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The Rise of Organized Labor and the Conservative Coalition

The American labor movement was transformed in the 1930s and the 1940s, setting in motion a series of changes that would reverberate in the American political system for decades. During this period, which spanned the presidential administrations of Democrats Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman, a class cleavage emerged in the American electorate, workers gained legal recognition of the right to organize in the National Labor Relations Act, unions grew to represent a third of the workforce, and most of the labor movement became active in Democratic Party politics. Consequently, labor gained an unprecedented role in the American economy and government.

This chapter examines the rise of organized labor and its consequences for the Democratic Party and congressional politics. The emergence of an ambitious, pro-civil rights labor movement created a backlash that split the Democratic Party between labor-oriented liberals and conservative Southern Democrats, who feared labor's challenge to the political economy of the South. Starting in the late thirties, conservative Southern Democrats joined their ideological allies in the Republican Party to rein in the power of organized labor, culminating in the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. The conservative coalition was most

effective when it controlled legislative majorities. But even when it did not, members used legislative institutions like the House Rules Committee to undermine the interests of the labor-liberal wing of the Democratic Party. These tensions came to a head in the 1948 election when Truman ran on issues that appealed to labor-liberals but alienated the South, such as the repeal of Taft-Hartley and civil rights. At a critical moment for both labor and the Democrats, Truman's actions ensured that labor would stay with the Democratic Party, instead of leaving to form a labor party. But the conservative coalition would continue to challenge labor in Congress.

The New Deal and the Transformation of Organized Labor

The Great Depression and World War II spurred the growth of a more diverse and politically active labor movement. The New Deal marked a major turning point in the history of organized labor. Franklin Roosevelt was elected in 1932 by an overwhelming margin and brought the working-class voters of the Northeast and the industrial West into the Democratic coalition. Yet organized labor had not been a major player in the election, and it was unclear how unions would fare in the Roosevelt administration. In his first two years in office, Roosevelt walked a fine line between business and labor, straining his relationship with the American Federation of Labor (AFL).¹ However, FDR's support for labor rights won him a great deal of support in the labor movement. The core of the early New Deal was the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), which targeted the negative economic effects of cutthroat competition among firms by encouraging industrial codes for production levels, wages, and prices. A controversial provision recognized workers' rights to join unions and bargain collectively. The NIRA spurred successful organizing drives in 1933 in industries such as coal, in which the United Mine Workers (UMW) under the leadership of John L. Lewis circulated flyers telling miners that the president wanted them to join the union. But the National Labor Board, which was established under the act, was too weak to implement the labor provisions, and many employers continued to ignore the law. A wave of industrial unrest, often characterized by bloody confrontations of workers with police and employers over the issue of union recognition, spread in 1933 and 1934.

The labor crisis fed a sense of urgency that something needed to be done. The liberal Democratic senator Robert Wagner of New York proposed legislation to create a more powerful independent labor board capable of enforcing workers'

rights to join unions. Supporters argued that the bill would foster industrial peace and improve the economy because unions would redistribute wealth from corporate profits to wages, increase consumer purchasing power, and reduce the likelihood of cyclical depressions. Reluctant to alienate business, FDR initially refused to endorse Wagner's legislation, and it languished in Congress in 1934. However, the continuing industrial crisis renewed interest in the legislation the following year in a Congress fortified with newly elected liberals.² After extensive debate in committee, Wagner's National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) easily passed the Senate in May. Shortly thereafter, FDR threw his support behind the bill.³ Within days of FDR's announcement, the Supreme Court ruled a major portion of the NIRA unconstitutional, leaving the administration with no labor policy and no way to spur wage growth.⁴ Labor leaders called for strikes in industries in which the collapse of industrial codes resulted in wage reductions and longer workweeks, redoubled their efforts to pass priority legislation like the NLRA, and pledged to lead an effort to amend the Constitution to clearly stipulate the government's authority to regulate social and economic conditions.⁵ In spite of opposition from the National Association of Manufacturers and other business groups, the NLRA passed the House with limited debate and was signed into law on July 5, 1935. The legislation recognized workers' rights to join unions and participate in collective bargaining, forbade company-run unions, established election procedures for workers to choose union representation, and empowered the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to enforce the act.

The Rise of the CIO

The passage of the NLRA in 1935 escalated an ongoing debate over organizing that led to a split in the labor movement and the mobilization of new segments of the labor force. As the International Workers of the World had done decades earlier, dissidents in the AFL argued that the labor movement's future depended on organizing the growing ranks of unskilled workers in the mass production industries. But old-line unions favored organizing along craft rather than industrial lines and were reluctant to commit resources to the challenging task of organizing unskilled workers, who were in a weak bargaining position with employers. Lewis, the charismatic and irascible president of the UMW, emerged as the leader of a rival group that emphasized the power of organizing all workers in an industry into one union. Lewis felt the NLRA offered an opportunity to unionize the largely unorganized mass production industries along industrial

lines. Several months after the bill's passage, Lewis and his allies formed the Committee for Industrial Organization, which later left the AFL to become a rival labor federation, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). In less than two years the CIO grew to more than four million members.⁶ Although the CIO only briefly eclipsed the AFL in membership, it forever changed the labor movement by mobilizing new groups of workers and taking a greater role in politics.

The CIO invested unprecedented resources in organizing industries such as steel, rubber, and auto production and used radical tactics that capitalized on the growing militancy of rank-and-file workers during the Depression. Faced with intense employer resistance, the CIO's United Auto Workers (UAW) resorted to the sit-down strike against General Motors early in 1937. In the first of a wave of sit-down strikes that would sweep the country, autoworkers occupied two Flint, Michigan, plants and refused to leave without union recognition. GM finally capitulated. Three weeks later, the CIO's Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) gained recognition from U.S. Steel, which had used every tool available for decades to thwart unionization. CIO militancy spread to a range of workers from meatpackers to shop clerks. The rivalry encouraged the AFL to sink more resources into organizing, including the organizing of low-skilled and unskilled workers, and the AFL actually surpassed the CIO in growth by the end of the thirties.⁷ Total union membership almost doubled from 1935 to 1937.⁸

As part of a broader social movement for equality, CIO activists embraced workers of all races and ethnicities. Although the AFL was rhetorically committed to the equal treatment of blacks, it did little to suppress discrimination within its own ranks, particularly in the South. In contrast, the CIO organized whites alongside blacks and became a strong supporter of civil rights legislation. CIO unions targeted industries dominated by black workers such as meatpacking, hired black organizers, set up headquarters in black neighborhoods, and pressed blacks' particular grievances against employers. After touring Southern states in 1941, Harold Preece, of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), referred to the CIO as a "lamp of democracy."⁹ The CIO also targeted industries with ethnically diverse workforces, which led the CIO to stress what historian Lizabeth Cohen terms a "culture of unity" in order to minimize ethnic rivalries often exploited by employers.¹⁰ CIO union halls fostered a new level of socializing across ethnicities in a number of communities during the 1930s and 1940s.

The CIO was also more committed to political mobilization. While the AFL had been rather passive in elections, the CIO plowed money into campaigns and made well-organized efforts to mobilize its membership at the polls.¹¹ CIO leaders, like Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, saw politics as central to labor's future.¹² Lewis and Hillman persuaded George Berry of the AFL's Printing Pressmen's Union to join them in forming Labor's Non-Partisan League (LNPL), which raised a million dollars for Roosevelt in 1936.¹³ Although the LNPL was formed explicitly to support Roosevelt, CIO leaders had grand plans for it. Hillman noted in a speech on the activities of the league, "The interest of the country as well as of labor demands a realignment of all progressives into one party, and the basis for that kind of realignment ought to be the organization of labor in the political field."¹⁴ As the rivalry between the AFL and the CIO intensified, Berry pulled out of the LNPL, but many AFL unions continued to work with it. Some AFL leaders remained skeptical about the utility of political action, but as they watched CIO leaders like Hillman develop a close relationship with the Roosevelt administration, they felt it necessary to defend their interests. In fact, the CIO put so much effort into the 1940 and 1944 elections that many argued the Democratic Party was "captured" by the CIO.¹⁵ This drew the AFL toward greater involvement in politics over the next decade.¹⁶ Labor's growing interest in politics was also reinforced by the intricate involvement of the government in labor issues during World War II.

Labor's Wartime Gains

The NLRA spurred far-reaching changes in the labor movement, but organized labor continued to face widespread employer opposition and limited government protection that hindered further growth until the onset of World War II. The Senate's La Follette Civil Liberties Committee investigated employers' anti-union practices from 1936 to 1940, exposing widespread use of violent and illegal tactics. One of the most flagrant examples occurred when police hired by Republic Steel fired on a protest march outside its Chicago factory in the 1937 "Memorial Day massacre," which killed ten union sympathizers and wounded more than fifty. The White House proved an unreliable ally to labor. Roosevelt's refusal to send troops to evacuate the factories in the sit-down strikes at GM was viewed as a sign of his support for union growth. But when Roosevelt, weary with the lack of resolution of the steel crisis, said of employers and the union, "A curse on both your houses," it was viewed as a sign of his waning support for

unionization.¹⁷ The notoriously antiunion Ford Motors also remained impervious to the UAW, and Ford's private police continued to assault union organizers and sympathizers with little government intervention. Across a range of other industries organizing efforts stalled. The momentum behind union growth appeared to be waning when World War II changed everything.

Defense mobilization gave labor new leverage against employers. The fifteen-month period leading up to the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 produced 1.5 million new union members.¹⁸ As the economy approached full employment, organizing drives and pent-up wage demands precipitated a wave of more than four thousand strikes in 1941. Eager to sustain production, many employers finally came to the table. The Little Steel firms, including antiunion stalwart Republic Steel, one by one recognized SWOC over the course of 1941, transforming the position of labor in the steel industry. Strikes for UAW recognition at Ford threw the manufacturer into disarray, and managers finally agreed to a certification election, which the UAW won overwhelmingly.¹⁹ Membership in AFL unions such as the Teamsters, the International Association of Machinists, and the Carpenters also surged because of defense mobilization.

Union growth was fed not only by improved economic conditions but by the government's wartime policies. After the United States' formal entry into the war, leaders of both the AFL and the CIO agreed to a "no-strike pledge" in light of the national emergency. The National War Labor Board (NWLB), composed of representatives of the public, labor, and management, supervised industrial relations for the duration of the war. Labor leaders were expected to cooperate in the defense effort by restraining workers' wage demands, disciplining the rank and file, and maintaining uninterrupted production.²⁰ In exchange, the board pressured employers to recognize and bargain with unions. Cooperative unions were also offered "maintenance of membership" arrangements in which new employees in unionized firms automatically became union members and unionized workers had to remain members for the duration of a contract. Eventually the board even ordered employers to withhold union dues from paychecks.

Union growth brought organized labor unprecedented economic and political power. Union membership grew more than 50 percent over the course of the war to more than fifteen million in 1945.²¹ Organized labor represented more than a third of the civilian labor force.²² CIO unions penetrated almost every area of the industrial economy, and the AFL continued to expand. Although organized labor still faced considerable challenges and had barely broken into certain areas of the economy or the South, it was hardly the underdog of the

early Depression years. Labor's mobilization in elections and participation on the war boards also brought a new level of political influence. Labor leaders became what C. Wright Mills termed in 1948 the "new men of power," joining business leaders and politicians as part of the power elite.²³

Rising Opposition to Labor

The invigoration of organized labor from the passage of the NLRA in 1935 through the conclusion of the war led to a split in Congress and in the Democratic Party on labor issues. The overwhelming majority of non-Southern Democrats continued to support organized labor during this period, but increasing numbers of conservative Southern Democrats and Republicans became critical of the labor movement.²⁴ The NLRA passed with substantial support across the Democratic Party and the entire Congress. Though Democrat Millard Tydings of Maryland, a handful of Southern Democrats such as the legendary Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia, and several Republicans publicly criticized the legislation, there was no sharp regional or partisan cleavage in the roll call vote. The bill passed the Senate 63–12.²⁵ Eighty-one percent of non-Southern Democrats supported the bill, compared with 73 percent of Southern Democrats and 54 percent of Republicans.²⁶ The House passed the NLRA on a voice vote with no record of the distribution of support. However, in a roll call vote several days earlier, most Southerners supported extending the provisions in the NIRA that dealt with collective bargaining, wages, and hours, suggesting there was Southern Democratic support for New Deal labor policy in both the Senate and the House.²⁷ As in other New Deal programs, agricultural and domestic workers were excluded from the protections of the NLRA to minimize Southern resistance.²⁸ While some Republicans were progressives who generally supported New Deal programs, the Republican opposition was likely muted by the party's substantial losses in 1934.²⁹ But the limited debate surrounding the passage of the NLRA soon gave way to intense criticism of the act and the labor movement.

Much of the growing opposition stemmed from the CIO's tactics and perceived radicalism. While many in Congress voted for the NLRA because they wanted to empower organized labor, others supported it out of desperation to calm industrial unrest.³⁰ Some feared that if something was not done, more radical forces might gain power and capitalism itself might be threatened.³¹ But as noted above, the legislation initially did little to stem high-profile strikes or radicalism. CIO unionists resorted to the controversial sit-down tactic because

employers refused to comply with the law, many because they expected it to be declared unconstitutional. Conservatives viewed the sit-down strike—in which workers effectively took over a plant, refused to work, and refused to leave—as a radical violation of property rights. Conservatives were also alarmed by the CIO's willingness to use Communist organizers and the influence of Communists in many CIO unions, a factor that was later exploited in a series of congressional investigations.³² Although David Plotke argues that the discrediting of business and conservatism muted opposition to the passage of the NLRA, increasingly negative public opinion regarding labor in the late 1930s emboldened these forces. Polls showed that a third of the public had a less favorable view of labor in the wake of the sit-downs and more than half favored making sit-down strikes illegal and using force to remove the strikers.³³ Polls also suggested that the public thought the NLRA actually caused the surge of sit-downs.³⁴

While conservatives in both parties shared these concerns, Southern Democrats had additional fears. Conservative Democrats felt the CIO had become an adjunct of the New Deal because of the CIO's extensive role in the 1936 elections and the presence of many bureaucrats favorable to the CIO in the NLRB and throughout the Roosevelt administration. Conservatives feared organized labor might take over the Democratic Party, which had been the base of Southern agrarian power since the Civil War.³⁵ When FDR refused to intervene in the wave of sit-down strikes in 1936 and 1937, intense friction developed between Roosevelt and Southern Democratic congressional leaders and even Vice President John Nance Garner, who was a Texan.³⁶ Southern congressional leaders became particularly strident when the CIO launched organizing drives in Southern textile mills. Eugene Cox (D-GA) proclaimed, "I warn John L. Lewis and his Communistic cohorts that no second-hand carpetbag expedition in the Southland under the banner of Soviet Russia . . . will be tolerated."³⁷ The South attracted textile mills and other businesses away from the Northeast because of its low wages and pliable workforce, and many Southern leaders did not want this advantage compromised by unionization.

Most important, Southern leaders were alarmed by the CIO's interest in unionizing black workers and its support for integrated locals and civil rights. In their study of growing Southern opposition to labor during this period, Farhang and Katznelson note that, by the 1940s, "in the mind of the Southern legislator . . . labor had become race."³⁸ The two issues had been braided together. Race was not an issue when the NLRA passed because most AFL unions

in the South represented skilled white workers and adopted local racial norms. They did not challenge the Southern caste system. But even though the CIO never made much headway in the South, it represented a threat Southern conservatives could not tolerate. With the CIO's growing commitment to civil rights and political action, unionization in the South reflected a dual threat to the economic and political power structures that supported most Southern politicians. As a result, Southern Democrats moved to the right on labor issues.³⁹

The Rise of the Conservative Coalition and the House Rules Committee

As the New Deal progressed and labor's influence grew, Southern conservatives felt increasingly threatened by the challenge of urban liberalism to Southern dominance of the Democratic Party. Signs of Southerners' loss of influence accumulated. The Southern states' shrinking percentage of the Democratic electoral college vote in the Roosevelt landslides demonstrated that a Democrat could comfortably win the presidency without the support of any Southern states. The 1936 Democratic convention removed the requirement that the presidential and vice presidential nominees receive the support of two-thirds of the delegates, a provision that had effectively given the South a veto over the nominee. The following year, the Southerners' preferred choice for majority leader of the Senate lost by one vote following Roosevelt's intervention in the race.⁴⁰ Southerners were further alienated by Roosevelt's unprecedented intervention in local politics in his ultimately unsuccessful efforts to "purge" five conservative Democrats in the 1938 primaries. Moreover, as the federal bureaucracy expanded, many Southern Democrats became more concerned about a growing federal government that might move beyond doling out money to the underdeveloped region to intervening in racial matters and the South's political economy. Southern Democrats, who had once shown the greatest party loyalty on roll call votes and supported most of Roosevelt's social and economic policies in his first years in office, increasingly found common cause with Republicans and defected from the party line.⁴¹

The conservative coalition began to take shape in 1937 when support for labor, Roosevelt, and much of the New Deal agenda faltered. Alarmed at what they perceived as Roosevelt's power grabs and his threat to the separation of powers, conservatives came together to undermine FDR's plans to pack the

court with New Deal supporters and reorganize the executive branch. But conservatives were joined in their opposition to these proposals by a diverse group in Congress in terms of ideology and region.⁴² The conservative coalition that would control Congress over most of the next three decades emerged more clearly on labor issues. Unsuccessful votes to outlaw sit-down strikes and investigate the CIO in 1937 reflected a new pattern of support among conservative Southern Democrats and Republicans. After failing to appear on a single vote in 1933, the conservative coalition appeared in 9.1 percent of House roll calls in 1937 and showed up with increasing frequency in subsequent years.⁴³

The House Rules Committee emerged as the conservative coalition's most important institutional power base.⁴⁴ The Rules Committee serves as a gatekeeper, reporting bills from the substantive committees for floor consideration, setting the limits for debate, and controlling which amendments can be offered, including full substitutes for original bills. Prior to the late 1930s, the committee had largely served as the instrument of the majority party leadership, and members voted the party position even if they did not personally support the legislation. But the emerging regional and ideological split, driven in large part by conflicting views toward labor and Roosevelt's agenda, changed the norms of committee members. Three Southern Democrats, Cox of Georgia, Howard Smith of Virginia, and Martin Dies of Texas, were appointed in 1931, 1933, and 1935, respectively, when the party was relatively unified, and all appeared to be loyal Democrats.⁴⁵ But by 1939, all three ranked among the most conservative Democrats in the House, and they were joined that year by William Colmer of Mississippi, who moved to the right after his appointment. All four were strongly antilabor. Eric Schickler notes that from 1939 to 1952 "the Rules Committee consistently included three to five Democrats who scored among the most conservative 10 to 20 percent of party members."⁴⁶ This group often allied with the Republican members to control the committee. The seniority system made it very difficult to remove these members after it became clear they gave conservative policy positions priority over the national Democratic Party's interests.⁴⁷ Conservatives used the Rules Committee to undermine labor in three ways: blocking measures labor supported, pushing to the floor measures labor opposed, and launching investigations of labor organizations and agencies administering labor policy.

The blocking potential of the Rules Committee became apparent in the legislative battle over the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). The FLSA, which eliminated child labor, set a maximum workweek with overtime pay, and established

a federal minimum wage, was a high priority of the Roosevelt administration, the AFL, and the CIO, although there were divisions over the specifics.⁴⁸ While most Republicans were opposed in principle to government regulation of wages, many Southerners worried that a minimum wage law would compromise the region's low-wage advantage and minimize wage differentials between whites and blacks. This was precisely the goal of labor leaders, who wanted to reduce wage disparities between regions, industries, and firms and between nonunionized and unionized workers. Moreover, as historian Steven Fraser suggests, labor leaders like Sidney Hillman, the leader of the CIO's Textile Workers Organizing Committee, viewed fair labor standards legislation as key to a three-part "Southern strategy" to "overturn the South's prevailing social and political order" along with unionization and the presidential purge of conservative Democrats.⁴⁹

These concerns prompted a number of Southern Democrats to reject party loyalty on the FLSA. Despite a provision for regional wage differentials and the exclusion of much of the workforce, 45 percent of Southern Democrats sided with 93 percent of Republicans in a failed effort to stall the bill in the Senate.⁵⁰ Knowing the popular legislation would likely pass on the House floor as it had in the Senate, Southern Democrats joined Republicans on the Rules Committee in refusing to report the bill. In a rarely used or successful parliamentary maneuver, supporters obtained the necessary 218 signatures for a petition to discharge the bill from the Rules Committee directly to the floor in a special session of Congress called by Roosevelt in 1937. But the bill was narrowly defeated when conservatives were aided by the AFL's opposition to a provision in the version of the bill that came up for a vote. A compromise with the AFL was worked out, but supporters again had to discharge the bill from the Rules Committee in the 1938 session. The FLSA ultimately passed with large margins in the House and Senate, but only after compromises were incorporated that significantly weakened the bill. Southern senators, who threatened to filibuster if regional wage differentials were not in the final bill, were appeased with a provision allowing some flexibility in the application of the minimum wage.⁵¹ Furthermore, only one-fifth of workers were covered by the FLSA because many categories including agricultural labor were excluded.⁵²

The FLSA was to be the last major piece of New Deal legislation. Its legislative trajectory demonstrated two emerging problems for labor: the defection of Southern Democrats from the party line on labor-related issues, and the ability of Southerners in alliance with Republicans to use congressional institutions to block or water down legislation. As Democratic representative Maury Maverick

of Texas (whose liberal family inspired the term “maverick”) defined the problems in response to action on the FLSA:

Two questions are now brought to a head. One is technical, and the other of national social importance. The one is the highhanded behavior of the Rules Committee. The public cannot understand these technicalities; all it wants to know is whether the Democrats deliver the goods, or not. And unless Democratic leadership and the party gets a system, including rules, where its pledges are fulfilled it will be repudiated, as it should be. The other point is the South. The South is for the good old time virtues, but is not averse to taking a few billions of gold from the Federal till for the TVA, for cotton subsidies, WPA and others. . . . But when a general bill is offered, the South is liable to pull Thomas Jefferson from the grave, and swear it's coddling the people.⁵³

Conservative Southern Democrats would support federal government programs that redistributed resources to the region but oppose those they thought threatened the South's political economy. As Poole and Rosenthal point out in their comprehensive analysis of congressional voting, the vote on the FLSA marked a departure from voting among Democrats on labor issues earlier in the New Deal. A new division appeared between Northerners and Southerners signaling rising economic conservatism among Southern Democrats.⁵⁴ Robert Fleck's analysis of the House votes and constituency data reinforces Poole and Rosenthal's conclusions and further finds in distinguishing among Southerners that “representatives from low-turnout Southern districts, where the political system gave low-wage workers little influence,” were more likely to turn away from the New Deal.⁵⁵ Although conservatives on the Rules Committee did not prevent the FLSA from passing, they demonstrated the capacity to undermine the priorities of the national Democratic Party by exploiting House procedures and the leadership's inability to enforce party discipline.

Political scientists Schickler and Kathryn Pearson find that the conservative coalition on the Rules Committee not only blocked legislation favored by liberals from reaching the floor but also forced conservative proposals to the floor over the opposition of Democratic leaders.⁵⁶ Fifteen of the forty-four such initiatives they identify from 1937 to 1952 dealt with labor-management relations, and several others dealt with farm labor. They included amendments to the FLSA, provisions to limit strikes, and other changes to the NLRA.⁵⁷ Suggesting how important labor issues were in consolidating the conservative co-

alition, most of the first measures Rules forced to the floor dealt with labor. Schickler and Pearson note that “the committee crafted rules that made possible the consideration of broad, conservative antilabor substitute bills that had not even been approved by a legislative committee and that otherwise would have been ruled out of order on germaneness grounds.”⁵⁸

The Rules Committee also had jurisdiction over investigations that conservative members used to harass organized labor and the executive agencies that enforced labor laws. The House voted against a Rules resolution to investigate the sit-down strikes in 1937, but Dies’s House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) took up the issue the next year. When the new Wages and Hours division of the Labor Department set up to enforce the FLSA came to supervise compliance in the hosiery mills located in Representative Cox’s district, he requested a congressional investigation of the Labor Department division and the NLRB. Representative Smith, an intense opponent of the Roosevelt administration and organized labor, used Rules to launch the “Smith Committee,” a panel he chaired that hounded the NLRB for two years and managed to link the board, the CIO, and Communist radicals in the public mind.⁵⁹ HUAC also investigated the CIO’s ties to Communists during the war. Many of the antilabor bills that Rules pushed to the floor were never taken up by the Senate, but the House investigations fed negative attitudes toward labor that contributed to growing congressional support for antilabor legislation.

The Road to Taft-Hartley

Just as the war effort gave labor new leverage with employers, events during the war and reconversion period created an opening for labor’s critics in business and Congress. They sought to curtail the organizing rights recently granted under the NLRA, while the Roosevelt and Truman administrations struggled to manage the conflicts between labor and management, and labor leaders struggled to balance the demands of their members with the need to maintain government and public support. The dislocations of the postwar period complicated these tasks, and a public backlash against the Democrats made possible the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, which labor leaders termed the “slave labor law.” The legislative battles over labor demonstrated the growing power of the conservative coalition and the deepening rift between the Northern and Southern wings of the Democratic Party.

Defense Mobilization and Efforts to Regulate Labor

Defense mobilization heightened the stakes of labor issues. The wave of strikes in 1941, many in defense-related industries, angered critics of organized labor who accused “radical” unions of subverting the defense effort just as Communist unions in France contributed to the nation’s fall to the Nazis by hindering defense production.⁶⁰ Red-baiting of CIO unions became a common activity in Congress. While the administration tried to gain labor’s voluntary cooperation in the defense effort through various mediation boards, conservatives in Congress sought to force it. Labor’s critics pushed right-to-work legislation for defense industries that would effectively prohibit union security arrangements. They also called for antistrike legislation ranging from outright bans on strikes in defense industries to mandated “cooling off” periods before a strike could begin. Although such legislation passed repeatedly in the House, it all died in the Senate Education and Labor Committee. In the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, a similar wave of bills to regulate unions was proposed but failed to pass as labor’s supporters tried to impress upon conservatives the need to enlist organized labor as a willing ally in the defense effort. However, the bargain between labor, government, and management became increasingly strained as the war progressed.

A series of strikes by the coal miners and conservative gains in the 1942 congressional elections precipitated the first successful attempt to amend the Wagner Act to curtail unions’ power and tactics. Wartime inflation led government mediation boards to hold wages below what workers would have been able to obtain in a free market given the shortages of labor and high corporate profits. Combined with ineffective controls on prices, workers’ frustration with restrained wage growth grew intense. Wildcat strikes unauthorized by union leaders rose in 1943 and again in 1944 when the Allies’ victory seemed secure. Lewis, who had withdrawn his support of Roosevelt in the 1940 election and pulled the UMW out of the CIO, never agreed to the no-strike pledge. He was very critical of government intrusion in labor-management relations during the war and repeatedly called the coal miners out on strike. Lewis became a national symbol of labor’s irresponsible use of its newfound power. Conservatives in Congress, emboldened by public disapproval of Lewis and the miners, pushed the Smith-Connally Act, named after its Democratic sponsors, the consistently antilabor Smith of Virginia and Senator Tom Connally of Texas, who had actually voted for the NLRA eight years earlier. Also known as the War

Labor Disputes Act, the legislation allowed the president to seize industries central to the defense effort that were threatened by strikes, required NLRB-supervised strike votes and mandatory cooling-off periods, and restricted union political activity. Roosevelt vetoed Smith-Connally because the administration feared it would antagonize labor and jeopardize production. But his veto was overridden by Congress—the first of FDR’s vetoes to be overridden since the beginning of the war. The highest level of support came from Southern Democrats, with 92 percent backing the bill in the House (compared with 77% of Republicans and 17% of non-Southern Democrats) and 88 percent backing the bill in the Senate (compared with 82% percent of Republicans and 31% of non-Southern Democrats).⁶¹

The Problems of Reconversion

Tensions during the reconversion period were heightened by conflicting expectations on the part of business, labor, and Truman, who assumed the presidency after Roosevelt’s death near the end of the war. Although some business leaders supported unions’ rights to collective bargaining, most wanted to curtail union power, particularly in areas where they felt management’s prerogatives had been undermined during the war. Labor’s most ardent foes in the business community saw the reconversion period as an opportunity to eliminate the labor movement’s gains since the onset of the Great Depression. In contrast, labor expected its sacrifices during the war to be rewarded.⁶² Labor leaders tried to suppress strikes and workers’ demands, but the rank and file grew restless by the end of the war. Workers were apprehensive about the future economy, overburdened by inflation, frustrated by union discipline and the no-strike pledge, and eager for wage increases and a whole new standard of living denied over the course of the war and the Depression.

The Truman administration, eager to avoid unemployment and inflation while converting production to meet pent-up consumer demand, tried to navigate these conflicting expectations, and it would repeatedly be drawn into the conflicts between management and labor in the postwar years. After victory over Japan, President Truman called a Labor-Management Conference in November 1945 with the intention of resolving the most pressing labor relations and economic issues for the reconversion period. The conference dragged on for three weeks but reached few compromises on how to achieve a smooth reconversion. Before the conference’s unsuccessful conclusion, a number of strikes began that initiated the largest strike wave in the nation’s history. In the

year following V-J day there were 4,630 strikes involving roughly 5 million workers and a loss of more than 120 million workdays.⁶³

Important players in the Truman administration believed employers would be able to increase wages without raising prices because of accumulated wartime profits. The administration erroneously expected that wage increases would be negotiated without production interruptions.⁶⁴ Instead, the process of collective bargaining broke down. Eager to end government price controls, business after business insisted they could not increase wages unless the administration allowed for an increase in prices. Labor leaders were convinced that employers, many of whom were protected from losses in the reconversion period by special federal tax laws, were intent on breaking the power of unions and determined to provoke strikes in order to precipitate “economic chaos.”⁶⁵ Essentially, the loss of production during strikes was being subsidized by the government, and proposals to terminate the tax provisions were tied up in congressional committees.⁶⁶ Two high-profile strikes in the steel industry and against General Motors in late 1945 and early 1946 epitomized these tensions, and their resolution ensured continued inflation and public dissatisfaction.

The steel strike was the first to be settled, and it signaled the end of effective price controls. Demanding government approval of a substantial price increase on steel before it would engage in collective bargaining with the United Steelworkers, the steel industry refused to accept the terms suggested by a fact-finding board appointed by Truman. After a series of internal struggles within the Truman administration, the president ultimately conceded to a price increase double what the head of the Office of Price Administration had originally offered in exchange for the industry’s acceptance of a sizable wage increase. The settlement would ripple across negotiations in every industry.

In the contemporaneous GM conflict, Walter Reuther, the head of the GM division of the UAW, called what would become one of the longest strikes of the reconversion period. Trying to tie labor’s demands to the public interest, Reuther insisted that GM could offer a sizable wage increase without an increase in prices. Recalling one of the problems of the Great Depression, insufficient consumer demand, Reuther argued that redistributing large corporate profits to wages and keeping the price of consumer goods low was central to achieving a high-production, high-consumption, high-employment postwar order and an improved standard of living for the average American. When GM insisted to Reuther that it could not afford to increase wages without raising prices, Reuther demanded that GM open its books to the union and the public to prove its

inability to pay. GM refused, and both sides settled into intransigence as the strike of more than two hundred thousand workers dragged on. In December, the Truman administration appointed a fact-finding board that made suggestions for a settlement. The union eventually endorsed the recommendations, abandoning its larger goals, but GM continued to refuse the terms. Influenced by the steel settlement, the 113-day strike was ultimately settled with a similar wage increase and administration approval of an increase in product prices.

The conclusion of the steel, GM, and other contemporaneous strikes had a number of consequences. The Truman administration's effort to stabilize prices through the reconversion period was effectively abandoned. Inflation spiraled out of control, and many unions returned to the bargaining table before the end of the year to demand more wage increases. Industry leaders argued that higher prices were driven by unions' wage demands. Labor leaders argued that higher prices were driven by corporations' quest for higher profits.⁶⁷ Business won the public relations battle. As the reconversion period progressed, both the media and the public increasingly blamed price increases on what they perceived as the unreasonable and well-publicized demands of labor unions.⁶⁸ Reuther failed in his bid to associate organized labor's goals with the public interest. These events helped set the stage for the passage of legislation to curtail labor's power.

The Postwar Strike Wave and the Case Bill

In addition to the problem of inflation, politicians and the public grew increasingly frustrated with production interruptions that threatened reconversion and the stability of the national economy. Coal and railway strikes in particular fed this mood. Lewis again called the mineworkers out on strike over the coal operators' refusal to help fund a union-administered health and welfare fund. Both the UMW and the mine operators declined Truman's offer of arbitration. Because shortages of coal threatened the reconversion of industrial production, Truman, utilizing authority granted in the Smith-Connally War Labor Disputes Act, which was still in effect, seized the mines and established a compromise under government operation. The Truman administration was also forced to intervene in a dispute between the railroad operators and the multiple unions of rail workers. Truman seized the railroads and established a settlement with two of the unions. However, two other unions held out and called a strike, effectively against the government, that brought a virtual collapse of the nationwide rail transportation network. An exasperated Truman seemed to share the view of labor's most ardent critics. Government negotiators

arrived at a compromise just as Truman went before a joint session of Congress to request emergency legislation to empower the president to prevent strikes that threatened the national economy. In a game of political brinkmanship with organized labor, Truman proposed the Temporary Disputes Settlement Bill, which among other things would have allowed the president to draft strikers, a proposal backed by two-thirds of the public.⁶⁹ Although the bill passed overwhelmingly in the House, the Senate refused to act, in part, ironically, because of the opposition of Republican senator Robert Taft of Ohio, who would become the archenemy of organized labor because of his role in the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act.

Despite the growing hostility to labor and the circulation of numerous legislative proposals to amend the Wagner Act and curtail the power of unions, no major bill became law in the 79th Congress (1945–46). After the failure of the Labor-Management Conference in late 1945, Truman called for legislation requiring a thirty-day cooling-off period and enabling the president to appoint fact-finding boards in labor-management disputes that threatened the “national public interest.” Neither management nor labor would have been compelled to comply with the board’s recommendations, but both railed against the proposal. Ultimately legislation even more objectionable to organized labor, a bill introduced by Republican congressman Francis Case, was substituted for the administration bill, a move facilitated by the actions of the conservative coalition on the Rules Committee.⁷⁰ In February 1946, the Case bill passed the House 258–155 and, after several months delay, the Senate 49–29, hours after Truman’s speech to the joint session of Congress in conjunction with the railroad dispute. The Case bill incorporated several ideas that had been circulating around Congress for years, including the establishment of a sixty-day cooling-off period before strikes or lockouts, a provision to allow unions to be sued for contract violations, denial of Wagner Act protections to employees who participated in wildcat strikes or violated union contracts, and a prohibition of secondary boycotts in which unions force their employer not to do business with another employer, typically one that is resisting an organizing drive. All of organized labor again expressed intense opposition to the bill, and mail urging a veto poured into the White House.⁷¹

The passage of the Case bill precipitated a debate within the Truman administration over whether the president should veto the bill and highlighted a growing rift within the party over how to handle labor. Some advisers suggested that labor had nowhere else to go but the Democratic Party and that, by not

signing the bill, the president might alienate middle America. But many labor relations specialists suggested that the bill might do more to foment industrial unrest than to prevent it.⁷² The president was also urged to veto the bill by pro-labor Democrats in Congress who saw labor's support as crucial to the party.⁷³ Ultimately, Truman decided to veto the bill. The House barely sustained the veto, with almost all Republicans and ninety-six Democrats, eighty from Southern states, voting to override. Five Southern Democrats, under party pressure, switched from voting in favor of the bill to voting to sustain the veto, which averted an override.⁷⁴ Labor's allies in the Democratic Party narrowly managed to save labor from unfavorable legislation once again. Although a number of scholars have questioned the value of labor's relationship with the Democrats during this period, it is rather remarkable that most Democrats remained committed to labor in spite of the antilabor tenor of public opinion at the time.⁷⁵

Even though these proposals did not become law, they had an effect on the labor movement. A report to President Truman by CIO president Philip Murray detailed conservative efforts to amend the NLRA from 1937 to 1946. Murray argued that many of the proposals were introduced to keep labor and its congressional allies on the defensive, even though they had little chance of becoming law. Murray observed:

A basic aim of the sponsors of these bills has been to use the legislative process itself as a means of smearing labor and of artificially stimulating resentment against trade unions. The program of this group has become and continues to be a war of nerves to soften up or neutralize progressive opposition to antistrike legislation through a constant stream of restrictive bills. This program of misrepresentation in the form of bills also had other more immediate objectives. It was designed to frighten workers away from trade unions, to cheat labor of the fruits of Federal labor legislation, to force the labor movement to operate in a constant state of crisis and thus to dissipate its time and energy in defending itself. Finally, by attacking labor as a whole, this group of legislators encouraged large groups of American employers to attack the unions of their own employees. This group of legislators used the legislative apparatus to promote disregard of Federal labor laws and to keep alive hopes of repealing them.⁷⁶

The attacks in Congress as well as the overwhelmingly critical stance of the news media on organized labor shaped public opinion and fed the momentum to revisit the NLRA that ultimately resulted in the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act after the Republicans took control of Congress in the 1946 elections.⁷⁷

The power of organized labor became a major issue in the 1946 campaign. The strike wave and Washington's seeming inability to control it contributed to public anxiety over inflation, severe housing shortages, and a dearth of consumer goods following years of sacrifice for the war and more than a decade of sacrifice in the Depression. The Republican congressional candidates capitalized on this sentiment by nationalizing the 1946 elections around a common theme. The Republicans used the slogan "Had enough?" and promised to fight the "Three C's"—"Communism, Confusion, and Chaos"—of Democratic rule and the existing labor law.⁷⁸ This message was highlighted by Lewis's threat just before the elections to call another coal strike. Truman himself blamed Lewis for the outcome of the 1946 elections.⁷⁹ Scholars such as Michael Goldfield, Frances Fox Piven, and Richard Cloward have argued that worker insurgency forced the government to make concessions in the mid-thirties including passage of the NLRA.⁸⁰ Many scholars have also celebrated worker insurgency during the war and reconversion periods,⁸¹ but it hurt labor's political position. Voter turnout was low, and voter turnout of labor union members was particularly down.⁸² The Republicans won control of both houses of Congress for the first time since the Depression set in. In the House, Republicans gained a majority of 246–189, and 109 of the Democrats came from Southern states. Republicans gained a 51–45 majority in the Senate, with roughly half of the Democratic seats held by Southerners. Liberal congressional forces were decimated.

Although elections are a blunt instrument in the United States and rarely reflect the endorsement of particular public policies as much as unhappiness with present conditions,⁸³ conservative Republicans viewed the result of the 1946 election as an opportunity and even a mandate to reverse New Deal public policies. Moderate Republicans did not necessarily share the view that most of the New Deal should be revisited, but there was widespread consensus that New Deal labor policies should be amended. This was also a priority for many of the Southern Democrats returning to Congress. Dozens of measures to amend the NLRA were introduced in the first few days of the 80th Congress, and hearings were held in the early months of 1947.

Representative Fred Hartley Jr., chairman of the House Committee on Education and Labor, and Senator Robert Taft, chairman of the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, with the assistance of National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) lobbyists and other conservative Washington lawyers, hammered together proposals circulating since the introduction of the Wagner Act into comprehensive legislation to scale back the power of unions. The Hartley

proposal, considered to be the harshest toward labor, passed the House by the large, veto-proof margin of 308–107. The Taft proposal, which omitted some of the House bill's more antilabor provisions because the Republican majority in the Senate was not as large and not as conservative, also passed with a veto-proof majority of 68–24. As in the House, the majority of Democrats who voted in favor came from Southern states. Hartley intentionally played up the House bill as harsh and the Senate bill as mild.⁸⁴ If the conference committee moved in the direction of the Senate bill, Hartley reasoned, this would make it easier to sustain veto-proof supermajorities on the conference compromise.

Provisions of the Taft-Hartley Act

The purpose of the Wagner Act had been to protect workers trying to organize from employer abuses and to encourage unionization. From the time of its passage, critics of the act felt that it went too far by shifting the balance of power in favor of unions and placing individual workers, employers, and the public interest at the mercy of power-hungry union leaders. The expressed goal of labor law reformers was to level the playing field between unions and employers and guarantee workers protection from unions as well as from employers. Labor's friends saw the reform proposals as an effort by business and its conservative allies to reverse union advances and give employers new tools to fight unionization.

The Taft-Hartley bill had a number of goals. In an effort to tame an NLRB that many considered to be biased toward unions over management (and the CIO over the AFL), the board was restructured to administer a more legalistic, adversarial process in the enforcement of labor law.⁸⁵ As part of an effort to ensure managerial prerogatives, supervisors were no longer allowed to unionize. To handle strikes classified as national emergencies, the president could trigger a fact-finding process, obtain injunctions against strikes, and order cooling-off periods. Jurisdictional strikes, which tended to occur when an AFL and a CIO union were both fighting for recognition in the same firm, were prohibited. In an effort to force national unions to control the wildcat strikes of their locals, unions could be sued in federal courts for violation of contracts and held responsible for the acts of their agents.

Taft-Hartley included several provisions to expand the rights of members in their unions. Dues check-offs had to be voluntary. Unions were required to make annual financial reports available. Employees and employers could petition for decertification elections to remove a union as the recognized bargain-

ing agent. To protect individual workers and to make it harder for union organization to take hold, the closed shop (whereby only union members could get a job in a bargaining unit) was forbidden. The union shop, whereby new employees had to join a union or pay their share for collective bargaining services, which was often negotiated in collective bargaining contracts, would require a separate vote by the membership to take effect. States were also permitted to pass right-to-work laws that prohibited the union shop. Another important provision that was rhetorically aimed at protecting the rights of individual union members, but clearly intended to tame unions' growing political power, was a prohibition against union contributions to candidates in federal elections from union treasury funds.

Many of the provisions targeted union organizing efforts. One measure prohibited secondary boycotts in which, for example, workers in a third-party unionized firm might refuse to handle products from a firm targeted by an organizing drive in order to encourage the targeted firm to recognize the union. Employers were guaranteed free speech rights to counter an organizing campaign, a provision that was increasingly utilized by employers to wage elaborate and effective antiunion campaigns among their employees. To gain the protections of the NLRA, union officials had to sign affidavits testifying they were not Communists. Part of the rising red scare, this provision was also aimed at eliminating some of the most aggressive organizers and created internecine battles within a number of CIO unions.⁸⁶

Truman's Veto

Under the new Republican-controlled Congress, the final version of the Taft-Hartley Act—unlike the Case bill, which included many of the same measures—passed by veto-proof margins of 320–79 in the House and 57–17 in the Senate. It was a rout for organized labor, which lobbied aggressively against the bill. As Taft-Hartley moved to the White House, the labor effort intensified. Labor leaders argued that Taft-Hartley would result in endless litigation, precipitate more industrial unrest, and lead to an employer attack on unions, wages, and working conditions that would push the United States into another depression. Unions organized large rallies against the bill across the country, including a high-profile event in Madison Square Garden. The AFL alone was alleged to have spent more than a million dollars to shape public opinion.⁸⁷ Spurred by the efforts of the AFL and the CIO, more than three-quarters of a million pieces of mail and telegrams, the vast majority urging Truman to veto the bill, poured

into the White House.⁸⁸ Other liberal groups, including religious organizations and the National Farmers Union, joined labor in opposition. Increasingly tied to the labor movement, Democratic Party regulars outside the South also lobbied Truman to veto the act.⁸⁹

Taft-Hartley precipitated the same debate within the administration over a veto as the Case bill. All but one of the prominent labor relations experts whom the Truman administration asked to comment on the bill recommended he veto it.⁹⁰ However, the administration was concerned about the political ramifications. Many advisers pointed out that the elections had been a mandate against unions. Others countered that the elections revealed frustration with other postwar issues and could not be read as a mandate on labor law. Southerners emphasized that the party might fall apart just over a year before the presidential election if Truman vetoed the act. Advisers again argued that organized labor had nowhere else to go and that Truman needed to hold on to the conservative wing of the party by not issuing a veto. Still others argued that while labor might not go to the Republicans, its members might stay home as they had in the disastrous 1946 elections. The Democratic National Committee chairman warned that Truman's failure to exercise the veto might give former vice president Henry Wallace an issue on which to build his third-party movement.⁹¹ Truman was faced with choosing between two wings of his party in a situation in which there was no compromise.

Truman decided again to side with labor and the liberals by vetoing Taft-Hartley. He issued a stinging veto message, calling the bill "unworkable" and "discriminatory" against labor. Hours later, the House voted to override, 331–83. A short filibuster started in the Senate, and at one point it appeared that Truman had just enough votes to sustain the veto. There were even plans to summons the ill Senator Wagner (D-NY) from his deathbed and to fly Senator Elbert Thomas (D-UT) back from Europe if their votes would have been decisive in sustaining the veto. However, support slipped, and the veto was finally overridden 68–25. The regional division was again apparent with Southern Democrats and Republicans voting overwhelmingly to override Truman's veto. Most of the support for upholding it came from non-Southern Democrats. Only four Southern Democratic senators voted to uphold the veto, the liberal Claude Pepper of Florida, the senators from Alabama, where the United Steelworkers union was strong, and a member of the Senate Democratic leadership from South Carolina. There was even less support for labor among Southern Democrats in the House where only a dozen voted to sustain the veto.⁹² Even though

the Republicans controlled Congress, Southern Democratic support was crucial to the veto override. Thus, the shift in the attitude of Southern Democrats toward organized labor since the passage of the NLRA made its amendment possible.⁹³ The NLRA had not been repealed, but the national labor law no longer reflected the position that unionization and collective bargaining should be fostered as a matter of public policy.

Waning Union Growth and the Enduring Problem of the South

The rate of union growth declined the year after Taft-Hartley passed, and by the mid-1950s union density began to fall.⁹⁴ Most Southern states and a number of rural Western states quickly adopted right-to-work laws prohibiting the union shop, which made it more difficult for fledgling unions to solve collective action problems.⁹⁵ There is some debate about the effect of the legislation on union growth, but it is clear that the law offered new tools to antiunion employers, who would become experts at using the provisions of Taft-Hartley to fight unionization drives. On the fifth anniversary of the law a UAW memo cited numerous studies showing that, particularly in the South, Taft-Hartley was “being used more and more by anti-union employers to prevent organization of their plants or to crush unions where they already exist.”⁹⁶

It isn't clear that Southern unionization would have taken off in the absence of Taft-Hartley, but the law certainly made an inhospitable environment even more so.⁹⁷ The CIO and AFL had launched major Southern organizing drives in 1946.⁹⁸ As part of the CIO's Operation Dixie, affiliates like the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) plowed money and staff into organizing the large Southern textile mills. But three years later, the CIO membership in the Southern states at four hundred thousand was virtually the same as it had been at the beginning of Operation Dixie.⁹⁹ The effort was formally disbanded in 1953.¹⁰⁰ Union density in the South lagged considerably behind that in the rest of the country, with an average of 17.1 percent of the nonagricultural workforce unionized among Southern states, compared with a national average of 32.6 percent.¹⁰¹

There are no firm conclusions as to why the Southern organizing drives failed. Race, religion, an oppressive social order, hostile local politicians and policies, violent resistance to unionization by companies and police, and the inadequacy of the CIO's financial commitment and organizing strategy are all viable explanations.¹⁰² The economic position of the South intensified the effects of all these factors. The weak and largely unindustrialized Southern econ-

omy dating from the Civil War fed antiunion attitudes. Employers and the community leaders determined to keep them happy were intent on maintaining the South's low-wage advantage. Workers were often complacent, not only because they faced intense repression by employers and local authorities but also because they were afraid of losing some of the best jobs they had ever had if they unionized.¹⁰³

The failure to make organizing gains in the South posed a tremendous barrier to labor's goal of achieving a more egalitarian and progressive society. In their struggles with unions, employers could move—or threaten to move—to the low-wage, low-unionization South, or they could cite their competitive disadvantage with firms that were already there. Southern politicians also used their political power in Congress to fight organized labor's efforts to level the playing field through public policies to promote national labor markets and standards, and they constantly challenged labor's position within the Democratic coalition. The disparity between union power in and outside the South as well as labor's growing liberal political agenda—including civil rights, the most explosive issue of all—ensured that the clash between the two wings of the Democratic Party would extend beyond labor legislation like Taft-Hartley. This irreconcilable tension was epitomized in the 1948 presidential election.

The 1948 Elections: Labor, Civil Rights, and the Future of the Democratic Party

By 1948, cracks in the New Deal Democratic coalition had grown into a full-scale schism. As Truman aide Clark Clifford's famous memo outlining strategy for the 1948 presidential elections noted, "The basic premise of this memorandum—that the Democratic Party is an unhappy alliance of Southern conservatives, Western progressives and Big City labor—is very trite, but it is also very true."¹⁰⁴ These wings often shared a common orientation on foreign policy, which helped both Roosevelt and Truman downplay growing divisions in the party during the war. But with the return of domestic policy to center stage, Truman was forced to confront the realities of a crumbling party. As with the Taft-Hartley veto, Truman had to decide whether he wanted to placate Southern conservatives and risk alienating liberals and labor or whether he wanted to side with the liberals and labor and risk losing the solid South. His decision to veto Taft-Hartley was an early indication that he would take the latter route.

Over the course of 1947 and 1948, Truman worked to solidify the labor-

liberal coalition with little consideration for Southern opposition. As the Clifford memo noted, "It is inconceivable that any policies initiated by the Truman Administration no matter how 'liberal' could so alienate the South in the next year that it would revolt. As always, the South can be considered safely Democratic. And in formulating national policy, it can be safely ignored."¹⁰⁵ In pursuing this strategy, the Truman administration benefited from Republican control of Congress. Clifford argued, "The only pragmatic reason for conciliating the South in normal times is because of its tremendous strength in the Congress. Since the Congress is Republican and the Democratic President has, therefore, no real chance to get his own program approved by it, particularly in an election year, he has no real necessity for 'getting along' with the Southern conservatives. He must, however, get along with the Westerners and with labor if he is to be reelected."¹⁰⁶ Thus with few negative consequences, Truman could rail against the "do-nothing Congress" while reminding voters of his opposition to Taft-Hartley and, in a first for a Democratic presidential candidate, his support for civil rights.

The passage and veto of Taft-Hartley pushed the labor movement closer to the national Democratic Party and, as Truman intended, dampened labor's enthusiasm for third-party politics, which had grown during the reconversion period.¹⁰⁷ Labor's alliance with the Democrats did not reflect a rejection of class-based politics or the political centrism of labor leaders but rather a strategic adaptation to the realities of the political system. Taft-Hartley taught labor leaders how important it was to have an ally, if not a best friend, in the White House, and it encouraged them to pursue a safe political strategy.¹⁰⁸ When Henry Wallace announced his presidential candidacy under the Progressive Party of America, CIO unions controlled or significantly influenced by Communists again pushed for labor to break away from the Democratic Party, as they had for years.¹⁰⁹ But in a three-way race most of the union leadership, including Walter Reuther, who had long been interested in forming a third party, concluded that labor's best strategy was to maintain an alliance with the Democrats.¹¹⁰ The AFL and CIO each spent more than a million dollars on the election and launched unprecedented efforts to mobilize voters and assist Truman's campaign.¹¹¹ Taft-Hartley was a blow to labor, but without Democratic friends in the White House and Congress, the Republican-controlled Congress might have passed an even more damaging bill gutting the NLRA in 1947. If labor had thrown its support behind a third-party candidate and Dewey had won the presidency, conservatives might have built on Taft-Hartley to launch

additional attacks on organized labor following the 1948 elections. Instead, labor helped elect a president pledged to Taft-Hartley's repeal.

Moreover, labor had close Democratic allies in Congress. In the face of widespread public hostility to labor, non-Southern Democrats overall had remained quite supportive. Labor concluded that trying to pull the Democratic Party to the left was more likely to pay off than fighting an uphill battle to build a third party that would have as much difficulty controlling Congress as liberal Democrats—or possibly more. There was never much serious talk of third-party labor politics after 1948 at the national level. Organized labor continued to participate in a coalition of progressive forces often referred to as the “labor-liberal alliance” that endeavored over the next few decades to realign the Democratic Party away from Southern conservatives and toward its more social democratic wing. Advocating civil rights, the other major issue dividing the Democratic Party, became an important part of this strategy.

The cleavage between non-Southern and Southern Democrats on labor issues increasingly overlapped with the cleavage on civil rights issues. FDR brought African Americans into his electoral coalition with economic appeals but generally made only symbolic overtures on civil rights. An exception was FDR's creation by executive order in 1941 of a Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), which targeted discrimination in defense industries. Roosevelt made this decision in order to fend off a proposed march on Washington organized by A. Philip Randolph, the president of the almost all-black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. As elaborated in Chapter 4, the CIO and other activists in the labor-liberal alliance worked to expand New Deal liberalism to include civil rights. Thus, despite the absence of presidential leadership, the civil rights issue percolated in Congress with the support of many New Deal liberals.

As with labor bills, civil rights legislation was often the victim of congressional institutions. The Rules Committee was the major obstacle to civil rights in the House because most Republicans on the committee cooperated with Southern Democrats to block civil rights bills. But the conservative coalition did not always operate against civil rights bills on the floor. By the 1940s, non-Southern Democrats were the biggest supporters of labor and civil rights bills, and Southerners were the biggest opponents. But the support of Republicans made the difference on civil rights bills. Because bills often had to be discharged from Rules through the petition process, Republican support had to be active, and it was not always forthcoming. There appeared to be quid pro quo agreements between Southern Democrats and amenable Republicans on some bills whereby

Republicans failed to support civil rights bills in exchange for Southerners' opposition to labor bills. A number of Republicans also opposed enforceable employment antidiscrimination bills because of employer resistance, which undermined Truman's efforts to create a permanent FEPC.¹¹² Even though they would be killed by Southerners in the Senate, bills to abolish the poll tax passed in the House in 1942, 1943, 1945, and 1947 with high levels of support from Republicans and non-Southern Democrats. Both were in competition for blacks' votes, which were crucial to Truman's 1948 election strategy.

Truman took a number of actions to appeal to black voters and liberal advocates of civil rights such as labor. Early in 1948, he requested congressional action on a ten-point legislative program addressing civil rights issues such as lynching, voting rights, and discrimination in interstate transportation facilities and employment. He expected that Southerners would be successful in obstructing his program in Congress. However, Southerners were not successful in obstructing the effort of liberals, led by Minnesota Senate candidate Hubert Humphrey and Wisconsin House candidate (and future AFL-CIO lobbyist) Andrew Biemiller, at the 1948 Democratic convention to get a strong civil rights plank in the party's platform for the first time in the party's history. The inclusion of the plank reflected the determination of liberal groups like the CIO, Americans for Democratic Action, and the NAACP to force a confrontation over civil rights that national party leaders would have preferred to avoid. The Mississippi delegation and part of the Alabama delegation walked out. Later that month, Truman issued two momentous executive orders, one mandating the desegregation of the military and the other creating a Fair Employment Board to fight discrimination in federal employment. Southern segregationists could not tolerate the shift in the national Democratic Party, and many defected to support the States' Rights Democratic Party, dubbed the Dixiecrats, and its nominee, South Carolina governor Strom Thurmond.

The Electoral Outcome

The solid South crumbled in 1948, but Truman's strategy worked. The electoral college votes of Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina went to Thurmond. But the remainder of the Southern states and the border states stayed in the Democratic column. All of the electoral votes of the Northeastern states, except Massachusetts and Rhode Island, went to Republican Dewey. But many urban areas remained heavily Democratic, and several of the Northeastern states only narrowly went to Dewey, including Dewey's home state of New

York, because liberal forces were split between Truman and Wallace's third-party candidacy. Truman also won in industrial Midwestern states like Ohio and Illinois, where union members' votes were pivotal.¹¹³ Although Truman lost most of the Northern states and needed the votes of some of the Southern states to win (unlike Roosevelt), the strategy for the 1948 presidential election in many ways presaged the future of the Democratic Party after Southern conservatives left for the Republican fold. Liberal constituencies were central to Truman's surprising and truly remarkable victory. After the election, Truman exclaimed to the press, "Labor did it!"¹¹⁴

The 1948 election was a pivotal moment in which the labor movement committed to an alliance with the Democratic Party and the national party staked its future on maintaining the support of liberal constituencies with a socially progressive platform. While the outcome of the 1948 election is viewed as the continuation of the New Deal coalition, the prominence of the civil rights issue and the defection of a handful of Southern states signaled the beginning of a partisan realignment of the South.¹¹⁵ The migration of Southern voters continued in the 1952 and 1956 elections, in which several Southern states went Republican in Dwight Eisenhower's landslides, as well as in the 1960 election. By 1964, five of the only six states that went for Republican nominee Barry Goldwater were in the deep South. At the same time labor moved into an even closer alliance with the national Democratic Party, with both the AFL and the CIO formally endorsing the Democratic presidential nominee for the first time in 1952. The merged AFL-CIO would endorse every subsequent Democratic presidential nominee, with the exception of George McGovern in 1972, and labor would become the most important organized player in the national Democratic Party.¹¹⁶ Despite the dominance of labor and its liberal allies in the national Democratic Party, Southern Democrats remained very powerful in Congress through the 1970s, feeding a constant struggle between the two wings of the party.

In 1948, the labor-liberal components of the New Deal coalition managed to prevail in a national election without FDR on the ticket. But the constituencies that reelected Truman did not have the same leverage in congressional elections. The national electorate backed a president who ran as a liberal, campaigning on civil rights, pro-labor policies, and an expansive welfare state; meanwhile, the electorates of the various congressional districts and states produced a Congress that was very resistant to these policies. R. Alton Lee argues that this outcome reflected the existence of a "dual constituency" in American

politics that was largely a result of the one-party system and limited voter participation in the South.¹¹⁷ Yet it is also important to acknowledge Republican strength. Outside the South, Republicans won a larger share of the popular vote than Democrats in all the House elections from 1938 to 1952.¹¹⁸ Moreover, malapportionment of congressional districts produced a Republican edge worth about twenty seats from 1946 to 1960.¹¹⁹ At this point in history, labor-oriented Democrats simply were not strong enough in the rest of the country to counter the influence of conservative Southern Democrats. Thus Truman's successful electoral strategy was not a successful legislative strategy, as is detailed in the next chapter. Unlike many Southern voters, Southern Democratic members of Congress had shown and would continue to show a willingness—even an eagerness—to take on the administration.

Conclusion

The American labor movement made unprecedented gains in the 1930s and 1940s as a result of favorable public policies and aggressive organizing. While unionization rates increased throughout the country, gains were not equal across states and regions. More than half of the union members added from 1939 to 1953 were located in just six states, New York, California, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Illinois, and Ohio.¹²⁰ The organizing surge, particularly of the CIO, had the greatest impact in previously unorganized sectors of the economy in the Midwest, which became a highly unionized region like the Northeast and the West Coast.¹²¹ By the early 1950s, unionization rates in many industrialized states were comparable to those in the more highly unionized areas of Europe, but they lagged behind in the politically crucial region of the South.¹²² The regional concentration of organized labor was the movement's greatest weakness, and legislative institutions like the Rules Committee magnified its impact.

In their analysis of congressional roll call votes, Poole and Rosenthal argue, "The period from the late New Deal until the mid-1970s saw the development of the only genuine three-political-party system in American history."¹²³ These three parties formed different legislative coalitions depending on the issue. Southern Democrats joined Republicans in the conservative coalition to oppose pro-labor and many welfare state policies, as elaborated in the next chapter. In contrast, non-Southern Democrats joined many Northeastern Republicans in support of civil rights.¹²⁴ The two wings of the Democratic Party hung together on most other policies. Although a number of observers argue that

labor would have been better off rejecting the Democratic Party and pursuing its own party in the 1940s,¹²⁵ it is not at all clear that a labor party would have changed this informal three-party dynamic. Even if a labor party could have overcome the barriers to third parties in the electoral system, it would have likely been strongest in areas where pro-labor, pro-civil rights Democrats fared well. This rarely represented a majority of congressional seats. A labor party could have put together an uncompromised pro-labor platform, but like the liberal Democrats, it would have probably had trouble delivering on it.¹²⁶

In choosing to continue to work within the national Democratic Party in the 1940s, labor set off a slow-moving chain reaction that would shape the course of American politics over the next six decades. In the 1944 debate on an anti-poll tax bill supported by organized labor, Senator Josiah W. Bailey (D-NC) asserted on the Senate floor, "I make no threats, but I will simply say that when Sidney Hillman (chairman of the political action committee) and the Communist crew in the name of the CIO come in the doors and the windows of the party in which my father and I lived and served, I will go out."¹²⁷ The Southern losses for the Democrats in the 1948 election provided a glimpse of the future. Both the CIO and the AFL came into the Democratic Party, and eventually Southern conservatives like Bailey left. Organized labor became a powerful progressive force within the Democratic Party in the postwar period, allying with other liberal constituencies to push the party to endorse civil rights legislation, welfare state programs, and congressional reforms to undermine the dominance of conservative Southern Democrats in the legislative process. After substantial progress on these goals was finally made in the 1960s and 1970s, Southern conservatives began to leave the Democratic Party to find a new and more comfortable home in the Republican fold. This allowed the Democratic Party to gradually move to the left. But whether working with Republicans in the conservative coalition or *as* Republicans in later decades, Southern conservatives continued to effectively oppose much of labor's policy agenda, as explored in the following chapters.