject interference in the “management of business” by breaking agreements and crushing strikes with force. Others were quick to follow. By 1903 the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) adopted a vehement anti-union stance, the open shop movement (later The American Plan), and quickly became the largest and most outspoken opponent of unionism in the United States (a position it maintained through most of the century) (Wakstein 1969; Workman

1998). At the same time, the use of scientific management (“Taylorism”), introduction of machinery, and the deskilling of labor intensified. If the AFL’s craft unions had their strength in a monopoly of knowledge, the goal of Taylorism was to break (and invert) this monopoly by analyzing the work process and breaking it down into discrete parts that require less skill (Montgomery 1979). A 1916 editorial of *The International Molders’ Journal* (the Molders’ Union journal) expressed the threat to craft workers:

The one great asset of the wage-worker has been his craftsmanship. ... [T]he greatest blow that could be delivered against unionism and the organized workers would be the separation of craft knowledge from craft skill. ... Any craft would be thrown open to the competition of an almost unlimited labor supply; the craftsmen in it would be practically at the mercy of the employer. (Frey 1916; pg. 365).

Going on the offensive, employers pushed for open-shops, deskilled labor, and made efficient use of court injunctions, effectively slowing the AFL’s growth until WWI.

When the IWW and the TUUL emerged in the first quarter of the 20th century (1905 and 1920³ respectively) they represented serious alternatives to the AFL model. Both organizations were explicitly political, radical and organized along industrial lines. The IWW was founded by radical socialists, anarchists and

³ Formed originally as the Trade Union Educational League in 1920 to organize radicals within existing unions, the organization reformed as an independent federation, the TUUL, in 1929.

Marxist trade unionists in direct, intentional opposition to the AFL. Like the KoL before it, the IWW organized workers regardless of craft or trade, maintained a decentralized organization and envisioned the general strike as labor's most powerful tool. Not only did it focus on industrial unionism and militant direct action, but on inclusiveness, as it welcomed women, immigrants, African Americans, Jews, Latinos, and Asian Americans into its ranks. The organizing goals of the IWW went beyond the AFL's "pure and simple" unionism as well, fighting for shop floor control and eschewing collective bargaining (Brissenden 1920). Though the IWW had some significant victories, and organized a peak of 100,000 members its position against signing collective bargaining contracts made it difficult to retain gains. Combined with intense state repression including subterfuge, mass arrest, violent confrontation, murder, and execution, especially during WWI, and an internal schism the IWW as an important labor organization was not long for this world. By 1930 the IWW counted only around 10,000 members nationwide (Siitonen 2005).

World War I represents an important moment in the factional success of union organizing. Again, changing needs of capital allowed for limited incorporation of the moderate-conservative AFL coupled with extreme repression of radical-left unionists. Increased production needs, loss of immigrant labor, and

an expansion of federal economic involvement created an opportunity for strike leverage of which many AFL unions took advantage (Dubofsky and Dulles 2010). The war need made the AFL a necessary partner in production. Responding to labor unrest at the outset of the war, Wilson created the National War Labor Board (NWLB), charged with mediating labor disputes and smoothing corporate/labor relations. The board consisted of 10 members: 5 picked by the AFL and 5 by the National Industrial Conference Board (NCIB), a moderate corporate association⁴. Bolstered by wartime production and the NWLB, the AFL grew from around 2 million to over 3.5 million between 1916 and 1919. At the same time, radical and socialist unionists (particularly from the IWW), under charges of espionage and sedition, were being jailed by the hundreds or thousands in at least one case (Dubofsky 1994; Shor 1996).

However, the success of the AFL was fleeting. In 1919, following the War, 1 in 5 workers struck as post-war employers refused to recognize or bargain with unions. This unrest is perhaps most spectacularly illustrated in the 1919 Seattle general strike in which 65,000 workers virtually shut down the city for five days. Labor unrest was then, with the help of NAM and its media allies, presented as

⁴ Formed in 1916, the NCIB was founded by industrialists (including executives at GE and AT&T) who previously supported the open-shop movement, but responding to labor unrest in the wake of the Ludlow Massacre decided to go a different way. Though not friendly to unions per se, it recognized that unions were a permanent fixture of American life.

evidence of a socialist revolution, hence the post-war Red Scare was turned against unions (Piott 2011). Employers branded unionists as Bolsheviks, attacked picketers, disrupted union meetings and made extensive use of Black strike breakers. The Palmer Raids continued war-time repression of leftists and radicals, deporting hundreds and arresting thousands of unionists. Though President Wilson publicly advocated for good faith bargaining and the recognition of unions, the war was over. And in the case of the high profile 1919 steel strike the justice department and national guard intervened on behalf of employers to break the crucial 1919 steel strike, signaling an end to war-time federal labor support (Brecher 1999; Dubofsky 1994). The 1920's would not be characterized by repression of the left labor factions and compromise with moderate labor, as had been the case during the war. Rather, this period would see repression of the radical left in combination with a mass offensive against labor of all stripes.

Not initially a rival to the AFL, the TUEL was formed in 1920 in the midst of extreme labor and left repression, by a small group of socialists, communists and former Wobblies. Its goal was radicalizing existing union locals and replacing their leadership through "boring from within." Beginning in 1922 TUEL was subsidized by the Communist Party of America (US affiliate of the Communist International) and could intensify its efforts. As boring from within proved

ineffective, leaders expelled from the AFL formed a rival federation, TUUL in 1929. Like the IWW, TUUL organized mainly unskilled workers across industries (its biggest success was in light manufacturing), across race and gender lines (particularly focused on organizing African-Americans), incorporated radical union democracy, and advocated class struggle through prolific use of strikes and direct action (Johanningsmeier 2001). Before dissolving in 1935⁵, even with a peak membership of 74,000, TUUL presented a radical challenge which capital found to be much less desirable than bargaining with the simple unionism of the AFL (Weir 2013). Though neither the IWW or TUUL ever gained membership approaching the scope of the AFL, they laid significant groundwork for the emergence and success of the CIO.

Over the next 12 years the NAM, in cooperation with Republican administrations and the NCF, instituted “the American Plan” to replace closed and union shops with open shops and successfully roll back most of the AFL’s organizing gains. The American Plan was a sophisticated strategy that consisted of several tactics: 1) reduce class solidarity through pitting native and immigrant workers against each other, rapidly expanding mechanization, and utilizing paternalist company unions or welfare capitalism, 2) weaken the organizational

⁵ The Communist International had adopted the Popular Front strategy and therefore abandoned dual-unionism in favor of organizing within other unions.

capacity of workers with espionage, bribery, political lobbying and the creation of alternatives to craft apprenticeships, 3) decrease the efficacy of strikes and collective action by providing strike-breakers and monetary support to employers, and use police, militias and “private agents” to repress, suppress and break strikes, and 4) manipulate the political system to legally constrain unions, in particular radicals (Griffin, Wallace and Rubin 1986; Wakstein 1969; Davis 1975). As a result, union density in the US dropped from 18.4 to 12.3 between 1920 and 1930 (Galenson and Smith 1978).

Labor’s Ascendancy – CIO, AFL and the State

Amid the Great Depression’s devastation, labor and unemployed insurgency spurred a legislative response: FDR’s New Deal and its’ strong labor provisions, which in turn, played an important role in the coming labor insurgence. First, the symbolic power of the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) particularly section 7(a)⁶ granting unions the right to bargain on behalf of workers “free from interference,” and most importantly the passage in 1935 of the National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act) which extended the rights granted in the NIRA and added enforcement through the creation of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) were transformational for labor. To be clear, as much as the NIRA and

⁶ Ruled unconstitutional in 1935.

NLRA were a victory for labor (one that required maintained vigilance), they were also in line with efforts of moderate corporate elites over the previous decade to “rationalize” labor relations and end disruptions to production. Our understanding closely resembles the one presented by Goldstein (1989; pg 1269), that New Deal legislation was the:

result of interaction between labor movement growth and activity, the increasing strength and influence of radical organizations, particularly the Communist party, liberal reformers with both immediate and historical corporate ties, and government officials (or state managers) with primary concern for preserving social stability and assuring the continued electoral success of the Roosevelt-led Democratic party.

Empowered by the legislation, growing dissent, new successes and the war-time boom, the ensuing decades would prove an unprecedented period of union innovation and growth.

In the weeks following the passage of the NLRA, both capital and labor responded. The corporate community, having been dealt a major blow by the legislation, launched a multi-faceted attack against unionization, including restructuring “employee representation plans” and company unions to maintain their legality, challenging the constitutionality of the bill, obtaining injunctions to block the enforcement powers of the NLRB and finally, preparing for significant suppression of labor organizing and action (Lichtenstein 2002; Domhoff 2013

Online).⁷ Workers responded with action. Work stoppages increased significantly in 1936, including some of the first sit-down strikes in the automotive and rubber industries (Lichtenstein 2002). Despite early success, AFL leadership did not immediately attempt to capitalize on the legislation or new labor militancy. AFL reluctance hastened an internal debate rooting back to the mostly failed strike wave of 1933-34. At the forefront of this debate were John L. Lewis of the UMW and Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, who both argued forcefully for the industrial organization of workers irrespective of skill or tradition. Following the now infamous “small potatoes” argument in which Lewis punched an AFL opponent to his industrial appeal, Lewis, Hillman and others formed the Committee for Industrial Organization (still under the auspices of the AFL) in the Fall of 1935. From its inception, the CIO enunciated broad ambitions to organize the mass of industrialized workers on a class basis. John L. Lewis, no radical himself,⁸ recognized that the AFL had far too few experienced organizers and appealed to and later hired Communists, socialists and former Wobblies to assist in the new organizing efforts.

⁷ Revealed during 1937 Senate Hearings, corporations were preparing for confrontations with workers, by stockpiling weapons, organizing anti-union thugs, and hiring spies to infiltrate labor.

⁸ Lichtenstein (2002; pg. 44) notes he “had a well-deserved reputation as an autocrat who voted Republican in most elections.”

The CIO was officially ousted from the AFL in 1937 under charges of “fomenting insurrection” and dual-unionism and reconstituted itself as the Congress of Industrial Organizations. It differed from the AFL on many critical dimensions. The AFL focused its organizing on strictly delineated, skilled crafts while the CIO organized by industry. The federations represented different, but overlapping, factions of the working class. Their difference in organizing orientation had long lasting impacts on their ideologies, tactics and strategies. The CIO moved beyond simple unionism and incubated class consciousness, including (with restrictions and reservations) radicals, communists, and socialists rather than ousting them. Communists in CIO unions, who competed with more centrist-unionists, went on to play an integral role in the success of the CIO – by broadening issues subject to negotiation and incubating rank-and-file democracy, communist-led and democratic CIO unions created a potent class-based solidarity and unique political culture that proved extraordinarily successful in labor struggles (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003). In addition to its ideological diversity the CIO was more inclusive; it organized across race and gender divisions, undermining employers’ divide and conquer tactic. Tactically, the CIO embraced and made extensive use of the highly effective sit-down strike and solidarity actions. Though the AFL had offered tacit support for the tactic when it had

worked for the rubber workers in 1936, when it became associated with industrial unionism (in violation of AFL jurisdictions) AFL President William Green condemned sit-down strikes as illegal, unpopular and bound to lead to further repression (Pope 2006). Still some AFL locals engaged in the tactic. Lastly, the CIO engaged in electoral politics in a way that the AFL had never done. Bitter rivals until their eventual merger in 1955, both federations experienced unparalleled growth and success (and period setbacks) over the course of their rivalry.

The 1936-1937 UAW-CIO fight with General Motors provides a spectacular and emblematic example of who, how and for what the CIO fought. At the time, GM was the largest, most profitable corporation in America. Across the country in over 100 production and assembly plants GM employed more than 250,000 people (Fine 1969). In the mid-1930s, GM was the second biggest contributor to NAM and as a flagship member, the like many of their industrial counterparts carried out NAM's anti-union strategy to a T: incorporating paternalism, repression, strikebreaking and state-support (Fine 1969). Work at GM was often seasonal (long, hard work in the Winter and Spring followed by long periods of unemployment) and subject to "speed-up" and idiosyncratic supervision. The shop floor in GM plants could be fairly characterized as mini-dictatorships – "[f]oremen

and other managers had the unfettered right to discipline, fire, lay off and rehire at their own discretion” (Lichtenstein 2002; pg 49). Thus, CIO unionists fought not only for standard of living issues (wages, hours, benefits), but job security and shop floor control. In 1936 and 37, UAW unionists struck against GM, in GM and its subsidiary plants across the country. The center of the action was Flint, Michigan where GM employed more than 45,000 workers.

In the past, industrial strikes and picketing were often broken by police and hired thugs who allowed worker replacement with scabs. This time workers sat down at their work stations. Replacement, therefore, required a confrontation between every replacement worker and striking worker. Whereas replacement workers are normally willing to risk conflict at picket lines (with help from company guards) they are usually not willing to forcibly remove a striking worker from their work-station. Though used previously, the UAW pursued the sit-down on a scale not seen before, shutting down multiple plants for six weeks (combining the powerful strategies of sit-down strikes and solidarity strikes). The strikers occupied the factories, halting production entirely,⁹ and shielding themselves from confrontation with police and strikebreakers. Inside the factory, sit-down strikers formed strong bonds and developed critical solidarity. The workforce at GM was

⁹ GM’s production shrunk from 50,000 vehicles in December 1936 to 125 in February 1937 (Newsinger 2010).

segregated and only one African American participated in the sit down, but hundreds of Black workers (many Communists) joined picket lines to support the occupiers. The Women's Emergency Brigade, comprised of female workers as well as the wives and family members of male strikers, also provided critical support. Additionally, the electoral activity of the CIO paid off as Democrats, FDR, and Michigan Governor Murphy, withheld federal and state troops from breaking the strike.¹⁰

In February 1937, GM and the UAW reached an agreement that made the UAW-CIO the sole bargaining voice for GM employees. The contract was short, only four pages and covered just six months, but it opened the door to future negotiations and represented a huge symbolic victory. Although most Americans supported unions at the time (72% "approved" of unions" (Gallup 2017)) many in Flint and around the country had stood on the sidelines during the strike, fearful of retaliation. Inspired by the Flint victory, millions of workers left the sidelines and joined the growing movement.

In 1937 alone, five million workers engaged in industrial action, including 400,000 workers participating in 477 sit-down strikes¹¹ (more than 10 percent of all strikes that year), and nearly three million joined unions across the United States

¹⁰ Though Murphy deployed the National Guard, they were tasked with de-escalating tensions between strikers and police, not breaking picket lines or evicting strikers.

¹¹ At least 100 of which included AFL members (Fine 1969).

(Fine 1969; Newsinger 2010; Lichtenstein 2002). Much of the new organizing was hard fought by workers, but employers too could see which way the wind was blowing and many (including the infamously anti-union US Steel) raised wages and/or recognized unions in efforts to avoid the kinds of confrontations happening around the country. The CIO was not the only federation to gain members: not counting the loss of CIO unions, the AFL gained members in 1937 as well. While both federations gained members, between 1937 and the 1955 merger, the AFL enrolled more workers and increased its relative density (Stepan-Norris and Southworth 2010). Despite the early explosive growth of the CIO, there are several reasons the AFL could outpace CIO growth during and following World War II.

The first major setback for the CIO was the 1938 NLRB v. Fansteel decision, in which the Supreme Court declared that the NLRB could not legally enforce strike protections for sit-down strikers, who, per the decision, were in violation of the law. The decision significantly restricted the use of the highly effective CIO tactic. The emergence of the CIO was also accompanied by intense opposition and competition from the AFL. This rivalry spurred growth in the AFL and impacted CIO growth in several ways. 1). The jurisdictional innovation of the CIO was adopted by the AFL. The AFL both chartered its own industrial unions and authorized existing craft unions to organize along industrial lines (Roberts

1971). 2) Employers sometimes welcomed AFL unions as a preferable alternative to CIO organizing,¹² going as far in some instances as offering sweetheart deals to AFL unions (Babson 1999). 3) AFL made cross-class alliances to push anti-CIO legislation. The AFL partnered not only with Republican legislators and anti-labor Southern Democrats, but NAM itself as well to revise the Wagner act and undermine the NLRB (Swenson 1997; Gross 1981). The surprising alliance produced legislative and judicial change, which ultimately culminated in the Taft-Hartley Act almost a decade later.¹³ Finally, the AFL's traditional craft unions were increasingly successful in creating regional labor monopolies that secured employment and confronted urban growth coalitions and were more insulated from business cycle effects (and grew rapidly in the mid-century) than the CIO's industrial unions (Lichtenstein 2002).

Though the union movement began to stall in 1940, WWII represented another moment of relative peace between management and labor, allowing for a renewed period of growth. The war both increased industrial demand and decreased the labor force (to the point of pulling women and African Americans into previously closed sections of the economy out of necessity) creating an

¹² The AFL's opposition to the CIO's shop steward system, often overt racism, and vehement anti-Communism were particularly attractive.

¹³ To be clear, though the AFL allied with NAM to lobby congress in opposition of the Wagner Act and the NLRB, they were vehemently opposed to Taft-Hartley.

extremely tight labor market.¹⁴ Thus, unions were able to assert new pressure on employers. To maintain manufacturing efficiency, Roosevelt re-established the National War Labor Board. The NWLB came to adopt a compromise between capital and labor, in which unions pledged not to strike in exchange for a “maintenance of membership” provision whereby new workers would be required to maintain the union membership once they joined (they were given a yearly opportunity to opt out). Additionally, there were wage and price freezes; while the former was enforced, the latter largely weren’t (BLS 1950). This led to an accumulation of wage grievances that would culminate in a national strike wave after the War. However, between 1937 and 1945, both federations grew enormously, and for the most part so did workers’ wages, benefits and standards of living (Zeiger 1995; Stepan-Norris and Southworth 2010).¹⁵

Taft-Hartley, the AFL-CIO and the “accord”

At the end of World War II, approximately 35.4% of the non-agricultural workforce was unionized, the liberal-labor coalition and moderate corporate elites had forged a form of corporatism exemplified in tripartite negotiations, and labor

¹⁴ Unemployment dropped from 14.6% in 1940 to 4.7% in 1942 and 1.2% in 1944.

¹⁵ Inequality decreased among the working class and there was an unprecedented growth in the middle class. These transformations were racially uneven and unequally benefited white Male workers. However, this inequality was not identical across the federations. Perhaps unsurprising given the differences in racial inclusiveness – in the years 1940-1950 where the CIO had more power, the more equal were white and Black workers (Zeitlin and Weyher 2001).

was enjoying unprecedented power. This situation, like the one during WWI, was quick to change. A complex set of circumstances (most immediately inflationary pressures and a large strike wave) turned the tables on labor. When other tactics (reduce solidarity, repress organizing, breaking strikes) failed to stem the tide of organizing, corporate elites made use of a fourth tactic, legislative action. In 1946, Republicans gained both houses of Congress for the first time since 1930 and finally had the power to pass the NAM sponsored amendments to the Wagner Act. Overriding Truman's veto, Taft-Hartley was passed in 1947.

It's hard to overstate the long-lasting impact of Taft-Hartley on labor organizing in the United States. In addition to extending the sit-down strike ban of the *Fansteel* decision¹⁶, the bill outlawed many crucial tactics of both the CIO and AFL, including: sympathy strikes and secondary boycotts, protests and pickets.¹⁷ It also prohibited closed shops (contractual obligation for employer to only hire union members, which reduces worker divisions, increases unity and unions' bargaining leverage), restricted union shops, and allowed for states to pass right-to-work laws. The law also reversed the Wagner Act's requirement of employer

¹⁶ The Supreme Court decision still left the NLRB with some leeway in deciding how to proceed in sit-down strike cases, Taft-Hartley specifically directed that sit-down striking along with the tactics listed above resulted in forfeiture of all strike protections i.e. a worker who was fired for engaging in the tactic has no legal recourse for their employment or damages.

¹⁷ Secondary or solidarity actions may have been just as or even more important than the sit-down strike for new organizing. These actions provided crucial support to what could otherwise be relatively weak workers. They protected strikers, put additional pressure on employers, and built solidarity.

neutrality, therefore allowing employers to express opposition to unions. These provisions later became the bedrock of employer attempts to eradicate unionism in the United States. Lastly, Taft-Hartley required union leaders to sign and submit affidavits denouncing the Communist Party and affirming they had no connection to any organization with aims to overthrow the US government.

Despite the legislative loss, unions continued to enjoy popular support (Gallup 2017)). But by removing crucial union organizing tactics, Taft-Hartley virtually guaranteed that unions would be severely limited in organizing new industries or expanding gains in previously organized ones. The sit-down strike was crucial to CIO industrial organizing success and sympathy organizing was an invaluable tool for many unionizing efforts (Fantasia and Voss 2004). The anti-Communist provision intensified longstanding internal divisions in the CIO and ultimately resulted in the expulsion of some of its most successful unions. Perhaps as importantly, the radical left in the CIO played a central role in linking the union struggle to class struggle, the feminist movement and the black freedom struggle. By expunging this element from the mainstream labor movement, it became more conservative and less willing to engage in the big leftist struggles of the next half-century. The labor movement's organizational strength was crippled, and union density (percent of workers organized) has been on the decline since 1954.

By the mid-1950s the CIO had been purged of its radical elements and tactically crippled. The AFL had long ago accepted and adopted industrial unionism. The federations' rivalry had cooled to barely a simmer, there was no longer a reason to remain separated. The AFL and CIO merged in 1955, essentially reducing the U.S. labor movement to one faction. This was amid what some have termed the "labor-management accord" (1945-1980). Characterized by soft corporatism and formalized, rational (predictable) negotiations and a coupling of corporate growth and the wages of working people, this accord only existed in core industrialized sectors, if it existed at all. Meanwhile, workers in industries with intense domestic competition and/or weak unions (either historically or because of the Communist purge) fell behind those in core industries as unions failed to organize new or increasingly relocated plants, or lacked the strength to resist cuts. African American and Latino men¹⁸ who were more likely to work in marginal firms, and women who were more likely to work episodically or in domestic labor were cut out of the firm-centered bargaining system and failed to see the same regular raises or benefits. Even so, what little accord there was, it would be decimated in the next decades.

The Neo-liberal Period, Employer Offensive and Private/Public Split

¹⁸ Even those who managed to gain work in core firms, were, because of historical segregation and contemporary discrimination, more likely to be on the short end of the seniority stick and therefore were more vulnerable to business cycle effects.

Profitability in U.S. manufacturing began to seriously decline in the 1970s as international competition increased and stagflation wracked the market (Harrison and Bluestone 1990). Labor already weakened by the past three decades of stagnation, was further threatened by the increasingly real threat of offshoring manufacturing altogether. Craft unions, though many were isolated from the threat of offshoring, faced existential threats from mechanization and computerization. The ITU for example was decimated by technology. Though the ITU had adapted to technological change and maintained monopoly over skill before, the introduction of cold type printing processes in the 1970s and computerized printing in the 1980s combined with the monopolization of newspapers was too much to bear. Grasping what little strength they had left, ITU locals “job guarantee” contracts that protected jobs of current union workers, but all but guaranteed a death by attrition moving forward (McKercher 2002).

Taking advantage of this environment, employers nationwide went on the offensive. Expanding the bounds of employer free speech, large corporations began employing a cottage industry of consultants who mastered industrial propaganda discouraging union organizing. Consultants also provided legal strategizing and representation to maximize anti-union activities to the limits of the law and beyond (calculating when breaking the law via suppressing unionization was economically

sound). This problem was exacerbated by electoral victories that resulted in anti-union NLRB appointments which severely rolled back employer penalties, gave employers even more leeway in “free speech,” and further restricted what constituted eligible areas for collective bargaining. Right to work laws spread out of the South and into the sun-belt and the eventually the heart of the industrial mid-west, further economically and organizationally destabilizing unions across the country. Union density had been on the decline in the United States since 1954, but the AFL-CIO had still managed to slowly and steadily maintain gains in absolute numbers through the 1960s and held steady throughout the 1970s. However, beginning in 1980 because of the intensification of anti-union tactics in combination with globalization, mechanization and computerization, overall membership began to decline, drastically escalating the fall in union density (Stepan-Norris and Southworth 2010). As employers propagandized against unions and fewer American workers had any experience with unions (and many that did had little more than bureaucratic experience), support for unions fell as well, reaching a low of only 48% approval in 2009 (Gallup 2017).

Although Change to Win represents a rival to the AFL-CIO (2005 – present; several of its largest affiliates have reunited with the AFL-CIO since 2009). The largest factional division in U.S. labor in the neo-liberal era is probably best

characterized as a public-private split. As of 2015, only 6.7 percent of private sector workers belong to a union, while 35.2 percent of public sector workers do (Dunn and Walker 2016). Private sector unions have been reduced to one of many liberal interest groups whose support of the Democratic party is repeatedly unrequited. Public sector unions have grown tremendously. Still unified under one “house of labor”, the AFL-CIO has attempted over the last two decades to broaden the labor movement and incorporate various social movement tactics and causes. It remains unclear how the factional divide between public and private sector unions has or will have on their strategy or politics moving forward.

It is clear, however, that the corporate community *has* adjusted their strategies to address the rise of public sector unions. Until mid-century, federal, state and local government organizations were not obliged to engage in collective bargaining. Following in the footsteps of NYC mayor Robert Wagner, Jr., in 1962, John F. Kennedy issued an executive order granting union rights to federal employees. States and municipalities then passed similar statutes throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Because unionizing in the public sector is very different than in the private sector, following the changes in legislation, public sector union density increased quickly and dramatically. By 1980, more than 35% of public employees were union members, holding steady through the 2000s. However, following the

financial crisis in 2008, Republican-led legislatures and governors around the country, most notably in Wisconsin, Indiana, New Jersey and Ohio, passed bills voiding collective bargaining agreements and/or severely limiting the ability of public sector unions to organize. In Wisconsin, for instance, union membership dropped from 14.2% in 2011 to 8.3% in 2015 as result of this legislation (Umhoefer 2016).

Conclusion

Like the capitalist factions identified in *Who Rules America?*, labor movement factions in the United States, though they share much in common, differ in their structural positions, interests, ideologies, and tactics. As such they challenge different factions of the corporate class in a variety of different ways, prompting a variety of responses. Competition between labor organizations tends to be good for the labor movement overall: rival factions promote innovation and growth (Stepan-Norris and Southworth 2010), empowers workers and builds collective class power.

Ultimately, understanding the factional nature of the labor movement helps us to contextualize the actions of capital's factions. Legislative and political action of various capitalist factions is not only a result of intra-class contests of ideology and material need, but is also a complex response to labor factions, their tactics and

relative strength. Capitals' accommodations of labor factions i.e. war-time truces, tri-partite negotiations, and the mid-century accord, were not the generous actions of corporate moderates, but strategic concessions to major labor victories. The nature and origin of labor's victories have varied by the tactics of its factions and as such the calculated response was tailored ("Taylor"-ed) to respond to specific labor strengths as time and again accommodation gave way to repression.

Corporate moderates and the political tactics they prefer – state-welfare, company unions, limited, routinized bargaining – rise to prominence when labor is most dangerous, when they pose an existential threat. Hence, moderate corporate policies are most likely to gain traction when radical labor militancy is very high (1890s, 1910s, 1930s). At the same time, radicalism and militancy in factions of the labor movement (IWW, TUUL, CIO) makes dealing with moderate labor factions (AFL) more appealing. This combination has tended to translate into gains for workers as they win concessions and unionization increases. However, victories of moderate labor factions (and moderate corporate policies) are often coupled with the repression that destroyed the IWW. Additionally, the victories in wages and security may demobilize the workers that make labor success possible. The existential threat now ameliorated, corporate conservatives rise to prominence once again (and as we saw in the 1920s when the NCF joined with NAM to

implement the American Plan, they are often joined by the moderates) to go on the offensive and rollback union gains in service of ever greater profitability. Even when radical labor factions avoid dissolution through violent state repression, as the CIO did, corporate conservatives have still effectively neutralized them legislatively, and otherwise, once crisis has passed.

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